
Comrades in arms

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TO THE rattle of gunfire, the Indian state of West Bengal completed local elections in traditional fashion on May 20th. At least 37 people were killed in the polls, mostly in fighting between the goons of rival political parties, including those within the Left Front coalition that has ruled the state since 1977. Some were mown down while waiting to vote. Others were incinerated in their thatch-roofed houses. Supporters of the main ruling party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), were mostly to blame.

The elections, spread over two weeks, will yield 17 district and hundreds of sub-district and village councils, or panchayats. The CPI(M) will run most of them. Kshiti Goswami, the state irrigation minister, says the cadres of his Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) were armed only with "hand bombs", whereas the men of CPI(M) had "light machineguns, muskets, revolvers and explosives".

In addition, the CPI(M), which has brought land reform and other boons to poor Bengalis, is quite popular. That it resorts to violence nonetheless is due to the nature of the party and the polls. After three decades in power in West Bengal, the party has become a vast patronage-dispensing machine, with a cell in every village to allot government jobs and settle disputes. Its control is based on a system of powerful, highly politicised, local governments. With lavish spending powers, their leaders, who, unusually for India, are elected at the lowest level on a party basis, have much to fight over.

This arrangement helps the CPI(M) rally its cadres. It also ensures that the state organs, including the police, are in its grip. But it is not clear that party bosses in Kolkata can control their local strongmen. Before the previous local elections, in 2003, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the state's chief minister, beseeched his party cadres to let opposition candidates register for the poll. This time, the CPI(M) won nearly 6,000 seats uncontested; the main opposition parties won 20.

Another reason why West Bengal's local polls are so bloody is that, unlike in state and national elections, the CPI(M)'s allies contest them separately. And they are currently unhappy with big brother, whom they accuse of ignoring their advice—in particular, over Mr Bhattacharjee's brave, but messy, pro-business policies—and of encroaching on their fiefs. These elections saw unusually serious intra-left fighting.

Once again, Mr Bhattacharjee has been embarrassed by his hooligan party. Meanwhile, its national leaders, in the politburo in Delhi, have other concerns. The Left Front provides majority-making support to India's Congress-led government, while remaining outside it. The distinction is important. While wanting a say in national policy, the Communists are necessarily antagonistic towards Congress, their main opponent in the states. The result has been interminable bickering between the government and the leftists, bringing the death of several sensible reforms. The government's single main foreign achievement, a nuclear co-operation deal with America, could be a victim too.

The deal would provide India with nuclear fuel and technology, but it is currently blocked by the Communists. On May 28th the government will hold talks with them to try to unblock it. For America, that a bilateral agreement on which it has staked much can be hijacked by unelected Communist bosses, who owe their strength to West Bengal's village gangsters, is, to say the least, frustrating.

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