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A hundred days of BJP shock and awe in West Bengal

The party finds taking on local customs and the opposition easier than fixing the economy



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FOR MANY years the Hindu nationalists' student group at Jadavpur University in Kolkata was so unpopular that it imported middle-aged activists to pad out its rallies. But in May the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party led by Narendra Modi, the prime minister, won West Bengal, the state that has Kolkata as its capital. For days in August emboldened students assaulted leftist rivals and torched their flags and posters. A minister urged more such "surgical strikes". "They

have the muscle power and the money power,” complains a 19-year-old political-science major, “and now they will start controlling this campus.”

Until now, West Bengal has been everything the Hindu-nationalist BJP is not: secular, left-leaning and abysmal at business. So victory for the party, its first-ever in the state, was especially sweet. But the mismatch also makes West Bengal among the biggest headaches the BJP has had to cope with in its 12 years of ruling India. The party promised big changes in its first 100 days, which expired on August 17th. But it has found waging culture wars is easier than fixing the economy.

For decades Communists and the Trinamool Congress, a regional party, ran West Bengal in fairly similar style. Their appetite for bribes and aversion to business reduced what was once one of India’s industrial strongholds to a “syndicate raj” of dodgy influence-peddling. May’s election unseated Trinamool’s Mamata Banerjee, a three-term chief minister and a fierce critic of Mr Modi. Many did not vote for the BJP so much as against her party’s corruption and thuggery.

After decades of bad blood between state and centre, things are smoother now. Infrastructure projects that were stalled are moving, including an extension to Kolkata’s metro system. Since the election, Delhi has pledged 1trn rupees (about \$10.5bn) for railway projects in West Bengal. But winning over private-sector investors is a slow and thankless task. “I am on a hunt for one huge, iconic investment,” says Swapan Dasgupta, a maverick intellectual now serving as the state’s finance minister. One coup would be persuading Tata Group, India’s biggest conglomerate, to return with a big manufacturing project—two decades after Ms Banerjee staged a hunger strike and drove a planned Tata car factory out of the state.

The sweet talk is saved for businesses: the new government seems brazen about imposing an alien culture of Hindu nationalism on secular-minded, meat-loving Bengalis. “I will work for the Hindus,”

announced Suvendu Adhikari, the new chief minister of a population that is close to 30% Muslim. The BJP has cleared Muslims at prayer from public roads and made it harder to sell halal meat. In a rush to deport “illegal infiltrators”, even some Indian citizens who happen to be Muslim have been pushed across the border into Muslim-majority Bangladesh. A brief attempt to remove eggs from midday meals in schools outraged many Hindus, who eschew the “pure” vegetarianism preferred by the Hindu nationalists of the north. Though many voters complain that Ms Banerjee coddled her Muslim vote-bank, few want the government to mess with West Bengal’s syncretic culture.

The BJP has also co-opted much of the opposition. In the national parliament in Delhi, 20 out of 28 Trinamool politicians have defected to Mr Modi’s coalition. In the state assembly, 65 of 80 Trinamool representatives have distanced themselves from Ms Banerjee as part of a breakaway faction that keeps suspiciously quiet on the BJP. Many, say critics, did so to ward off investigations by central law-enforcement agencies. One Banerjee loyalist was found hanging from the ceiling of the party office on August 16th, with a suicide note begging his family never to get into politics.

The BJP is rushing to show results in West Bengal before the next national election, expected in 2029. Because about 57% of state revenues come from Delhi, fixing the economy by such a tight deadline means that West Bengal must stay at the top of the national government’s list of priorities. The second challenge stems from the BJP’s decision to strengthen its presence in the state by inducting scores of high-profile Trinamool politicians into its ranks. These turncoats, including some tainted by corruption scandals, make it harder to convince voters and financiers that the state really has turned a page. ■