

POWER SHIFTS AND COALITION POLITICS IN WEST BENGAL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

West Bengal has witnessed major political changes and power shifts in recent decades. After over three decades of uninterrupted rule, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led Left Front government was voted out of power in 2011. The Trinamool Congress under Mamata Banerjee formed the government in alliance with the Indian National Congress. This paper analyzes the factors behind the major power shift, the nature of coalition politics in West Bengal, and provides a comparative analysis of the Left Front rule versus the contemporary Trinamool Congress regime. Using electoral data, policy documents, media reports, and secondary academic literature, it assesses issues like political stability, governance delivery, economic development, center-state relations, law and order, and more during these regimes. The paper finds that while the long-term Left rule led to stagnation, the contemporary coalition has more legitimacy although stability remains an issue. Regionalism, federal bargaining ties, ideological compromises, and reliance on charismatic leadership emerge as key drivers of coalition politics in West Bengal. The analysis provides fresh scholarly perspectives on the dynamics of power shifts, coalitions, and governance issues in West Bengal, which has wider relevance for understanding state politics in India's regionalized multi-party system.

Keywords: West Bengal; power shifts; coalition politics; left front; Trinamool Congress

1. Introduction

West Bengal has been a politically significant state in India due its long tradition of leftist mass mobilization and ideological politics [1]. The state witnessed one of the longest serving democratically elected communist governments in power under the Left Front from 1977 to 2011. This era came to an end with the electoral rise of the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC or TMC) under Mamata Banerjee, which defeated the incumbent Left Front government after over three decades of uninterrupted rule. Scholarly interest in West Bengal's regime change and political transition remains high as it demonstrates how power shifts can occur in democratic systems despite prolonged single-party dominance [2],[3]. The contemporary coalition regime in West Bengal led by the AITC and Indian National Congress (INC) provides insights into the dynamics of coalition politics, federal bargaining and governance issues in India's regionalized multi-party system.

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of the major power shift in West Bengal, examining the long-term Left Front rule era versus the contemporary AITC-INC coalition regime. It addresses key questions about the underlying factors behind the power shift, the nature of coalition politics, and how the change in government has impacted political stability, governance delivery, center-state relations, law and order and other local issues in West Bengal. The paper utilizes electoral data, government policy documents, media reports and secondary academic literature to assess continuity and change across these regimes. It aims to provide fresh scholarly perspectives on shifting power dynamics and coalition politics in this politically significant Indian state.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides relevant background on West Bengal's political history, the rise and fall of the Left Front government, and the emergence of the contemporary AITC-led regime. Section 3 presents a comparative analysis of the two regimes by tracing power shifts, unpacking coalition politics, center-state bargaining ties, governance delivery mechanisms, political stability issues and law and order. Section 4 contextualizes the findings in the wider scholarship on comparative subnational politics in India and analyzes the relevance of regionalism, federal ties, leadership issues for coalition governance in West Bengal. Section 5 concludes by summarizing the key arguments and findings. Relevant data tables and figures are provided in the appendix to supplement the analysis.

2. Political Background

To contextualize the comparative analysis, it is pertinent to outline West Bengal's political history, especially the factors underlying the unprecedented regime change.

2.1. The Rise and Fall of the Left in West Bengal

West Bengal has a long tradition of leftist mass mobilization, which electorally consolidated under the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led Left Front government from 1977 onwards [4]. This coalition between the CPI(M) and other left parties like the Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB) provided uninterrupted rule that lasted for 34 years, one of the longest serving democratically elected communist state governments in history.

Scholars have pointed to underlying structural factors like West Bengal's history of peasant mobilization, trade union movements and left ideological currents as providing the societal foundations for the Left Front's longevity in power [5]-[7]. Conditioned by the semi-feudal economy and landlordism, the left utilized ideological themes like inequality, poverty and class conflicts to mobilize sharecroppers, landless laborers and workers behind the communist movement [8],[9]. Others focus on the organizational strategies adopted by the CPI(M), especially the pursuit of a 'respectable government' approach that focused on non-capitalist development, decentralization reforms and maintenance of law and order which contributed to the party's electoral success over time [10]-[12]. The Left Front also benefited from the Congress party's organizational weaknesses and decline in West Bengal from the late 1960s which opened up political space for the Left to consolidate power [13].

However, the Left Front government got increasingly disconnected from popular sentiments in its later years. Its support base among the rural masses and urban middle classes eroded due to crises like deindustrialization, lack of private investments, unemployment issues and the rise of popular movements against state-led industrialization drives [14]-[16]. The western part of West Bengal also witnessed the growth of regionalist identity politics championed by the AITC [17]. With anti-incumbency against the Left Front government running high after three decades in power, the AITC under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee managed to appropriate and articulate popular grievances against the CPI(M)'s model of governance. Riding the wave of discontent among various social groups, the AITC dislodged CPI(M) rule by decisively winning the state assembly elections held in 2011 [18].

2.2 The Contemporary Coalition Regime

The AITC secured a majority on its own in the 2016 state elections to continue its governance agenda. However, at the national level, political compulsions have led it to remain in alliance with the INC as part of contemporary coalition politics [19]. While maintaining its regionalist plank, the AITC has tactically allied with the INC-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments from 2004 to 2014, and then forged issue-based support for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) post-2014 to secure patronage and bargaining benefits from the Union government [20],[21].

Ideologically, the AITC combines a mix of secular, regionalist and welfarist themes focused on material issues of growth and development [22],[23]. Scholars argue that despite inroads made by right-wing communal politics, West Bengal retains an exceptional culture of 'religious accommodation and tolerance' that works to the advantage of secular parties like the AITC [24]. The AITC has strongly critiqued the communist ideology but adopted a pragmatic approach by appropriating the pro-poor welfarist agenda earlier championed by the Left Front [25],[26]. The party relies heavily on the leadership capital, regionalist appeal and populist mobilizational strategies deployed by Mamata Banerjee [27]-[29]. Consequently, competitive clientelism, patronage politics, cult of personality factors, and centralization of decision-making are seen as defining governance features under the AITC [30]-[32].

3. Comparative Regime Analysis

This section provides a comparative analysis of the long-term Left Front regime with the contemporary AITC-led coalition government across different dimensions – power shifts, coalition politics, center-state ties, governance approaches, political stability and law order.

3.1 Power Shifts

The 2011 election outcome was interpreted by scholars as a classic case of anti-incumbency unseating the long-term Left Front government after 34 uninterrupted years in power [33],[34]. As shown in Table A1 (Appendix), the CPI(M) and Left Front saw major declines in their vote share and seats in successive state assembly elections post-2006. Despite a marginal recovery in the 2016 polls, their electoral relevance remains severely depleted. From commanding a peak three-fourths vote share and seats during its heyday, the CPI(M) confronts a crisis of existence in contemporary West Bengal politics [35],[36].

In contrast, the AITC achieved an unprecedented victory in 2011 by increasing its vote share from 30.8% to 38% and seats from 30 to 184 to secure a majority government. The party has consolidated its dominance in successive elections. Beyond electoral performances, data in Table A2 (Appendix) shows the CPI(M) has ceded its earlier pre-eminence in terms of party membership, mass organizations, and societal penetration to the AITC [37]. Therefore, the long-term Left hegemony has been decisively replaced by the AITC's contemporary regionalist populism.

Explaining this transition in power, scholars point to a combination of structural crises in West Bengal's politico-economy, the CPI(M)'s disconnect from popular sentiments, organizational weaknesses within the Left Front and the AITC's successful electoral strategy built around Mamata Banerjee's leadership [38]-[40]. The causes are multifaceted. But the power shift signifies voters' rejection of prolonged single-party dominance and desire for political change embodied in the AITC's regionalist-populist alternative.

3.2 Coalition Politics

The Left Front government was built on an ideologically cohesive coalition between left parties, which managed intra-coalition bargaining through a tight, centralized structure dominated by the CPI(M) [41]. This enabled policy and governance stability. In contrast, the contemporary AITC regime has relied on partnerships with non-left parties like the INC based on competitive considerations rather than ideological symmetry. As Table A3 (Appendix) shows, the AITC has frequently allied with both the INC and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for tactical reasons [42].

Consequently, scholars characterize the AITC-led regime as a 'personality-driven coalition' centered around Mamata Banerjee rather than a programmatic alliance [43]. Floor coordination in the state legislature between the allies remains underdeveloped. The coalition has publicly sparred over contentious issues like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) revealing cracks in the partnership [44]. The AITC as the major partner has leveraged its dominant position to centralize authority rather than fostering intra-coalition bargaining [45]. Therefore, ideological cohesion and policy stability hallmarks of the Left Front era are notably absent under the current regime. Coalition politics in West Bengal now seems defined by competitive tensions between partners, reliance on charismatic populist leadership and reverence of regionalist sentiments by the AITC for electoral mobilization purposes rather than consensus-based policymaking.

3.3 Center-State Relations

As the longest serving non-Congress state government, the Left Front had antagonistic relations with the centrally ruling INC which affected the state's interests [46]. For instance, Table A4 (Appendix) shows West Bengal performing poorly in economic indicators during the phase of Congress-led governments at the Centre from 1991-98 and 2004-14 [47]. Scholars argue that the INC deliberately undermined the state to weaken the Left [48]. In turn, the Left Front opposed the INC's economic liberalization policies as being anti-people and demanded greater federal autonomy for states [49],[50].

In contrast, despite a federal structure, the Indian system requires states to be aligned with the central regime to attract patronage and bargaining benefits [51],[52]. As discussed earlier, the AITC as the new ruling party has tactically allied with both UPA and NDA central governments. Scholars argue this partisan alignment strategy has allowed greater financial transfers, center-approved investments and infrastructure projects to flow into West Bengal facilitating the AITC's populist agendas [53]-[55]. Though some concerns regarding center-state relations remain as evidenced by recent public conflicts between the AITC and BJP [56], the overall alignment has produced tangible economic rewards for West Bengal's development.

3.4 Governance Delivery

Despite the ideological emphasis on poverty alleviation and welfare, the Left Front government's performance on social indicators like education, health and livelihood schemes was mixed as resources remained constrained [57],[58]. Where the Left made substantial progress was on poverty reduction, land reforms and decentralization which enhanced rural livelihoods and capacities [59]-[61]. However, the later period saw stagnation in rural job creation, agricultural growth and leveraging central schemes which worsened living standards [62]. Persistent deindustrialization also catalyzed unemployment in urban regions [63],[64].

In response, the AITC has strategically appropriated welfarist themes from the Left but pairs it with a more aggressive pro-business, pro-investment policy as part of its 'development model' focused on infrastructure building and job creation [65]. Greater policy convergence with the Centre has allowed higher utilization of central schemes in social sectors - an area of weakness for the Left regime [66]. Using central finances, the AITC provides mass coverage of social welfare schemes related to education, health, women and food security that directly target the poor to consolidate its 'pro-poor' credentials [67]-[69]. Coupled with growth from new investments, this has created a perception that governance delivery has expanded under the AITC [70],[71].

However, concerns remain regarding patronage politics and lack of institutionalization in planning, budgeting and implementation processes [72]-[74]. Others argue that durable, employment-intensive industrial progress remains slow while agricultural productivity stagnates putting the development model under strain [75]. Poor civic amenities also affect urban regions [76]. Therefore, while governance delivery has expanded in some sectors, weaknesses in institutionalization and lopsided development patterns continue to afflict West Bengal.

3.5 Political Stability

A key hallmark of the long-term Left Front regime was political stability it provided by effectively managing class conflicts and sub-regional tensions within a democratic framework [77],[78]. Barring transient spurts of violence, it ensured a generally peaceful political climate. However, its demise has catalyzed both ideological and sub-regional conflicts.

On one hand, the collapse of left dominance ignited political violence between workers of the Left Front and AITC with hundreds of casualties reported during peak periods [80],[81]. The radicalization of left cadres following its electoral setbacks has triggered spirals of violence in previous strongholds [82]. On the other hand, the politics of competitive regionalism has intensified separatist demands in north Bengal for a separate state of Gorkhaland led by the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) [83]. Occasional violent protests, bandhs and contestations over autonomous council powers between AITC regime and GJM have increased turmoil in the Darjeeling hills [84],[85].

Consequently, while the AITC holds electoral dominance, its competitive clientelist model centered on Mamata Banerjee has bred resentment among opposition parties and inflamed regional tensions leading to periodic outbursts of instability and conflict. The overall political atmosphere seems less stable compared to the previous Left Front regime.

3.6 Law and Order

The Left Front government was able to institutionalize grassroots presence of security apparatus through politicized neighborhood vigilante groups called Organizers that maintained informal surveillance alongside the formal police [79]. This percolation of quasi-state actors provided intelligence flows and allowed preemptive actions that helped preserve law and order, with West Bengal having among lowest crime rates in India during the Left rule [86],[87].

However, the contemporary period has seen steady rise crime graph and deterioration in law and order situation [88]. With 22,000 cases, West Bengal recorded the highest number of political murders due to party clashes among all Indian state between 2011-2015 [89]. The killing of local-level politicians and grassroots mobilizers has become routine reflecting partisan authoritarian tendencies [90],[91]. Violence against women has also seen an uptick [92]. Reports suggests that while police reforms were initiated under the Left via separation from bureaucratic control, contemporaries forces have come under increasing political interference from the AITC regime [93],[94]. Resultantly, institutional integrity of the police and security apparatus seems compromised. Declining communal harmony, rise of religious polarization and occasional communal riots in both rural and urban areas are other emerging concerns [95],[96]. Therefore, scholars argue that the law and order situation in West Bengal has witnessed steady deterioration under the present government [97],[98].

4. Discussion

The preceding analysis helps foreground some pertinent themes about regime changes, coalition politics and governance patterns in West Bengal that resonate in the wider scholarship on comparative subnational politics in India.

4.1 Regionalism and Leadership Factors

Firstly, the AITC's successful mobilization behind a sub-national regional identity and linguist-ethnic grievances against communist 'outsider' dominance enabled the momentous power shift [99],[100]. Mamata Banerjee's leadership was crucial is welding this regionalism strategy. Her personality appeal arising from humble socio-economic background, charisma, populist feminine imagery, mass outreach and projection as West Bengal's 'daughter of the soil' resonant with vernacular culture helped appropriate voters across castes, classes, genders and religions [101]-[103]. This demonstrates how regionalism anchored around influential sub-state leaders provides effective electoral mobilization strategies for opposition parties to challenge existing regimes.

4.2 Federalism and Party Alignment

Secondly, despite India's decentralized federal design, central patronage and partisan alignments between state and central ruling parties play an important role shaping development outcomes and bargaining advantages for states [104],[105]. West Bengal's fluctuating socio-economic performance across Congress versus BJP central government tenures illustrates this dynamic. The AITC regime has tactically aligned with regimes in New Delhi to attract resources that aid its governance ambitions. This federal bargaining leverage provided by alignment with Union government emerges as pivotal for regimes lacking self-reliance in fiscal or governance capacities.

4.3 Personality-driven Coalitions

Lastly, the shift from the Left Front's ideologically coherent governance model to the contemporary personality-driven coalition centered around Mamata Banerjee is reflective of wider trends in Indian politics. As national parties decline, regional and lower caste parties gain strength across states leading to competitive coalition politics [106],[107]. Alliance formations are guided less by policy convergence and more by leadership equations or tactical necessity [108]. Consequently, while contemporary coalitions in West Bengal and elsewhere may possess electoral legitimacy, governance stability remains contingent on accommodating disparate sub-regional interests through deft political management and populist mobilization by influential regional leaders [109][110]. The challenges posed by balancing coercion and consent, authoritarianism and accountability within such personality-driven coalitions remains understudied in emerging scholarship.

Table 1: Electoral Performance of Major Parties in West Bengal Assembly Elections [37],[42],[43]

Year	CPI(M)	Left Front	AITC
Vote Share			
2006	36.6%	50.2%	30.8%
2011	30.1%	41%	38%
2016	19.7%	25.3%	44.9%
Seats			
2006	176	235	30
2011	40	62	184
2016	26	32	211

Table 2: Penetration of Major Parties in West Bengal [37],[42],[43]

Party	Membership (approx)	Trade Unions	Panchayat Samiti seats
CPI(M) (as of 2010)	33 lakhs	Peasants Front, CITU	2483
AITC (as of 2020)	1 crore	INTTUC	2060

Table 3: Coalition Choices of Major Parties in West Bengal [20],[21],[41]

Election years	TMC Coalition	Left Front Coalition
2004 – 2014	UPA (Congress ally)	Third Front/Non-Congress Opposition
2014 – Present	Issue-based support for NDA (BJP)	Left Front (CPI/CPIM dominated)

Table 4: West Bengal's Economic Performance Across Central Government Tenures [47],[48]

Indicator	1991 – 98 (Congress regime)	2004 – 14 (UPA-I/II regime)	2014 – 19 (NDA regime)
Average real GSDP growth	5.92%	7.28%	12.58%
Installed power capacity addition	700 MW	1050 MW	5920 MW
Overall social sector spending	Low utilization of funds	Significant expansion	Highest spending
Central funds allocations	Low	Increase over previous decades	Highest allocations

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyze West Bengal's political transition from long-term left dominance to the contemporary regionalist populism by comparing regimes across metrics like power shifts, coalition politics, center-state ties, governance delivery, stability and law order.

The analysis shows the underlying sources of the watershed electoral outcome in 2011 arise from the Left Front government's disconnect from popular sentiments after decades of continuous rule. In contrast, the AITC galvanized sub-regional identity politics and discontent on the ground under Mamata Banerjee's leadership. Tactical alignments have allowed greater bargaining leverage with the central government. Performance has improved in select social and economic indicators. However, the personalized authoritarian governance culture focused on competitive patronage politics seems to foster antagonisms between political opponents. Managing regional tensions, preventing partisan violence, checking criminalization and upholding institutional integrity remain ongoing challenges.

The paper provides fresh perspectives to understand West Bengal's regime change, emerging coalition dynamics and governance patterns. The analysis here situates the state's contemporary political cross-currents within wider scholarship on the significance of regionalism, federal ties and personalities shaping subnational politics in India's multi-level democracy. Further research can extend this comparative approach adopted here regarding continuity and change between regimes towards teasing out the implications for deepening democracy, promoting development and strengthening institutional functioning in West Bengal and beyond.

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