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Indian elections

Historic defeat for 'traditional' Communist Parties?

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV414 - July 2009 -

Publication date: Friday 24 July 2009

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The two “traditional” Communist parties – the CPI and the CPI-M – suffered serious defeats in the Indian parliamentary elections which ended on May 13, 2009 and which were won by the Congress Party. Given the place the CPI-M has today among the parties originating in the pro-Soviet or "Eurocommunist" current this question has an international dimension.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/cpim.gif>]

In India, during the Sino-Soviet conflict the original Communist Party split into three components : the “maintained” Communist Party of India (CPI) which remained pro-Moscow; the “Marxist” Communist Party (CPI-M) which adopted a “neither Moscow, nor Peking” international profile; and the “Marxist-Leninist” parties (CPI-ML), pro-Chinese, which would break up into a spectrum of competitor organisations. If the Maoists represent the dominant reference point on the far left (today still in part waging armed struggle), the CPI and CPI-M (in particular) have maintained a significant parliamentary representation.

India is a federation where no party has a homogeneous implantation on the scale of the sub-continent. The CPs can be in power in certain states whereas they are virtually non-existent in others (like Gujarat in the West). During previous electoral contests, the CPI-M had experienced success which had allowed it – a rare thing – to govern simultaneously the three states where it is best implanted; West Bengal and Tripura in the North-East, Kerala in the South-West.

Demographically (with more than 80 million inhabitants), politically and economically, West Bengal (capital Calcutta) is by far the most important. After a first victory in 1967, the CPI-M has governed this state permanently since 1977 via, latterly, a “Left Front”. The CPI-M has also governed, but in discontinuous fashion (namely one legislature out of two), Kerala and its some 35 million inhabitants.

At the federal level, after the previous parliamentary elections of 2004, the CPI-M set up a left bloc made up of 62 MPs – or the third biggest parliamentary group. The Congress Party having need of their support to be able to govern, this coalition around the CPI-M had a real influence, It has notably been able to impose the “freeze” on the rapprochement on nuclear questions between New Delhi and Washington and hold back some measures of economic liberalisation.

The CPI and CPI-M lead the two main left trade unions (the All India Trade Union Congress and the Center for Indian Trade Unions); the biggest confederations being linked to the bourgeois governing parties (Congress and the far right, Hinduist, BJP). Via their mass organisations, they have also committed themselves thoroughly to the World Social Forums, playing an important role (in concert with other components) in the organisation of the Bombay (Mumbai) forum in 2004. The CPI-M claims nearly a million members.

At the international level, the CPI-M (it is less true for the CPI) occupies a specific place: it is one of the few to keep a real capacity for political initiative among the “big” parties originating from the pro-Soviet and Stalinist Communist movement. Nonetheless it has just suffered a serious electoral reverse during the parliamentary elections (they lasted a month, starting on April 16 and ending on May 13, 2009).

The number of federal MPs for the CPI-M fell from 43 to 16 and that of the CPI from 10 to 4. They have set up a parliamentary group with, notably, regional parties, including initially 67 MPS, but it is a very fragile, heterogeneous bloc. The alliance led by the Congress Party holds the majority and has freed itself from dependence on the CPs. In

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Tripura, the CPI-M has certainly kept its electoral base, but this little state (more than 3 million inhabitants) only represents a marginal political stake. On the other hand, support fell sharply in its bastions in west Bengal, where the left only won 15 seats (9 for the CPI-M) as against 35 in 2004, and Kerala (4 seats for the CPI-M against 19 for the left coalition in 2004).

The political game in India varies considerably according to the state and the reasons for these setbacks are not the same everywhere. In Kerala, for example, the CPI-M has been openly divided by an intense factional struggle. The CPI-M had moreover had the intelligence to not enter in the federal government during the previous legislature, supporting Congress from the outside, maintaining thus a certain political liberty. But crisis broke out in its stronghold of western Bengal, after decades of continuous power and the accompanying corruption. The government of the Left Front wished to open itself to capitalist globalisation and create industrial free trade zones, expelling peasants from their land in order to do this. Thanks to the implementation of land reform, the CPI-M benefited from significant popular support in the countryside. But in Singur and Nandigram in 2007 it encountered violent rural resistance. It responded by a very brutal repression, the police behaving as in other states governed by the centre or right: there were numerous deaths, rapes and so on.

The impact of these events has been considerable. After exceptional unitary convergences, notably during the Social Forum, they created a veritable river of blood between the CPI-M and other Indian progressive components who supported the villagers of Singur and Nandigram. This impact is all the greater in that the conflicts between peasants and industrial groups (Tata cars...) are breaking out in various regions of the country and that the villagers generally receive the active support of the left.

There has not really been, during the recent elections, a "wave" in favour of the Congress Party from which the CPs would have suffered. Congress has above all benefited from the decline of the other federal forces like the BJP and the lefts; as well as the rise of the regional parties which it can co-opt rally. The defeat for the CPs did not come essentially from "external" circumstances but rather it seems from a break in the links with their social base, at least in the states where they have been in power. singularly in west Bengal.

The defeat of the CPI/CPI-M is probably not solely conjunctural then. It reflects profound developments. In a subcontinent like India, one should avoid hasty generalisations. But the CPI-M is wounded at its heart. west Bengal and its overall orientation is threatened.

The elections of April-May 2009 concerned the National Assembly (Lok Sabha) alone. When the state assemblies are elected we will see whether they confirm the developments underway. But we are probably witnessing a historic turning point for the Indian left; a turning point of international scope. After the weakening of Rifondazione in Italy and the compromises of the South African Communist Party, the crisis of the CPI-M would in effect begin the decline and the loss of identity of one of the last (the last?) of the big "traditional" Communist Parties. [1]

[1] I here use the term "traditional", for want of anything better, to include both the CPI and CPI-M in the Indian case and at the international level all the parties essentially originating from the pro-Moscow and Stalinist Communist movement, including organisations which have "renewed" and have undergone a notable development, like Rifondazione in Italy. I leave aside here the possible evolution of the East European parties and the possible fate of the party-states from Vietnam to Cuba