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India: Information on the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI(Marxist) or CPI(M)) in West Bengal, including party structure, objectives and political affiliations; whether the party engages in extortion; capacity to track an extorted person who relocates (2014-February 2016)

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Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Background on CPI(M)

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor of political science at Indiana University, who specializes in Indian politics and security, stated that CPI(M) is "the dominant Communist party" in India, especially in West Bengal (Professor 5 Feb. 2016). Similarly, the International Business Times (IB Times), a digital global news publication that covers business, economic, political and technological issues (IB Times n.d.), reports that CPI(M) is "the largest of India's far-left parties" (IB Times 4 Oct. 2014). According to the Political Handbook of the World (PHW), the CPI(M) was organized in 1964 by "'leftist' deserters" from the Communist Party of India (CPI) who favoured a "more radical line" and who took with it the majority of CPI members when it broke away (PHW 2015, 645-646). Al Jazeera reports that the main communist parties in India participate in the electoral process; however, the Naxalites or Maoists [1] do not, and have

continued a "decades-old insurgency" that is not supported by India's mainstream communists (Al Jazeera 24 Oct. 2011).

According to the Professor, West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura have been the "main stronghold areas" of the CPI(M) (Professor 5 Feb. 2016). Sources report that the party has lost support in these three states (ibid.; PTI 21 Apr. 2015), as well as in Bihar (ibid.). Sources report that support in the former strongholds is "dwindling" (Professor 5 Feb. 2016; Senior Lecturer 8 Feb. 2016). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior lecturer in anthropology at the University of London, who has two decades of experience working in West Bengal and publishes on urban politics and social change in India, stated that the CPI(M) has been in "crisis," though it has had success competing in elections in Tripura (ibid.).

CPI(M) reportedly won only nine seats in the national Lok Sabha legislature in elections (PHW 2015, 646; PTI 17 May 2014) in 2014 (ibid.). According to the Press Trust of India (PTI), in 2014, the "Left" won 10 seats (1 to CPI and 9 to CPI(M)), made up of 6 in Kerala, 2 in West Bengal, and 2 in Tripura (ibid.). This marked a decline from 5.3 percent of the vote share in 2009 to 3.2 percent of the vote share in 2014 (ibid.).

Al Jazeera writes that, at the state level, the Left Front coalition, "dominated" by the CPI(M), governed West Bengal, with a population of 91 million people, uninterrupted, since 1977 (Al Jazeera 18 May 2011). Sources report that the party was defeated in 2011 elections by the Trinamool Congress party (ibid.; Professor 5 Feb. 2016). PHW 2015 indicates that the CPI(M) was voted out of office in Kerala in the same year (PHW 2015, 646). In the 2013 Tripura legislative elections, CPI(M) won 49 of 60 seats (ibid.). According to a 4 October 2014 article published by the IB Times, the CPI(M) has controlled the local government in Tripura for 21 consecutive years. According to the CPI(M) website, the party heads one state government (Tripura), and "though uneven," it has representation in eight state legislative assemblies (CPI(M) n.d.a).

2. Party Objectives

According to the Constitution & the Rules Under the Constitution of the CPI(M), available on the website of the West Bengal State Committee of the CPI(M), the aim of the party is as follows:

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) is the revolutionary vanguard of the working class of India. Its aim is socialism and communism through the establishment of the state of dictatorship of the proletariat. In all its activities the Party is guided by the philosophy and principles of Marxism-Leninism which shows to the toiling masses the correct way to the ending of exploitation of man by man, their complete emancipation. The Party keeps high the banner of proletarian internationalism. (CPI(M) Jan. 2006, Art. II)

A copy of the CPI(M) constitution is attached to this response (Attachment 1). According to the party's website, CPI(M) "has sought to independently apply Marxism-Leninism to Indian conditions and to work out the strategy and tactics for a people's democratic revolution, which can transform the lives of the Indian people" (ibid. n.d.a).

3. Party Structure and Leadership

For information on the CPI(M)'s party structure, see Articles XIV and XV of the constitution of the CPI(M) in Attachment 1. The website of the CPI(M) states that the party has a 91-member Central Committee, 5 "special invitees" and 5 "permanent invitees" to the Central Committee (CPI(M) n.d.b). PTI reports that the CPI(M)'s Central Committee elected Sitaram Yechury as the General Secretary in April 2015 (21 Apr. 2015). PHW 2015 lists the leaders of CPI(M) as follows:

Basudeb ACHARIA (Lok Sabha Leader), V. S. ACHUTHANANDAN, Buddhadev BHATTACHARJEE, Manik SARKAR (Chief Minister of Tripura), S. Ramachandran PILLAI (All India Kisan Sabha President and Politburo Member), Prakash KARAT (General Secretary). (PHW 2015, 646)

A Central Control Commission is also listed containing 5 members (CPI(M) n.d.b). A list of the CPI(M)'s Central Committee members is attached to this Response (Attachment 2).

The Senior Lecturer explained that the CPI(M) is a membership party that has "built its power on a strict organization of cadres in rural areas, and was very rigidly organized around central committees" (Senior Lecturer 8 Feb. 2016). She explained that the "spread and depth of its organizational structure enabled the party to stay in power for decades in West Bengal as the main democratically elected party" (ibid.).

According to the party's website, CPI(M) claims to have 1,065,406 members in India as of 2013 (CPI(M) n.d.a).

3.1 West Bengal CPI(M) Party Structure and Leadership

For information on the state-level, district-level and local organs of the CPI(M), see Article XVI and XVII of the constitution of CPI(M) (Attachment 1). According to the Professor, in West Bengal, the CPI(M) has a central committee, district level committees, and "these party structures permeate all the way down to local communities" (Professor 5 Feb. 2016).

According to the "Leadership" section of the website of the CPI(M) West Bengal State Committee, there are 85 State Committee members, who were elected by the West Bengal 24th Conference of the CPI(M) in March 2015 (CPI(M) n.d.b). A list of the West Bengal State Committee members is attached to this Response (Attachment 2).

4. Political Affiliations

According to PHW 2015, the CPI(M) is part of the Left Front coalition, with the CPI, and the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB), which is "a leftist party confined primarily to West Bengal" (PHW 2015, 646). The same source reports that the CPI(M) has been "unable to bring together a broad coalition at the national level," but maintains regional alliances with other parties (ibid.). The Professor explained that the CPI(M) "works with other parties as necessary," giving the example that when in office, they shared power with a now-defunct political party, the Socialist Unity Centre (SUC) (Professor 5 Feb. 2016). He also gave the example that CPI(M) have also "made common cause" with the CPI and are now in discussions with the Indian National Congress (INC) [2] to challenge the ruling Trinamool Congress in the next state-level elections in West Bengal (ibid.). A 2014 article by PTI explains that following a decline in its parliamentary strength in 2011, the CPI(M) joined with CPI(ML)-Liberation [3], Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist), CPI, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and Forward Bloc to create a "broad Left platform" to "take on the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party]-led government's 'anti-people' policies," as well as its "neoliberal policies, communalism and imperialism" (PTI 30 Dec. 2014). The same source reports that the group conducted a week-long protest across different parts of the country in December 2014 as part of a "nationwide campaign against communalism and the problems afflicting the people's lives and livelihood" (ibid.).

For information on the youth wing of CPI(M), the Democratic Youth Federation of India, refer to Response to Information Request IND104479.

5. Incidents of Violence and Extortion Perpetrated by CPI(M)

5.1 West Bengal

Al Jazeera reports that during its governing of the state, the CPI(M) network of cadres resorted increasingly to "strong-arm" tactics to win elections, including "intimidating ordinary people as well as outright fraud" (18 May 2011). The Professor noted that, although the CPI(M) has a centralized structure, "the ability of the central committee to control all members is questionable" (Professor 5 Feb. 2016). According to the same source, the CPI(M) is a "heavily criminalized organization" and many members join the party "not as ideological followers, but in order to make money, extort people, and engage in patronage politics" as well as to "enrich themselves" (ibid.). He explained that CPI(M) uses violence "to the extent that there is electoral violence to intimidate voters and other party members, and occasional clashes between CPI-Marxist cadres and the ruling party in West Bengal [the Trinamool Congress] since 2011" (ibid.). He added that extortion often occurs around the time of elections (ibid.). Similarly, the Senior Lecturer stated that the practice of extortion is "often localized" and "very closely related to electoral politics" (Senior Lecturer 8 Feb. 2016). She explained that extortion happens for the purpose of extracting funds and exercising political control (ibid.). Sources report that the CPI(M) engages in extortion in order to fund the party [called a "party levy" (AHRC 17 Feb. 2016)] (AHRC 17 Feb. 2016; Professor 5 Feb. 2016). The Professor characterized extortion activities as a "normal part of political life in West Bengal," noting that once CPI(M) was voted out of office in 2011, some "opportunistic cadres" of the party left and joined the ruling Trinamool Congress in order to carry on extortion activities for the party in power (ibid.). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), an "independent, non-governmental body which seeks to promote greater awareness and realisation of human rights in the Asian region" (AHRC n.d.), explained that the party would "never refer to this as extortion, but only as contribution from the working class [to] support political activities" (AHRC 17 Feb. 2016).

According to the Professor, the main targets of extortion by the CPI(M) in West Bengal are usually members of other political parties, businessmen, and local entrepreneurs (Professor 5 Feb. 2016). The AHRC stated that the typical targets of extortion are small business owners (AHRC 17 Feb. 2016). He explained further that the relationship with the victim may sometimes be "complex" and that many people pay the party so that they are not threatened or bothered (ibid.). He added that others pay "as a form of protection," and that there are also cases where "those who pay are themselves engaged in illicit businesses, like black-marketing" or other illegal activities (ibid.). He explained that the local police will also take a "cut" from the CPI(M) leaders in the locality so that there will be no intervention by the state into such activities (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5.2 Outside West Bengal

According to the Professor, extortion by the CPI(M) does occur outside of West Bengal, but this is mostly in the areas where the party has a "stronger footing" and "more influence, but this is less and less the case as the party has weakened" (Professor 5 Feb. 2016). The AHRC representative similarly stated that the CPI(M) carries out extortion in other parts of India "where the CPI(M), through its Local Committee, has muscle power" (AHRC 17 Feb. 2016). The same source stated that the CPI(M) has lost substantial support from their "mass base and therefore the muscle power they once had in large parts of West Bengal" (ibid.).

The Indian newspaper the Deccan Chronicle reports that in 2014, in Kerala state, three CPI(M) leaders and eight others were convicted and sentenced to life in prison for their role in the 2012 murder of a rival member of the CPI(M) who was attacked by a gang and cut 51 times (Deccan Chronicle 28 Jan. 2014).

Further information on instances of violence by the CPI(M) outside of West Bengal could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

6. Tracking Capacity of the CPI(M)

Information on specific cases where the CPI(M) tracked down a person who relocated outside West Bengal could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Senior Lecturer stated that "extortion serves to preserve power in the locality, as this is a democracy, parties want to keep [staying] in power in order to be able to extort money and have access to government funds and agencies ... there would be very little impetus to follow those who leave the state and no longer operate locally" (8 Feb. 2016). The Professor explained that

[t]he ability of the CPI-Marxists to locate an extorted person who has left West Bengal would depend on where that person moves, because if they relocate to a state where CPI-Marxist has a significant presence, then local cadres would more easily be able to find a person. Locating a person in this way would still likely be extremely difficult to do, however. The ability of the CPI-Marxists to find someone who leaves West Bengal would also depend heavily on that person's profile and if they had created a lot of problems for the CPI-Marxists. Someone who was a low-level operative of a rival party for example, or a rank and file member of an opposing party, or a defector from CPI-Marxist would more easily relocate without detection and be unlikely to draw the attention of the CPI-M enough to be tracked down than someone of great prominence or who had caused significant problems for the CPI-Marxists. The CPI-Marxist party does not have the kind of networks in India that would allow them to track down a person who left West Bengal unless they were a wanted person of some prominence or great importance to the CPI-Marxists. (5 Feb. 2016)

The AHRC representative stated that the CPI(M) "does not have the capacity -manpower, resources and political will -to chase a person across state borders" (AHRC 17 Feb. 2016). Further information on the ability of the CPI(M) to track down a person across states could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] According to the Professor, the CPI-Marxist-Leninist [CPI-ML, CPI-Maoist, Naxalites, Naxals] is a faction that split from the CPI-Marxists in the 1970s and has "eschewed the parliamentary path" and "embraced violence for decades" (Professor 5 Feb. 2016). PHW 2015 describes CPI-ML as an "extreme faction" of the CPI(M) organized in 1969, committed to "Maoist principles of people's liberation warfare" and "actively involved in the Naxalite terrorist movement in West Bengal" (PHW 2015, 650). The same source reports that the CPI-ML was banned by the government during the "state of emergency" (ibid.).

[2] INC holds 44 seats in the Lok Sabha, and forms part of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which is the second largest coalition in the Lok Sabha, with 60 seats (PHW 2015, 652).

[3] The CPI(ML)-Liberation is a "legal" political party of the CPI-ML (see note [1]) (PHW 2015, 650).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights; Common Cause; Legal Aid Services West Bengal; West Bengal Human Rights Commission.

Internet sites, including: Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights; Common Cause; DarjeelingTimes.com; ecoi.net; Factiva; Freedom House; Ganashakti; The Hindu; Hindustan Times; India - National Human Rights Commission; International Crisis Group; Legal Aid

Services West Bengal; Radio Free Asia; Tara TV; The Times of India; United Nations - Refworld; United States - Department of State; West Bengal - Calcutta High Court, Kolkata Police, West Bengal Human Rights Commission, West Bengal Police.

Attachments

1. Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). January 2006. Constitution & the Rules Under the Constitution. [Accessed 4 Feb. 2016]
2. Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). N.d. West Bengal State Committee. "Leadership." [Accessed 5 Feb. 2016]

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