

Left Front wins West Bengal panchayat polls but base eroded

West Bengal's ruling Left Front suffered an erosion of its rural base though it managed to retain its domination in 13 of the state's 17 districts in results declared Wednesday in elections to three-tier self-government bodies.

The Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee regime's industrialisation drive seemed to have cost the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), dearly as it was wiped out in Nandigram and Singur, the two hotspots which saw large-scale, opposition-sponsored agitation against plans to acquire land for setting up industries.

East Midnapore district, within which Nandigram falls, jolted the front which lost the zilla parishad or district council - the top tier of the state's panchayat system - to the Trinamool Congress. The Left Front has retained power in East Midnapore district uninterruptedly for 30 years, when the first panchayat polls in the state were held.

During the last rural self-government polls in 2003, the front had bagged control of 15 of the 17 zilla parishads, while the remaining two - Murshidabad and Malda - went to the Congress.

The main opposition Trinamool Congress, vanguard of the agitation in Nandigram against the government's abortive bid to acquire land for setting up a chemical hub, made a clean sweep of the seats in the area, besides making impressive gains at Singur in Hooghly district.

At Singur, the Trinamool mobilized people against land acquisition for Tata Motors' small car factory, but it failed to stretch its victory to the rest of Hooghly district where the zilla parishad remained with the front.

The Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool, which had failed to win even one zilla parishad five years back, made inroads into the front's much-vaunted rural base, capturing the zilla parishad in South 24-Parganas district in addition to its success in East Midnapore.

The Left Front wrested the Murshidabad zilla parishad from the Congress, but the latter made the score even by dislodging the combine from power in North Dinajpur district, which has elected state Congress president and central Information and Broadcasting Minister Priya Ranjan Dasmuni to the Lok Sabha.

However, lack of unity among the front partners over the process of industrialisation and selection of candidates for the panchayat elections did not affect its prospects much, as it maintained its control in the northern districts where the discord was maximum.

State election commission officials said the Left Front was declared winner in 13 zilla parishads - Puruliya, Murshidabad, Bankura, Cooch Behar, Nadia, North 24-Parganas, South Dinajpur, West Midnapore, Howrah, Hoogly, Jalpaiguri, Bardhaman and Birbhum.

Nearly 37.5 million rural voters cast their votes in 37,000 polling stations in the panchayat elections held on May 11, 14 and 18.

About 51,000 successful candidates will take charge of different positions in the decentralised rural

governance that cover over 38,000 villages.

West Bengal's three-tier panchayat system comprises gram panchayat, panchayat samiti and zilla parishad.

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