

Indian Parliamentary Elections: Congress Wave or Rejection of the Left?

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The following is the final result of the parliamentary elections of 2009.

Party	2009 Won	2004 Won	Change
**Indian National Congress	206	145	61
**Bharatiya Janata Party	116	138	-22
Samajwadi Party	23	36	-13
Bahujan Samaj Party	21	19	2
Janata Dal (United)	20	8	12
All India Trinamool Congress	19	2	17
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	18	16	2

Party	2009 Won	2004 Won	Change
**Communist Party of India (Marxist)	16	43	-27
Biju Janata Dal	14	11	3
Shiv Sena	11	12	-1
All India Anna DMK	9	0	9
Independents	9	5	4
Nationalist Congress Party	9	9	0
Others	8	7	1
Telugu Desam Party	6	5	1
Rashtriya Lok Dal	5	3	2
Communist Party of India	4	10	-6
Rashtriya Janata Dal	4	24	-20
Shiromani Akali Dal	4	8	-4
J& K National Conference	3	2	1
Janata Dal (Secular)	3	3	0
All India Forward Bloc	2	3	-1
Jharkhand Mukti Morcha	2	5	-3

Party	2009 Won	2004 Won	Change
Muslim league	2	1	1
Revolutionary Socialist Party	2	3	-1
Telangana Rastra Samithi	2	5	-3
All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimen	1	1	0
Asom Gana Parishad	1	2	-1
Haryana Janhith Party	1	0	1
Kerala Congress	1	1	0
Marumalarchi DMK	1	4	-3
Indian National Lok Dal	0	0	0
J & K People's Democratic Party	0	1	-1
Lok Jan Shakti Party	0	4	-4
Pattali Makkal Katchi	0	6	-6
Republican Party of India (A)	0	1	-1

- The first thing the foregoing table reveals is that there was no great wave in favour of the Congress. True, it significantly increased its tally by 61 seats. But that was from an extremely low base. Even now, it is a minority party, and the UPA (its pre-poll alliance) has less than the required 272 seats, though it now has enough assurances from others who were not its pre-poll allies to ensure the survival of its government. The second thing we can find is that a huge number of small parties are represented, indicating that much of the election was fought over regional issues.

- The Left parties have certainly suffered a big defeat. Their own seats have come down from 59 in 2004 to 24 in 2009. The CPI is in danger of losing its National Party status, while the CPI(M) tally has come down from 43 to 16. The Left has also suffered a strategic defeat. Its goal of building a non-Congress, non-BJP alternative received a huge jolt. The "Third Front" that it had put together got about 77 seats. And this front started unraveling even before the elections ended, with one partner bolting to the BJP-led NDA.

- However, it is necessary to question the general arguments being made. Biman Bose, West Bengal CPI(M) State Secretary, argued that the correct policy at the national level would have been beneficial, and that it was not Mamata Banerjee and the Trinamul Congress, but a Congress Wave that resulted in the defeat of the CPI(M). This reference to a "correct national policy" is a dig at Prakash Karat, who was instrumental in the Left Front withdrawing support from the UPA. The unstated argument goes: had the Left Front supported the UPA at the centre, the Trinamul Congress and the Congress would not have forged an alliance at the state level, but fought separately, thereby splitting the anti-Left Front votes. In that case, the left might have lost a couple more seats, but would have held on to a substantial majority. This outlook stops at mere number crunching, it sees people, human beings, as dumb cattle, and does not look at class aspirations and how they were brutally rejected over the years by the Left Front, notably the CPI(M), in West Bengal. In assessing their defeat, all these "leftists" can see are election mechanisms, not looking at policies. For them, their policies are correct by definition, and real consultation with the people is irrelevant. The promise of 1977, that the "Left Front government is an instrument of struggle", has disappeared. In addition, this argument is utterly asinine. It does not explain why, if indeed it was a "Congress Wave", the Congress got exactly six seats, the same number it had last time, whereas the Trinamul

Congress seats went up from one to 19.

- The best way of establishing the foregoing argument is to start, not with West Bengal but with Tripura. If indeed the Left was knocked out due to a Congress Wave, why did this wave fade out in Tripura? There, the Left won both the parliamentary seats. In Tripura East, the CPI(M) candidate had a lead of about 2,96,000 votes, and in Tripura West the lead was about 2,48,000. In both cases the nearest rival was a member of the Congress.
- If we are to accept the claim that people voted for a Congress wave, what does it mean? Did the people of India vote for neo-liberalism? This is what the big capitalists, and the mainstream media, are claiming. In truth, if one looks at the Congress campaigns, the issues were livelihood issues of common people. The Congress claimed full credit for the NREGP (the scheme to give 100 days employment to one member of every rural poor family). Since the Congress was in power, the claim was accepted by sizeable chunks of voters, who had indeed benefited, to whatever extent, from this scheme. Unlike the BJP's 2004 India Shining Campaign, the Congress campaign of 2009 focused on the "aam-admi" (common people). If the Congress turned around significantly in UP after nearly two decades, that was based on a campaign about poor women, about Dalits (challenging Mayavati on her own turf). Accordingly, the argument that the decline of seats for the Left is a mandate for selling off the banks and insurance to private capital, for further destroying India's already bad labour laws, and for further privatizations and the building of Special Economic Zones, cannot be accepted.
- Keeping these two points in mind, we now need to look at the performance of the Left in its two major bases, West Bengal and Kerala. In West Bengal, out of 42 seats, the Left got 15 (against 35 in 2004), with the CPI(M) getting 9, and the CPI, RSP and Forward Bloc getting 2 each. In Kerala the CPI(M) got 4 seats while the rest drew a blank (against 19 out of 20 in 2004 for the LDF). But the reasons in the two cases are very different.
- In West Bengal, the LF, and notably the CPI(M), has over the years become an object of bitter popular hatred. On one hand, it has adopted an increasingly neoliberal economic policy. It welcomed SEZs with open arms, and sought to start SEZs in West Bengal, if necessary by forcibly taking away fertile land from peasants. A virtual civil war raged in Nandigram for much of 2007, before the party and the state, acting in tandem, used massive force to smash the resistance of the peasants. But the cost had been high enough for the party to be forced into abandoning the plan to take land from the peasants. It did not, however, agree to pay compensation for those murdered, raped, molested, or those who had their homes destroyed. Nor even was it willing to apologise, or to punish party cadres who had come in disguised as police. In Singur, in 2006, land had been forcibly taken away from peasants, even though many of them resisted, and refused even to take any compensation. Two years of sustained agitations ended with the Tatas pulling out their Nano factory from West Bengal and moving to Guajrat. Even then, the government in its arrogance refused to hand back the land to that considerable section of peasants who had even refused to accept the compensation cheques. Moreover, the land-grab had not only affected peasants, but share croppers, agricultural labourers, transporters, and a range of other producers and service providers, who were not even offered any compensation. One dimension of handling resistance was the brutal murder of a young woman activist, Tapasi Malik. Two CPI(M) members have been convicted of her murder in a trial court, though they have appealed in a higher court. Apart from Singur and Nandigram, and the tall promise of plenty of jobs through industrialization, the other reality of West Bengal was the closure of industries, of tea gardens, and growing economic hardship of many sections of workers.
- On the other hand there was the politics of three decades of Left Front rule. To sum it up, we can say that this involved a set of practices: a) Party control by the CPI(M) over police and bureaucracy, to the extent that rules and regulations could be flouted at will; along with an increasing recourse to

state violence as a routine method of enforcing policies and stamping out dissent; b) Establishing party domination, where party offices at appropriate levels decided everything, from who among the rural poor would be selected for grants, or the receipt of Below Poverty Line cards, to which intellectual lackey would be selected the next Vice Chancellor of prestigious Universities; c) Imposing party control on people and forcing people to pay donations to the party or its mass fronts, forcing trade union and white collar union members to pay for party projects, forcing people to buy the party paper.

- In other words, party control, state and party led violence, coupled with support to neoliberalism when in power, was what turned people hostile to the CPI(M) in West Bengal. In Kerala, the picture was different. There have been two blocs, one led by the Congress and the other by the CPI(M), contesting elections and coming to power alternately. In recent years the BJP has been able to get some votes (a little over 6 per cent in 2009). But basically, a slight swing from one bloc to the other can cause a big slide in seats. In 2004, the LDF, led by the CPI(M) got 19 seats. Since then, factional conflicts in the CPI(M) have come out in the open, discrediting the party. Party Secretary Vijayan has been accused of corruption, and that too has tarnished the party's image. In a bid to cut into the Muslim League votes, the CPI(M) this time decided to form an alliance with a rank Muslim communal organization, the People's Democratic Party, something that did not go down well with the voters. On top of that, the huge mandate of 2004 clearly went to the head of the party, and it started ignoring its partners and taking decisions on its own, with the result that the cohesion of the Front was far less evident in 2009. These were the factors, all very local, that led to the Kerala debacle.

- If the Left Front in West Bengal was perceived as an oppressive power, does it mean that we should look upon the Trinamul Congress as a progressive force? Many former leftists, or dissident leftists, or Maoists of diverse hues, seem to have concluded that. The reality is different. The Trinamul Congress is a rightwing populist party. It has of course supported the peasants of Singur and Nandigram. But in doing so, it has sought to co-opt their autonomous struggles, and also to dilute its content. Thus, in Singur, the Trinamul Congress focus was purely on the peasant owners, and not on the other categories of people displaced. In an earlier period, this party as an ally of the BJP had endorsed the initiation of SEZs. Finally, it is now allied to the Congress, and committed to the UPA government. So it will swallow its opposition to the SEZs all over India, even though its own manifesto opposes SEZs and puts forward radical sounding rhetoric. A second feature is that this is a party with a record of violence. And this feature has resurfaced in recent times, with Left Front supporters being attacked, and even children of such people not being spared. The Manifesto of the TC reads like a wonderfully progressive text, promising everything to everyone. Land to the landless, job security, environmental protection, reform of the police, rights of women. Yet, just two instances show how fraudulent these claims are. When Taslima Nasreen was hounded out of West Bengal by Muslim communalists and with the government accepting their blackmail, the TC was silent. This suggests that like the Left Front, the TC is not really concerned with the rights of women, and further that just like the CPI(M), it is willing to cut a deal with minority communalists in the name of minority protection. And when polluting auto-rickshaws were sought to be replaced, the TC and its unions blocked the effort. We do not call for throwing out the auto drivers without providing them alternatives. But the answer has to be state assistance for conversion to less polluting cars, rather than simply halting the process.

- The lessons of recent elections are clear. Stalinist reformism will repeatedly claim working class and peasant votes, pointing to the fascist threat and to neoliberalism. But it will neither fight fascism on the streets nor fight neoliberalism if it is in power. And its opposition as of now is in all cases bourgeois oppositions, whether the Congress in Kerala or Tripura, or the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal. Only by relying on the independent power of workers and peasants, only by building a

revolutionary proletarian alternative, can the working people of India get out of this dead end.