

Bengal's 'tigress' welcomes poll showdown amid Modi challenge

Banerjee tackles mood change after 15 years leading high-profile Indian state

ANDRES SCHIPANI AND JYOTSNA SINGH
KOLKATA

Striding through the streets of her hometown of Kolkata last week, one of the most powerful women in Indian politics roused her supporters to rebuff an unprecedented challenge from India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

For 15 years, chief minister Mamata Banerjee has led one of India's biggest states, West Bengal, where she has defied the Hindu nationalist policies of Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party.

But analysts say support for the BJP is rising in Kolkata, with Modi hoping to seize the commercial and cultural capital that has long resisted his control.

West Bengal is the most high profile in a slew of Indian state elections this month, which analysts say offer an indication of the prime minister's political standing in historic opposition strongholds. The results are due on Monday, following the second round of voting this week.

Banerjee, who is seeking her fourth term, has put herself at the forefront of the state assembly election, a contest she has framed as between native Bengalis and Modi's largely Hindi-speaking party in a state of more than 90mn people, almost a third of whom are Muslims.

The chief minister told the FT in a rare interaction with foreign media that the BJP "is obsessed with Mamata". "They are trying to capture Bengal."

Banerjee, hailed by supporters as the "Bengal tigress", has ruled the state through a mix of identity politics and welfare schemes that have succeeded in lifting more than 17mn people out of poverty.

A student activist for the Indian National Congress in the 1970s, she was elected one of the youngest parliamentarians in the 1980s before breaking off in 1998 to found the Trinamool Congress. In 2011, the party won power, ending the 34-year rule of the communist-led Left Front.

"Mamata Banerjee is a leftist at heart," said Sudakshina Gupta, professor of economics at the University of Calcutta, citing populist policies including cash transfers for women, bicycles for schoolchildren, rice for the poor and stipends for imams, Islamic religious leaders.

"She has a very strong personality. She is fearless. She openly mocks BJP leaders," said Mukulika Banerjee, a professor of social anthropology at the London School of Economics. "But part of the reason she gets elected is her record of benefits to a large section of the electorate."

But the state's nominal GDP, which has grown sixfold during her tenure,

and per capita income, which has increased threefold, have continued to lag behind other Indian states.

This has created an opening for the BJP. Modi's party has been steadily gaining ground, rising from zero seats in the West Bengal assembly in 2011 to 77 seats in 2021, when it won 38 per cent of the vote.

"Shouldn't there be a change now?" said Ashok Singh, a lassi vendor close to Banerjee's residence in Kolkata. "She has been ruling for 15 years."

Modi has campaigned energetically in West Bengal and has dispatched his closest lieutenants, home minister Amit Shah and chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath.

The BJP has also circulated allegations of thuggery, extortion and corruption under Banerjee's TMC, which critics said was backed by local criminal gangs in a state long scarred by political violence.

"The entire machinery of Mamata Banerjee is corrupt, full of illiterate people, full of goons, mafia," said Ravi Tiwari, a BJP youth leader, calling the TMC a "syndicate Raj".

Amit Mitra, Banerjee's chief finance adviser, dismissed such allegations as "patently false and malicious propaganda".

Banerjee, who once served as railway minister in a BJP-led government, described Modi's party as more "dangerous than a venomous snake".

She has also accused Modi's government of "bulldozing" voters from the electoral rolls, a reference to the national election commission's removal of 9.1mn names — about 12 per cent of the electorate — from the register. A similar effort preceded a vote last year in Bihar, India's poorest state, where the BJP won a landslide election.

The Sabar Institute, a Kolkata-based public policy research centre, conducted an extensive analysis on the voter list revision in West Bengal and concluded that Muslims, many of whom



back the TMC, had been "disproportionately affected".

For Abdus Salam, general secretary of Muslim charity West Bengal State Jamiat-e-Uluma, "the target is clear — to change the government in Bengal and for the BJP to install its own government".

"For that to happen, the strength of vote of the Muslim population has to be reduced," he added.

Khalek Islam, a TMC supporter, was one of those removed from the voter list. Islam said he had been voting for decades. "I have lost my sleep since the name was deleted." He appealed against his deletion but did not hear back in time for the election.

The national election commission did not respond to requests for comment. Gyanesh Kumar, India's chief election commissioner, said the office would "leave no stone unturned to hold free, fair and transparent elections" in West Bengal.

Modi's government rejected accusations that the revision was politically motivated and defended the effort as needed to prevent "infiltrators" — a pejorative term largely used to refer to Muslim immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh or Rohingya refugees from Myanmar — from voting.

"This election is not about making a BJP worker the chief minister. It is about liberating Bengal from infiltrators," Shah, the home minister, told a rally last week, claiming that Banerjee "wants to protect infiltrators".

But Banerjee, whose image is ubiquitous across the state capital, still commands fierce loyalty from supporters,

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among whom she is known as "Didi", or elder sister.

"We love everything about Didi. We want her to stay on," said Piali Das, a Banerjee backer.

Banerjee's "political persona is rooted in her street-level activism, cultural symbolism and combative style", said Sayantan Ghosh, a political analyst. She "remains a potent force in Bengal's public imagination".

Thronged by crowds chanting "Joy Bangla!" ("Victory to Bengal!"), Banerjee, clad in her trademark cotton white sari and white rubber sandals, was untroubled by the threat from Modi's BJP.

"The people are with us," she said.

On the road: Mamata Banerjee meeting supporters. Below, Abdus Salam says an electoral purge has aimed to weaken the Muslim vote

Subrata Biswas/FT

EirGrid

Managing Director – Offshore

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