

Notes from the field: Democracy under threat in West Bengal

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Fernande Pool explains how villagers in West Bengal are responding to delays in panchayat elections and related violence, and what impact these may have on the public's faith in democracy.

"Let us win first, and then there will be democracy," says a grinning Trinamul Congress (TMC) leader to me in a village in West Bengal. And when we think we cannot win, democracy will have to wait a little, he could have added.

The political situation in West Bengal has gone from tense to tumultuous over the last few months. Panchayat elections were due in West Bengal in April. But because of a disagreement between the state government and the State Elections Committee (SEC), the poll did not take place in April, is unlikely to happen in May, and may be postponed until a much later date altogether.



Meanwhile, the number of victims of political violence has been rising. The [suspicious death](#) of Students' Federation of India (SFI) leader Sudipto Gupta in a Kolkata jail was retaliated by Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPIM) and SFI activists [heckling Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee](#) and manhandling Finance Minister Amit Mitra outside the Planning Commission office in Delhi on April 9. This resulted in a cycle of violence across West Bengal, with CPIM, Congress and TMC activists alike attacking the offices of their rivals. Most widely deplored was [vandalism by alleged TMC supporters](#) at the Presidency College in Kolkata. (Separately, the TMC is also involved in a [chit fund scam](#), which may require a CBI investigation.)

The state election commissioner (LSE alumna Mira Pande) filed a [petition](#) in the High Court against the state government because the latter insisted on two polling dates, rather than three, and planned to proceed without the help of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). Ever since the panchayat elections have been put on hold, [the security situation has deteriorated](#) to a degree that elections without such forces now are inconceivable.

At first I thought that the insistence on two polling dates – the first for those districts that favour the TMC, and the second for the three Congress strongholds – was a tactic by Banerjee to increase her chances of influencing and

winning the elections. But in an interview, Amzad Ali, a senior lawyer who was a Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha member in the 1970s, suggested that Banerjee was trying to keep the elections at bay for an indefinite period. The government is likely to appeal the High Court judgement, and move the case along another three layers in the judicial system before reaching the Constitutional Bench.

Meanwhile, as the State Panchayat Minister Subrata Mukherjee has announced, the government will appoint administrators to substitute the elected officials, whose duty will end in June and July this year. According to Ali, this is virtually unconstitutional, but the government may contrive to do so under Section 212 of the Panchayat Raj Act, which states: 'In the discharge of their functions, the Gram Panchayat, the Panchayat Samiti and the Zilla Parishad shall be guided by such instructions or directions as may be given to them by the State government from time to time in conformity with the provisions of this Act.'

On May 11, the [Calcutta High Court verdict backed the SEC](#) in all its key demands and, notably, upheld the primacy of the SEC in conducting the panchayat poll. As expected, the state government pronounced its decision to [appeal the verdict](#) in a Division Bench, despite senior government officials [warning against doing so](#) because the chance of getting a verdict in its favour is minimal. The performance of democracy, once again, will have to wait.

Although the rural polls may not seem all that important to city dwellers, they are to the vast majority of West Bengalis. For several reasons – including realpolitik, close identification with candidates, and a strong belief in democracy – panchayat elections in India draw the highest voter turnout, higher than state or national elections. So what do the rural citizens, the masses of West Bengal, think about the current developments?

The village perspective

To begin with, the villagers of Shyampukur, my fieldsite, are not at all surprised by the spreading violence. In the initial stages of my fieldwork, I would ask whether there was any fighting (*maramari*) or other problems (*jahmela*) in the village (in my ignorance, my question implied communalism, but I soon learned that villagers always imply political strife when talking about *maramari*). In response, the villagers would always be eager to affirm that their village is *shanti*, peaceful, and would name other villages where *maramari* was more common. In recent weeks, however, when I referred to the *maramari* across West Bengal, the villagers would react with an indifferent "it's supposed to happen now" (*aekhon to hobe*—political violence is only to be expected in the run-up to elections).

So it is not surprising that the villagers are eager to see central forces deployed at the polling stations. That the local police force is not considered capable of enforcing law and order is made clear to me by a village madrassah teacher. He says that he ignores the orders of local police, but obeyed respectfully when a central force policeman told him to leave a polling station after voting during the national elections.

Paradoxically, there is a lot of faith in the government when it comes to elections. In a discussion about the postponed elections, some illiterate adolescents told me not to worry as one minister had said that the elections would certainly take place in May. It is striking that despite their denunciation of politics and the ruling party in particular, they don't doubt the politicians' words when it comes to elections. Or perhaps it's a case of wishful thinking.

Meanwhile, a well-informed high school graduate stated that the problem of democracy does not lie with the masses. "Ninety-nine per cent of the population of India is very much in favour of democracy," he said when I expressed my concerns about West Bengal's democratic process after he opined that Banerjee is trying to deliberately delay the elections. "It is a very small minority of political leaders and industrialists who go against [democracy]. You should see the elections here; you will see all the villagers neatly lined up for the polling station to cast their vote. If there is any problem during the elections, it is because of the 'party people' (*party lok*), not because of the common people (*shadaran manush*)."

The deep engagement of villagers with the elections also means that there is usually a restoration of relative peace

following polls, until the next elections are due (notwithstanding the continuous simmering of threat and fear, with occasional eruptions, that party politics inspire). One can only guess what would happen if elections are delayed indefinitely.

The fact that there are regular local elections, which are largely fair and free, is often quoted as evidence of the validity and legitimacy of India's democracy. In West Bengal elections seem to be a mask that keeps the state acceptable not only in the eyes of outsiders but also for citizens. There is still value in the vote as it keeps political leaders accountable, if only to a minimum extent, and helps limit the violence used by the state and party activists. Moreover, democracy demands loyalty of the citizens to government because they feel responsible for empowering their representatives. Whatever scams and scandals emerge, people can count on elections and the fresh slate they offer.

But if no elections are held, the foundation of democracy is threatened; without the mask, there is no longer the comforting knowledge that elections can legitimise the chaos of Indian politics as democratic process. In that case, one can only dread the consequences.

About the Author

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