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Rainbow Coalition in Co-operative Society Elections in West Bengal — Is it the beginning of an End? | K Gireesan and Sujit Kumar Paul

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Background

After the State Legislative Assembly Elections held in West Bengal in the year 2021, number of scams unearthed in the State. The Central Investigating agencies such as Central Bureau of Investigation, Directorate of Enforcement, and Income Tax Department investigated the scams like West Bengal Teacher Recruitment Scam, Coal Scam, Lottery Scam, etc. by court orders. There is a sense of anger against the Ruling party of the State, All India Trinamool Congress (AITMC) by the people when crores and crores of money was recovered from house of close aid of ex education minister and a prominent member of the cabinet and ruling party. Most of the members of the Recruitment Committee were also arrested. There were also complains of exploitation, money laundering, threatening of false cases, etc. against the President of the ruling party in Birbhum District after he was arrested for multiple cases. Recently from the news reported it is known that there are scams in Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Mid-Day Meal programme, etc. as well. Corruption is in such level that the Central Government had to send different investigating team to investigate the level of corruption and give actual report to the Central Government.

Though there is an anger / strong resentment against the State Government, the opposition in the State is divided as there are ideological differences between them. This is an advantage to the ruling party as they could do everything legal and/ or illegal to win an election. Of course, this scenario is not new to the State and other parts of the country as one could find number of instances of political parties resorting to all sorts of 'strategies and techniques' by entering into overt and covert adjustments to win the elections to the Parliament/ Legislative Assembly, Local Government Institutions (Gireesan and Chathukulam, 2006), Co-operative Societies, etc.

In the municipal elections held in February 2022, out of 108 Municipalities, AITMC had a landslide victory by winning 102 Municipalities out of 108 in which 30 Municipalities with 'no opposition'. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and newly formed Humro Party were successful in two Municipalities, in Darjeeling and Taherpur. The results of the remaining four Municipalities were found hung which were managed to capture by the ruling party with the support of independent candidates. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the largest opposition party in the State, failed to win even a single Municipality. So is the state of affairs with the grand old political party in the country, Indian National Congress (INC), which could not muster power even in one Municipality in the State.

As the State is preparing to the conduct of Panchayat elections which may be held in March 2023, the political parties have redefined their political strategies and re-aligned their alliances with other political parties. AITMC had launched a '*Cholo Gram*' (Visit the villages) campaign, which will be led by the *Mahila* brigade. 'With the new campaign, the ruling party wants to woo female voters in the run up to the Panchayat elections in March 2023' (Roy, 2022). As part of the campaign, the female leaders and workers of the ruling party visit blocks in every *Gram Panchayat* (GP) in the State. Preparing the rank and file of the party to sweep the Panchayat elections, the AITMC had asked all its local leaders and cadres to continue their on-ground tour extensively. Drawing lessons from the Municipal elections held in 2022, the cadres of the opposition parties may have thought it is difficult for them to fight against the ruling party which does not allow free and fair elections, in the present scenario. That may have triggered the idea of fighting elections to the co-operative societies which happened ahead of the Panchayat elections, by side-lining the ideological differences.

Evidences of 'Rainbow' Coalition

At the end of the year 2022, there were co-operative society elections held in different parts of West-Bengal. During the elections, we could find several instances of different types of coalitions, some of them even stitched with diametrically opposite political parties. The unique political scenario of fighting elections by forming alliances of different political parties has been termed as 'rainbow coalition'. In the year 2005 itself, presence of 'rainbow coalition' at the local level was reported from Kerala, during the Panchayat elections (Gireesan and Chathukulam, 2006, 41).

In Baharampur Agriculture Co-operative Society, Nandakumar of Purba Medinipur District, there was a rainbow alliance in the name 'West Bengal Samobai Bachao Committee' (WBSBC) between CPI-M and BJP which contested in all 63 seats. Though the AITMC fielded its candidates in all the seats, but later withdrew its candidates from 52 seats and elections were held in 11 seats only. The 'rainbow coalition' of WBSBC won all the 11 seats, finally sweeping all seats in the Co-operative Society.

In Keshabpur Jalpai Radhakrishna Krishna Unnayan Samity election in Mahisadal of Purba Medinipur District, a 'rainbow coalition' was formed by BJP-CPI-M which fielded 76 candidates against the ruling party AITMC which also fielded its candidates for all the seats. However, when the final results were out, AITMC won 68 seats conquering the samiti and the 'rainbow coalition' could win only 8 seats.

In Sitla Krishi Unnayan Samity elections in Mahisadal of Purba Medinipur District, the BJP led alliance won in 51 out of 62 seats against AITMC. In the elections to Bardabar Krishi Unnayan Samiti in Kolaghat of Purba Medinipur District, CPI-M and Congress coalition won 38 seats out of 43 seats. Here, significantly, AITMC could win 4 seats only and BJP was left able to win a single seat. There are also instances where opposition parties have won without entering into any alliance. In Bhekutia Unnayan Samity, Nandigram of Purba Medinipur District, BJP Candidates won 11 out of 12 seats defeating the ruling AITMC. In Samaprasanna Krishi Unnayan Samiti election in Sankrail of Howrah District, CPI-M won all 64 seats.

In view of the above, we can say that there are three major opposition parties in the State, BJP, CPI-M and INC, which has its presence in certain pockets only. To defeat the ruling party, it may be possible, only if the opposition parties are united. But the three major opposition parties in the State (BJP, CPI-M and INC) have different ideologies. Hence, they may not be able to go for an 'open alliance' at the state. Probably, that's why most of the opposition leaders have described the 'rainbow coalition' in the co-operative election as 'United People's Alliance'. Similar twists and turns could be seen in the upcoming Panchayat elections in the State as well as one could find formation of 'adjustments and strategies' at the local level which are very similar to 'rainbow coalition' as per the political chemistry at the grassroots and temperature shown in the 'barometer' of that area.

In this context, the authors would like to raise few pertinent questions. Whether the rainbow coalition witnessed in the elections to the Co-operative Societies and Unnayan Samitis in West Bengal is ‘the beginning of an end’ to the ideological divides between the major political parties in the State? What is the driving force behind the formation of such pre-electoral coalitions Is it the desire to fight against the ‘common enemy’ which is numerically superior and strong, to enable it to stay live and float in the political scenario? Or Is it the desire to come to terms to grab power at any cost, even at the cost of ignoring the ideological differences? Only time will tell whether these coalitions were ‘Right’ in the political eco system of the State of West Bengal, while the political parties or its leaders are driven by the ‘moral compass’ to find their newly chartered paths or are shown the ‘mirror’ to them to find themselves how do they look like in the changed scenario. Time will further tell us that whether we will see this type of ‘Rainbow Coalitions’ in other elections between political and ideological rivals in Bengal which we have observed before in other States also.

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Note: The views expressed by the authors are personal.

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