Banyan

Mischief Minister: West Bengal's populist chief minister is doing badly. Yet she typifies shifts in power in India

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BUYER'S remorse is common enough in the dusty markets of Kolkata, a delightful if crumbling great city, once known as Calcutta and still capital of the state of West Bengal. Those who buy cheap plastic goods or plaster-of-Paris busts of Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal's cultural hero, may come to regret their haste. Likewise, many who voted in last year's state election. Sickened by 34 years of wretched Communist rule, they handed power to Mamata Banerjee and her party, the Trinamool Congress. The sense of regret is palpable.

Her faults are not the usual ones. She appears honest; home remains a two-storey whitewashed box in a humble bit of Kolkata, wedged between a fetid river and a tumbledown bakery. Her passions are not accumulating Ferraris but landscape painting and poetry. A prominent Bengali businessman praises her energy and direct manner, forgiving her much as she struggles with a dire legacy. The state is India's most indebted, and, despite a little spurt in the Communists' relatively reformist final years, enjoys little development beyond Kolkata, which has sprouted a property boom and outposts of India's outsourcing empires.

One set of complaints (Bengalis are talented, versatile grumblers) is over her style. "Mindset of a Stalinist", a journalist concludes. Cabinet colleagues "live in mortal terror", a senior party figure says. Her rule is "a one-man army", a young critic jeers. An autocratic bent leads to grotesque blunders. She claimed that a victim of gang rape was conspiring to discredit her rule, and punished a bright policewoman who caught the assailants. Then this month she failed to disavow the arrest of two academics, one of whom was beaten. He had merely shared a cartoon about her on Facebook and by e-mail. This suggested that she cannot take even mild criticism. So does the alleged banning of newspapers she dislikes from public libraries. Aveek Sarkar, a tycoon whose media group is critical, expects her to order his arrest: he has lodged "anticipatory bail" in eight as yet imaginary cases.

Defenders claim she is growing in the job, for which a few years as a minister in Delhi running the railways (badly) failed to prepare her. Derek O'Brien, her Anglo-Indian spokesman, claims somewhat limply that "you haven't seen the best of Mamata yet". Complaints about her style seem mainly confined to the urban elite. A bigger concern is what she does with power. She has notched up one success: cracking down on Maoist insurgents in their rural base. Otherwise, things look grim. Most worrying, her economic policies outflank even the Communists on the left. Trinamool, which means grassroots, won after she led a campaign against plans by Tata, India's biggest firm, to build a car factory on land she claimed was taken unfairly from farmers. Tata fled to a friendlier state, Gujarat, taking jobs, but voters cheered.

A populist not an ideologue, Ms Banerjee's success reflects a long-term trend across India: the rise of regional parties at the expense of the national ones. Poorer, less educated, rural people ("the *Lumpen*! the Luddites!" an educated Bengali sighs, in his plush office), who vote in greater numbers than the wealthier minority, seem increasingly to prefer local parties, often, at least in the north, with a statist bent. Ms Banerjee's political approach is to dish out public jobs and welfare and protect small farmers, and to duck reforms that might lure investors to the state. Her government did recently pass a law allowing business to lease modest plots of public land. Yet she vows loudly never to help industry buy it. And with land titles a confused mess of fragmented ownership, it is likely that land-hungry firms will stay away.

More energy is devoted to symbols and aesthetics. The state has a new name, "Paschim Banga". And Ms Banerjee seems to think the way to lure tourists to Kolkata is to paint every railing, kerbside, public urinal, roundabout and bridge in blue-and-white stripes. She has also ordered that loudspeakers blast Tagore's music at junctions in the city, while Marx is purged from the school curriculum. Yet she will not go to business forums, and rejects meetings with ambassadors hoping to promote industry ties. The state's budget last month reimposed a barmy entry tax on goods from elsewhere in India. That will distort trade but raise almost no revenue. Then this week Infosys, a big software firm, put on hold a development centre that would have created over 10,000 jobs. Ms Banerjee refused to allow a special economic zone offering tax relief.

All this will prove costly, in time. Farmers alone produce too little tax revenue to pay for planned roads, electricity, schools and hospitals. All her government's revenue goes to pay salaries and interest on its 2 trillion-rupee ($40 billion) debt. That leaves Ms Banerjee with a single destructive strategy: begging and threatening the central government in Delhi in order to secure debt relief. As a crucial ally of the ruling Congress party, she is in a strong position. But the finance minister, Pranab Mukherjee, is her main Bengali rival, and he refuses special help. The result is paralysis for West Bengal and India. She helps block the government's reforms—on foreign investment in supermarkets; cutting fuel subsidies; the railways budget; a water-sharing deal with Bangladesh; an anti-graft bill. But she gets no relief.

Follow the blue-and-white brick road

The stand-off will continue. Congress wants its candidate elected as India's president in July, and will need her help. She and some other state leaders want to wrest more powers from the centre, notably by scuppering a planned national counter-terrorism body. As the ruling coalition's spoiler-in-chief, she typifies rising regional clout at a time when the centre is weakly led. Her party talks grandly of a concept of "operative federalism", meaning that states should get more control of public funds. So the tensions with Congress will rise. But nobody expects her to fly away from its coalition soon. She may be seen as a mischief-maker; but, at least as yet, not quite as the wicked witch of the East.

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