

State Assembly elections in India 2011

The world's largest democracy continues to change

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- In five State Assembly elections during April and May 2011 more than 144 million Indians cast their vote. The elections were held peacefully and brought about a change of government in four of the five cases under review.
- In West Bengal, the world's longest serving, democratically elected Communist-Party-led government was removed from power after thirty-four years in a crushing defeat. In Kerala, the Left Democratic Front coalition was beaten by a narrow margin by the United Democratic Front coalition.
- West Bengal and Tamil Nadu saw two powerful women storm to power with astounding majorities. They are likely to alter India's political landscape. Together with their female colleagues from Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, women now rule almost one third of India's population as heads of government.
- While the Bharatiya Janata Party failed miserably, the Indian National Congress emerged bruised but not defeated from the elections. Congress won comfortably in Assam, and its United Democratic Front coalition narrowly made it in Kerala. Congress can also look forward to joining the West Bengal government after a long time.
- An unprecedented high voter turnout, four regime changes and a professionally conducted supervision of the polling process by the Election Commission without claims of vote rigging show that India's democratic culture is stable and deeply rooted in society.

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Introduction

Indian voters turned up in large numbers and voted without fear for a change of their respective state governments. The 'Dance of Democracy' has created great expectations for better governance with less fraud and corruption.

The results of the 2011 State Assembly elections in the four (of twenty eight) Indian states of West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and the Union Territory of Puducherry (seven in total) put high pressure to deliver on the newly elected governments.

Two decades after real socialism's collapse in eastern Central and Eastern Europe, Friday, 13 May 2011, ended the world's longest reigning, democratically elected communist government in West Bengal. In Kerala, however, the Communist-Party-led Left Front coalition gave the opposing coalition of the United Democratic Front, led by the Indian National Congress (INC), a close fight, suggesting that all is not lost for the Left Democratic Front in Kerala. The elections, in fact, brought Kerala close to upsetting its electoral 'anti-incumbency' traditions.

The elections also brought about regime changes in four of five cases; they saw the fall of a political family dynasty with Tollywood connections caught up in India's currently largest corruption scandal, the '2G spectrum scam'. It is noteworthy that, while the number of female Chief Ministers has doubled after these elections, female representation has

dropped by ten per cent in the respective Assemblies.

Securing democratic participation – securing participatory democracy?

The 2011 State Assembly elections affected the political representation of more than 230 million Indians.¹ India's political system foresees elections for each state's house of representatives every five years. 144 million Indians were entitled to cast their vote in polls and electronic voting machines with state-of-the-art voting cards in no less than 824 districts during the polling months of April and May 2011.² Such is India's immense demographic mass, which almost triples Germany's population in just a handful of State Assembly elections.³

The Election Commission of India can claim several big achievements with regards to the safety of voters and elections officials, the independence of voting and the military security of the entire polling process. The highest ever recorded voter turnout is a clear indicator for the widening of democratic participation in India's electoral processes. Numbers reached record turnouts of more than 80 per cent in several states.⁴

The Election Commission eradicated several names from contestants' lists, which have in the past confused voters and led to the blurring of election results. Several hundred million rupees, most likely intended to buy off voters and influence polling, were confiscated; the lion's share in Tamil Nadu.⁵ Due to pressure from the Election Commission,

several contestants with pending criminal charges have had their immunity removed. However, 35 per cent of West Bengal's recently elected Assembly still have criminal charges pending against them.⁶

Because of election-related violence in former West Bengal elections, polling took place at six different dates and in six different areas, sweeping from north to south between mid-April and mid-May 2011. All in all, West Bengal's elections went peaceful, and the state's ultimate voting phase involved more than 100,000 security personnel in the south-western area. Considered against the backdrop of that area's history of election boycotts and political violence its turnout of roughly 85 per cent is one of the success stories of this year's elections, in terms of participation in democratic processes. In a similar vein, northern West Bengal's Darjeeling participated in the electoral process in an unprecedented way and scored a mandate for a separate 'Gorkhaland' state under the political leadership of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha party, who contested for the first time in elections since its foundation in 2007.

West Bengal: a fresh start. But where to?

West Bengal was this voting season's most highly politicised election. Since 1977 the Communist Party had scored seven consecutive election victories. Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) broke this historic streak. Her party scored 184 seats out of 294, with 42 going to its coalition partner, the

INC. So severe was the drubbing for the Left Front coalition, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), (CPI-M), that its stalwarts, the ministers for industry, finance, housing and urban development, all lost their seats.

The election results also indicate the continuing diversification of Indian regional politics. Against the background of INC domination until 1967, parties of a regional or state orientation have been making headway in general elections since the late 1960's. This enabled regional representation at the very centre of Indian politics. Banerjee founded the TMC in 1998 from amongst INC members. State parties, such as the TMC, have gained more ground in regional and, consequently, in national politics. The INC, for instance, will be dependent on its offshoot in order to join the government in West Bengal.

The legacy of Left Front rule: economic aspects

In the run-up to the elections, Indian media were ripe with enthusiasm for political change. Three decades of Left Front rule have left West Bengal's economy in a miserable state. The infrastructure suffered, growth of economic output dwindled considerably, and trade unionism has become synonymous with militant industrial action.

Banerjee promised the installation of a 'Working Culture Commission' in order to address West Bengal's working ethics. An economic climate inimical to domestic

and foreign investment has developed, driving potential entrepreneurs and investors to competing Indian states or even abroad. In a report on the *Economic Freedom of the States of India* published by the Academic Foundation, West Bengal was ranked only number 15 of 20 states – although an improvement of three spots as compared to the report's previous edition. The report took into account the size of government and administration, legal structures, access to money, trade barriers and regulatory issues.

Realising that West Bengal was falling behind India's fast developing pace as a consequence of previous deindustrialisation initiatives, the Left Front government belatedly accelerated reindustrialisation through development schemes in the 1990s. In 2007, it allowed the Indonesian Salim Group to set up a chemical hub in Nandigram in the Purba Medinipur district of West Bengal as part of its 'Special Economic Zones' policy. The implementation of the policy included problematic land acquisition processes, involving development-related resettlement of local, mostly Muslim, farmers. At Nandigram, Banerjee was at the forefront of opposing the eviction of the local population and entered a 19-day hunger strike. Again in 2008, she opposed government plans to allow the Tata automobile manufacturer to build a plant in Singur in the Hooghly district, which would have produced the 'Nano'. Banerjee used 'Nandigram' and 'Singur' as important signifiers, indicative of the systemic and physical wrongdoing of the Left Front government, in a campaign

essentially directed against that government.

The legacy of Left Front rule: social aspects

The Muslim vote used to be a Left Front stronghold as a consequence of the CPI (M)'s land reallocation schemes of the 1970's. This year, however, many of these votes went to Banerjee. Muslims are underrepresented in West Bengal's administration. They form more than a quarter of the population, but fill only between two and three per cent in the state's administrative machinery. Addressing their underrepresentation is an essential aspect of ensuring Bengal's social development and fair democratic participation.

In terms of poverty reduction, West Bengal fares above national average. According to the Tendulkar Committee report on poverty in India, only Kerala's poverty reduction between 1993 and 2004 was worse than West Bengal's amongst all the states, which voted in 2011.⁷ According to more up-to-date figures by the *Financial Express*, West Bengal's population share below the poverty line was four per cent less than the 2007-2008 national average of 39 per cent.⁸

West Bengal's gender ratio currently counts 947 women to 1000 men, just above the national average of 940. Recent improvements, though, cannot hide the fact that women are still underrepresented in democratic institutions. Following the general trend

of the 2011 elections, women's representation in West Bengal's State Assembly is down by three seats to 34 of 294, stopping at the 12-per-cent mark in the state's highest representative institution. According to the ongoing 2011 census, West Bengal's population stands at 91.35 million. Literacy is at 68.5 per cent (64.3% national average), female literacy at 63.3 per cent (57% national average).⁹ It is imperative to improve access to schooling in general and women in particular in order to maintain West Bengal's positive figures vis-à-vis national trends.

Between 2006 and 2011, West Bengal's electorate increased from 48 to 56 million voters.¹⁰ According to the *Indian Express*, West Bengal's electorate has at the same time increased substantially amongst the group of 18- to 25-year olds.¹¹ Banerjee cultivated an image of youthful agility in the media, walking several kilometres to her many rallies in rubber sandals and a white sari. Her modest upbringing, ascetic lifestyle and able rhetoric add to the image of a down-to-earth politician. Insistence on systemic change gave the elections the resemblance of Obama's 2009 campaign for the White House. Banerjee was quick in adapting to the new media and the twitter speed of modern political movements, although she had, not long ago, expressed a dislike for computers.

Question marks behind West Bengal's harbinger of change

On the verge of entering office on a wave of popular support after an astounding

victory, Banerjee's governing qualities do not stand above criticism. She held the Indian government's railways portfolio since 2006. Having ousted the Left Front from West Bengal, she is bequeathing to her successor at the Railways the ministry's accounts in red numbers. This overshadows her record at the ministry. Her ministerial work seems to have been sidelined during the months of intensive campaigning in Bengal. Expenditure in the Railways' budget has risen, while earnings have reduced equally. Moreover, her position as Railways Minister seems to have been part of her campaign to become West Bengal's next Chief Minister. Banerjee promised new railway lines and connections for West Bengal, her home state, while at the same time envisaging a refurbishment of the Kolkata metro system.

Banerjee allegedly disregarded advice from the Planning Commission of the Government of India as well as from the Finance Ministry about the faulty Railways budget. Central posts required for an essential functioning of her ministry have not been filled since the departure of their previous holders. Several of the ministry's long-term projects have not developed beyond their initial steps. Published criticism of this sort against West Bengal's harbinger of change is what raises questions about the instruments to be applied to the development and reform of West Bengal.¹²

Banerjee laid the foundations for her 2011 victory during the 2009 Indian general and 2010 local (Panchayat)

elections with her anti-land-acquisition campaigns. She is opposed to amending the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, which would ease government-induced land acquisition for private industry. In order to help West Bengal's economy to its feet, however, Banerjee must attract exactly the kind of large development schemes to West Bengal, which she opposed during the very campaign, which has lifted her into office. Her party's 'vision document' envisages Kolkata as London and wishes to turn northern West Bengal into the 'Switzerland of the East'. The manifesto, moreover, proposes to generate one million new jobs, but does not go beyond announcing that this will eventuate by means of "large private investments in sectors such as engineering, steel, tea, jute, textiles and other areas of manufacturing, mining, power and food processing".¹³ The enigmatic party slogan "ma, mati, manush" (mother, land, people) is symptomatic of Banerjee's and the TMC's obscurity.¹⁴ According to the *Times of India*, India has not specified in writing the duties of elected representatives of the people. Taken together with the fact that 35 per cent of this year's elected West Bengal State Assembly members have pending criminal charges, a discussion on the accountability of people's representatives seems to be urgently needed.¹⁵

Tamil Nadu: of actors, playwrights, corruption and the consumer-voter

In another presidential campaign, the voters of Tamil Nadu chose erstwhile actress and former Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa of the All India Anna Dravida

Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) over Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, Tollywood playwright and ten-time member of the Legislative Assembly of the outgoing Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party. In 1972 the AIADMK broke away from the DMK, founded in 1949. Both parties have in common close relations with the Tamil film industry.

While the Election Commission has succeeded in strengthening the pragmatics of India's electoral system, the campaigns waged by the parties in Tamil Nadu have undermined the democratic opinion-making process. Riding on the wave of 'socialist welfare', the two largest rival parties of Tamil politics, the DMK and the AIADMK, centred their campaigns on the handing out of government subsidies in a variety of gifts ranging from free rice and mineral water, to grinders and mixers for households and laptops for students. The distribution of colour TV sets in areas with no electricity may at first seem absurd. In a state, however, in which the major campaigners entertain their very own TV channels and media networks, Jaya TV and Kalaigarnar TV, respectively, the taxpayer-funded dishing out of 'freebies' becomes highly problematic. Instead of stimulating mature democratic interaction, the Tamil Nadu campaign reduced democratic opinion-making to a material contest for the consumer-voter.

With the DMK currently deeply mired in India's largest political scandal, the election results went clearly in favour of Jayalalithaa's AIADMK, giving her a third term in office as Chief Minister of Tamil

Nadu. The election results are significant for Indian national politics as both the DMK and the INC are part of the current United Progressive Alliance coalition government headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The disastrous result of the election is likely to affect the parties' relations at the centre. In INC circles it must trigger a rethinking of its regional politics, having won only 5 seats out of 234 in the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections.

In early 2011, the Union Minister of Communications and Technology, Thiru A. Raja of the DMK, was arrested on corruption charges in connection with the sale of next generation mobile phone frequencies. For the DMK and its octogenarian party head Karunanidhi, the election results stand as a voter's verdict on the party's entanglement in large-scale corruption and one-family politics. Karunanidhi's daughter, Kanimozhi, a member of the Rajya Sabha, the Indian upper house, has also been arrested and may face trial over the '2G scam', in which Kalaingar TV, the DMK television channel, has been implicated. The Karunanidhi family clan holds enormous power in Tamil politics. Karunanidhi's son, Stalin, was reelected, brightening the party's hopes for a comeback in the 2014 Indian general elections. Having emerged as 'anti-establishment' regional parties, the 'Dravidian' parties have by now become part of the establishment themselves. 86-year-old Karunanidhi, outgoing five-time Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, has again been confirmed in his seat.

The Dravidian parties, especially the founding of the DMK in 1949, led the emergence of regionalised political decentralisation in Indian politics. Today, these first generation politicians still dominate the Tamil political scene, as can be seen from the family empire of the Karunanidhis. A rejuvenation process is needed, although age demands respect in Indian culture.

Kerala, Assam, Puducherry: a communist victory and a weary Congress

Rahul Gandhi, General Secretary of the INC, tried to set in motion a rejuvenation process of Kerala politics. Indira Gandhi's grandson is perceived by many to be India's future Prime Minister. In order to break Kerala's gerontocratic political structures, he handpicked 18 Youth Congress members to run as candidates in the Kerala State Assembly elections. Out of these, 8 were elected. In comparison with the Tamil Nadu variety of the experiment, which returned not a single of the 9 Youth Congress candidates, the Kerala result may herald a rethinking in the Indian electoral psyche, according to which politicians get better with age.

For decades, Kerala regularly outvoted its incumbent government, becoming the Indian version of a 'swing state'. This year's election result was the closest since 1965. With the departure of the Left Front government in West Bengal looming large, a similar verdict was expected for the Left Democratic Front government of 88-year-old V. S. Achuthanandan. In fact, the United

Democratic Front was able to scrape together 72 of the 140 seats, barely securing a majority. In Kerala, the Communist Party was not routed like in West Bengal. In fact, it emerged as the strongest single party with 45 seats as compared to INC's 38. Coalition politics, however, eventually won the day for the United Democratic Front in Kerala.

In Puducherry – a Union Territory consisting of four areas, Puducherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam – a coalition of the Puducherry AIADMK branch and an INC breakaway section, the All India NR Congress, emerged as election victors. The process of disintegration of the once dominating INC goes hand in hand with the continuing regionalisation of Indian politics. On the other hand, Assam held a positive note for the INC. There, it was able to carry away a comprehensive victory of 74 out of 126 seats. Chief Minister Gogoi received a mandate to return for a third consecutive term – an impressive statement against the 'anti-incumbency' mentality of Indian voters.

Conclusion

The diversification of Indian politics continues. Assam and Tamil Nadu have returned familiar faces. But, Puducherry and West Bengal have voted into power new political formations, which are also former INC outfits. While the Left Front was uprooted in West Bengal, the Left Democratic Front put up a fight in Kerala. The quality of Banerjee's and Jayalalithaa's resounding majorities was a significant outcome of the elections. There are now four female heads of

government. Female representation in all assemblies has, however, decreased by ten per cent.

The challenges for the four states and Puducherry could not be more different. West Bengal presents the most difficult task of unhinging a political administrative machine of more than 30 years standing, which includes the refurbishment of state and societal institutions. Banerjee's election campaign may give way to resentment-induced violence and recriminations against supporters and beneficiaries of the Left Front regime, especially in areas, in which the state has a poor record of governance such as West Bengal's south west. Netai village, for instance, which witnessed the killing of nine local inhabitants by armed Communist Party cadres in early 2011 voted collectively: not one of the 1,263 enlisted electors missed to cast his vote. When interviewed, villagers did not hold back the idea of taking revenge.¹⁶

Banerjee's performance in the Ministry of Railways does not inspire confidence. West Bengal must reduce the inhibitors of domestic and foreign investments. The new government must find ways to use the state's immense resources and capacities.

For the INC, the results have brought about some degree of success. It may be dependent on its 'grassroots' offspring to form part of the Government in West Bengal. But the INC doubled its vote share to a total of 42 seats. Given this, INC party workers are already preparing their campaigns for the 2012 elections.

However, the INC registered a heavy loss in Tamil Nadu; 5 seats as compared to 29 in 2006. Returning to Assam for a third consecutive time with an increase of 25 to 78 seats is a marker in its own right. The AINRC, a former INC outfit, emerged successful in Puducherry, while the INC lost three seats. The INC did increase its tally from 14 to 38 and helped the United Democratic Front coalition to attain victory in Kerala. But this must be weighed against the fact that the CPM emerged as the strongest single party with 45 seats.

Although West Bengal and Kerala produced widely differing results for India's Left, it seems that West Bengal's electorate has directed the Communist Parties to rethink their respective party programmes. The late West Bengal's government policy of endorsing capital development may already hint at a departure from previous, staunchly anti-capitalist positions. Since the 1990s, the CPI (M) and its regional outfits, the CPMs, have considered themselves as a major constituent of the global socialist movement. Until today, they form an essential and integral body of India's Left. Amidst the cheers for change, the electoral defeats of the Left coalitions in West Bengal and in Kerala are not unproblematic. Any growth-oriented rebuilding of West Bengal, for instance, must look beyond bipartisan politics in order to achieve truly inclusive, participatory democracy.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the Indian electorate has shown its commitment to label India the world's

largest democracy. Some 80 per cent of the electorate cast their vote in, at times, adverse conditions. The flawless management of the elections by the Election Commission under difficult circumstances showed a maturity, which seeks its parallels in other parts of the world.

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- 2 http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/press/current/PN_AE_010311.pdf.
- 3 For preliminary census 2011 results see: http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/DATA_FILES/Final%20PPT%202011_11.PDF. The state territories in question (approx. 337.000km²) comprise almost the size of Germany's 357.104km².
- 4 According to The Hindu: West Bengal 84.46%, Tamil Nadu 78.8%, Puducherry 85.57%, Assam 76.04%, Kerala 75.12%.
- 5 Source: Tamil Nadu: 601.000.000 (roughly 9.3 million €); Assam: 50.200.000 (roughly 817.610 €); West Bengal: 83.500.000 (roughly 1.3 million €); Kerala: 6.200.000 (roughly 97.484 €).
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