

## Somen Mitra leaves Congress, to align with Mamata

Giving a jolt to the Congress in West Bengal, its former state president Somen Mitra Saturday deserted the party and announced his new outfit would join hands with Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress to fight the Communists.

While Banerjee promptly welcomed the development, the Congress said it was not bothered, and the state's ruling Left Front major Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) said it stood to gain at the turn of events.

'We need to find a credible alternative to the state's ruling CPI-M-led Left Front. But the Congress cannot do it, as it has lost its popularity and credibility to fight the Marxists by running the central government with support from the Left,' Mitra said at a crowded media meet here.

Mitra's loyalists said the new party was christened Pragatisheel (Progressive) Indira Congress, but the leader maintained several names were being considered and the final decision would be taken later.

Describing Banerjee as the epicentre of the fight against the CPI-M, Mitra said: 'Our aim is to oust the CPI-M from power in the state. Mamata is the main force in the struggle. My party would form an alliance with the Trinamool.

'I'm not in the race for the chief minister's post. We will strengthen the hands of Mamata,' said Mitra, indicating his support for the Trinamool president's chief ministerial ambitions.

Mitra, regarded as a deft organiser who enjoys a strong grassroots level support among workers, has been licking his wounds for eight years as he was constantly cold-shouldered by Congress president Sonia Gandhi after he plotted the defeat of Gandhi's handpicked candidate Debaprasad Roy in the Rajya Sabha polls in 2000 on being denied nomination.

The selection of Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi as the state Congress chief earlier this year overlooking his claims probably proved the last straw for Mitra, who found himself increasingly isolated with several of his long-time associates switching allegiance to Dasmunsi in the party's factional politics.

Praising Mitra's decision, Banerjee said: 'He has taken the right step. We will work together to dislodge the anti-people government. All right-thinking persons in the Congress and the Left parties should come with us and form a grand alliance to fight the terror unleashed by the CPI-M in the state.

'The CPI-M will now face the music. The Trinamool and all other parties aligned with it will gain from an alliance with Mitra.'

Banerjee invited Mitra to the Martyrs' Day rally organised by the Trinamool July 21 in memory of 13 Congress workers killed in police firing on that day in 1993.

The two leaders had held several rounds of talks over the last few days in the run-up to Mitra's announcement Saturday.

Attacking the Congress, Banerjee said: 'It instructs the workers to launch movements against the CPI-M in the state when it suits the high command. And then, when the workers do so, they are reined in.'

Mitra's decision to align with Banerjee's party also seems ironic as the rivalry between the two was largely responsible for the latter quitting the Congress and launching the Trinamool on New Year's Day in 1998.

The Congress scoffed at Mitra's move. 'It is his personal decision. The Congress is like a big sea, which remains unaffected if a bucket of water is removed from it. On our part, we will fight the CPI-M with all our might,' senior Congress leader Subrata Mukherjee said.

The CPI-M, now locked in a fierce fight against the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government at the centre over Tuesday's trust motion in the Lok Sabha, could barely conceal its glee.

'The Congress' support base will continue to be eroded. Now one individual is separating himself from the party. Later on, several sections will split from the Congress. This trend will benefit the ruling Left Front in the state,' CPI-M Central Committee member Shyamal Chakraborty said.

The UPA has sought a confidence vote after the CPI-M and three other Left parties withdrew support to it protesting against its decision to go ahead with the India-US civil nuclear deal.

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