

# Insight Report: India

## West Bengal elections: An outlook

April 2021



### India Travel Security Risk Rating



**MEDIUM:** India

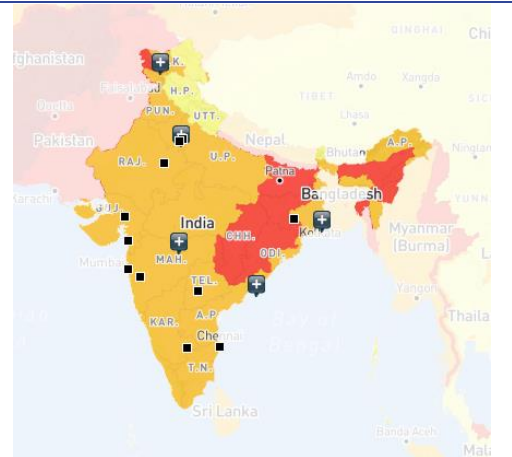


**LOW:** Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Leh district (Ladakh union territory)



**HIGH:** Asom (Assam), Manipur, Nagaland; some districts of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh; Kashmir division and parts of Jammu division (both Jammu and Kashmir union territory)

Evacuation planning level: **PREPARATORY**



### Key Judgements

- Legislative assembly elections are currently under way in West Bengal state and will conclude on 29 April, with results expected on 2 May. The polls are being contested by the incumbent Trinamool Congress (TMC), the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Sanjukta Morcha, a coalition of opposition parties.
- Politically motivated violence is frequently observed in West Bengal, particularly immediately prior to, and during elections. However, such incidents do not typically occur in major urban centres, such as the state capital Kolkata, and tend to remain confined to less urban districts.
- Campaign events can be expected to continue through the elections, as the Election Commission (EC) allows them to occur up to 48 hours prior to the start of voting in a constituency. Related gatherings can be expected to cause significant disruption, particularly when they feature prominent politicians, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and chief ministers of other states. The COVID-19 pandemic has not had any discernible impact on campaign events.
- The election itself, or its results, are not expected to cause widespread violence across the state, and a major attack targeting prominent politicians is unlikely amid a heightened security presence. However, clashes between grassroots-level party activists in less urban districts are possible through the election cycle, including on the day that results are announced.
- Organisations will need to align rostering of business operations to ensure that domestic employees are able to vote in their designated constituencies. This is imperative as polling days are not restricted to weekends.

## Legislative assembly elections: key facts

Legislative assembly elections are being held in West Bengal to fill 294 assembly seats. Initial results are likely to emerge through 2 May, though final results may take longer, especially if there is no clear majority won by any party, leading to a hung assembly.

**Table 1: Election schedule (source: EC)**

Dates	Districts
17 April	Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Kalimpong, Nadia, North 24 Parganas and Purba Bardhaman districts
22 April	Nadia, North 24 Parganas, Purba Bardhaman and Uttar Dinajpur districts
26 April	Dakshin Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Kolkata and Paschim Bardhaman districts
29 April	Malda, Murshidabad, Kolkata and Birbhum districts

The authorities may impose a ban on any gatherings near election booths on polling days, though this is unlikely to deter party activists, particularly in tightly contested constituencies. Around 70,000 security force personnel will be deployed across West Bengal during the electoral period. Stringent checks can be expected along interstate border crossings, particularly on polling days. While the movement of private vehicles is not expected to be affected, the authorities are likely to ban the entry of commercial vehicles into the state when voting is under way.

## Battle for political supremacy

The BJP had a very limited presence in West Bengal until 2014, when the party for the first time won a parliamentary seat in Asansol (Paschim Bardhaman), by a significant margin. The constituency was previously held by a prominent member of the TMC. South Bengal – comprising Bankura, Birbhum, Hooghly, Howrah, Kolkata, Nadia, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Purba Medinipur, Paschim Medinipur, Purba Bardhaman, Paschim Bardhaman and Purulia districts – accounts for 218 of seats.

**Table 2: Political alliances and their members**

Alliances	Constituents
TMC-led alliance	TMC Gorkha Janmukti Morcha
NDA	BJP All Jharkhand Students Union
Sanjukta Morcha	Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) Indian National Congress Indian Secular Front (ISF) All India Forward Bloc Revolutionary Socialist Party Communist Party of India (CPI) Marxist Forward Bloc

However, the 2016 legislative assembly election results did not yield any significant gains for the BJP in West Bengal, with the party winning only three seats, though its vote share more than doubled compared to the 2011 polls. By 2018, the BJP managed to come in second behind the TMC. It won 18 out of 42 seats in West Bengal in the 2019 parliamentary elections, increasing its vote share fourfold. This strengthened the BJP's political presence at the parliamentary and state legislative level, while the traditional opposition in the state, the Left Front, became further politically marginalised.

The period following the 2016 state elections also saw the BJP gradually increasing its organisational presence in West Bengal to be able to challenge the TMC. One of the key factors behind the BJP's increased profile in the state was the induction of several former senior TMC leaders into the party, including Mukul Roy in 2017. He was a close aide of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and known for his organisational skills.

There has been an uptick in former TMC leaders joining the BJP since the 2019 general elections. Most notable among these was Suwendu Adhikari in December 2020. He is believed to exercise significant influence in Purba Medinipur, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia – all seen as critical for the BJP's performance in the upcoming vote. Adhikari's move was regarded as a major setback for the TMC.

To counter this, Banerjee is running against Adhikari in Nandigram (Purba Medinipur), which is not only considered the latter's stronghold but also has symbolic importance as it was the epicentre of major land acquisition protests in 2007 against the then Left Front government in West Bengal. The demonstrations and the latter's heavy-handed response to them contributed to catapulting the TMC to power in West Bengal in 2011. Banerjee's choice to contest from Nandigram assumes even further significance in light of the 2019 parliamentary elections in Singur (Hoogly district), another prominent location in the 2007 protests. The BJP polled a higher number of votes than the TMC in Singur during the 2019 parliamentary elections, which at the state level has remained a TMC stronghold. Winning in Nandigram and Singur will be critical for the TMC to maintain political dominance in West Bengal. The loss of such high-visibility seats, even if TMC were to win the overall elections, would still likely have an adverse impact on the party's position in the state.

### A change of guard?

The BJP's attempt to unseat the TMC and the latter's efforts to regain power will fuel heightened political activity and associated tensions throughout the election cycle. The BJP has gone all out in its bid to secure power in West Bengal, with the party's central leadership, including Modi himself, holding regular campaign rallies to mobilise and consolidate support.

A BJP victory in West Bengal would mark the first time that the party would form a government in the state. With West Bengal fielding the third-highest number of parliamentary seats (42) in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament), a win would also allow the BJP to leverage on its state presence for the next parliamentary elections. In the two states with a higher number of parliamentary seats, Uttar Pradesh (80) and Maharashtra (48), the BJP already forms the government in the former and has 23 parliamentary seats in the latter. The state government in Maharashtra is made up of an alliance of various parties

opposed to the BJP. Winning the West Bengal elections would be crucial for the BJP to offset any potential loss in Maharashtra in the next parliamentary elections.

A defeat in the state elections would have major political ramifications for the TMC. While the party has made attempts to extend its reach in other states, such as Manipur, Kerala and Tripura, its presence remains concentrated in West Bengal. Furthermore, Banerjee has become a prominent voice among opposition parties, fuelling speculation of the possible formation of a 'Third Front' in national elections, a coalition of regional parties opposed to the BJP and not directly aligned with the other major national party, the Congress. While no such alliance has gained significant momentum in the two previous parliamentary elections, an electoral loss in West Bengal would significantly impede TMC ambitions to become a national political outfit.

That said, recent opinion polls have indicated that Banerjee remains by the far the most popular chief ministerial candidate, though her ability to campaign is likely to be somewhat hampered by a major injury sustained during a political event in Nandigram on 10 March. While the TMC alleged that the injury was the result of a deliberate attack on the chief minister, a police report stated that it was an accident. Nevertheless, the TMC continues to have a strong presence on the ground. Moreover, the BJP's gains in West Bengal have mainly been at the cost of the Left Front and the Congress. The TMC, in fact, increased its vote share in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

While the TMC and the BJP appear as the main contenders in the polls, the Sanjukta Morcha could make it a triangular contest in some districts. The newly-formed ISF could split TMC votes in areas such as Malda, Murshidabad and Uttar Dinajpur districts, which are dominated by the Muslim community. In addition, voting in these areas will be held respectively on **22, 26 and 29 April**, during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which could reduce voter turnout. However, even in this scenario, it will be a challenge for the BJP to dislodge the TMC.

The BJP is also trying to garner support from major communities such as the Matua, which consists of Bangladeshi migrants. The community has a major presence in North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas, as well as in parts of Malda, Nadia, and the cities of Cooch Behar and Howrah. The BJP's promise to implement the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) carries potential electoral weight, as this is one of the Matua community's major demands. The TMC is similarly attempting to woo them.

The CAA was passed by parliament in 2019. The act grants Indian citizenship to members of minority communities – Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Parsi and Sikh – from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, who entered India on or before 31 December 2014 because of religious persecution. Protests against the law were held across the country, with demonstrations in West Bengal involving considerable violence.

Fierce political rivalries combined with the easy availability of small arms and makeshift weapons (such as crude bombs) mean that politically motivated violence will be a major concern during the electoral period in West Bengal. The state is traditionally volatile during such periods, a fact further underlined by continuing violence in recent months (*see sidebar*).

Such violence has rarely been observed in Kolkata and its environs. It has also seldom occurred during events with prominent leaders in attendance. While clashes have occasionally occurred between the security forces and opposition party workers, these have typically involved grassroots-level party members or student groups affiliated with political parties.

In addition, communal undertones in campaign rhetoric could further contribute to unrest. While the BJP is targeting the TMC over alleged corruption, lack of development and minority appeasement, the latter has attempted to label the former as an 'outsider'.

There has been a significant uptick in violence in West Bengal since December 2020, triggered by interparty and intraparty disputes. The issue of ticket distribution has been a major concern for the BJP, with party members expressing their discontent over allocating legislative assembly seats to leaders who have recently switched over from the TMC and other parties. Related violent protests have affected Kolkata, Malda and Hooghly.

While the deadline for the filing of nominations for the latter phases of the polls has passed, similar demonstrations may still occur as voting continues. Politically motivated violence typically occurs at party offices in semi-urban districts or targets individual rival party members. Most recently, clashes between TMC and BJP activists took place on 6 April in Arambagh (Hooghly). The TMC alleged that BJP activists threw bricks at a candidate and also vandalised the vehicle of their activist. Such violence can also occur at polling booths when votes are being cast.

In addition, ongoing heightened political tensions and inflammatory rhetoric have caused near-daily clashes in West Bengal, mainly between TMC and BJP supporters. Such violence will continue in the coming weeks, including on polling days. The likelihood of disturbances increases around the date of any major political rallies, as parties attempt to mobilise supporters. This is particularly the case when counter-rallies are organised in an area, typically a day after any political gathering. Areas particularly prone to

#### Notable major incidents

- **10 December 2020:** Attack targeting the convoy of BJP president JP Nadda while travelling from Kolkata to Diamond Harbour (South 24 Parganas).
- **18 January:** Stones thrown at a BJP rally near Rasbehari Avenue in Kolkata.
- **17 February:** A minister in the TMC government injured in a crude bomb attack at Nimtita railway station (Murshidabad).
- **24 February:** Clashes between rival political activists in central Kolkata. Several vehicles vandalised.
- **5 March:** One political activist killed and six others injured in crude bomb attacks in Gosaba (South 24 Parganas).
- **17 March:** Three people injured in crude bomb explosions at 15 locations in the Jagatdal area of Bhatpara municipality (North 24 Parganas).
- **22 March:** One person killed in crude bomb explosion in Bardhaman (Purba Bardhaman).
- **26 March:** A crude bomb exploded inside a TMC office in Joypur (Bankura), injuring five people.
- **27-28 March:** The police recovered 56 crude bombs during an overnight raid in Kantipota village (South 24 Parganas).
- **10 April:** Five people were killed in two separate incidents during polling in Cooch Behar.

violence include Birbhum, Purba Medinipur, Malda, Murshidabad, North Dinajpur, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Paschim Bardhaman.

Given the significant publicity around the electoral contest between Adhikari and Banerjee in Nandigram, the constituency will be a sensitive one. There is potential for violence to increase as political parties assess their performance after each phase. Depending on their individual assessments, there could be an uptick in political and communal rhetoric as political parties attempt to mobilise support.

The EC has declared around 6,400 polling booths in West Bengal as 'extremely sensitive', indicating the high likelihood of election-related disturbances. Political violence in West Bengal can take the form of clashes between rival political activists and crude-bomb explosions targeting party offices or employed during violence at election booths. In recent weeks, the police have recovered crude bombs in Malda, Murshidabad, Paschim Bardhaman and South 24 Parganas. However, most such incidents are likely to occur in rural areas or small towns.

Unrest and associated disruption may also take place after the conclusion of voting in a particular phase or after final results are announced. Potential situations include demonstrations by parties alleging electoral malpractice or gatherings to protest against any major incidents of political violence during polling. However, the likelihood of a major attack against a prominent political leader remains low amid heightened security arrangements.

## Scenarios

While no major unrest is expected following the assembly elections, certain scenarios could contribute to localised escalations in the state:

**Hung assembly:** Such a scenario would result in political instability as parties attempt to build further alliances. However, this in itself is not expected to significantly degrade the security environment across the state. While no policy decisions can be taken by a hung assembly, executive functions of the state, such as the police, emergency services, power and utilities, will not be majorly impacted. Further, West Bengal does not face major challenges with regards to insurgencies, escalated crime rates or otherwise heightened social unrest.

**Imposition of so-called president's rule:** An escalation from a hung assembly would be the imposition of president's rule in the state. Such a situation may occur if no party is able to present the numbers required to form a government, over a sustained period. If this occurs, authority will be exercised through state Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar. This scenario would likely be met with heightened opposition and protests from the TMC. Banerjee has previously accused Dhankhar of favouring the BJP on political issues. However, even in such a situation, a heightened deterioration in the security environment is not anticipated.



## Advice

### Managers

Violence between rival party activists would pose incidental risks to bystanders. Managers with operations in remote areas should anticipate and prepare for any unrest, as a precaution. Ensure that you have clear communication protocols to disseminate information among your workforce in the event of an escalation.

With regards to ensuring compliance with labour laws, organisations will need to align rostering of business operations to ensure that domestic employees are able to vote in their designated constituencies.

From a health perspective, managers should advise employees to follow all local laws and hygiene requirements, keep three to six feet (1-2 metres) away from others in public places, and wear a mask whenever required. Even if not required, they should consider wearing a mask. They should also wash their hands frequently and carry hand sanitiser for use when soap and water are not readily available, such as at polling stations. If they develop symptoms, they should remain at their accommodation and know who to contact

### Workforce

Business travellers should book accommodation in the vicinity of the location they are visiting (where feasible) to minimise the effects of disruption from political events. The workforce should remain fully briefed on upcoming campaign events. For long-distance overland journeys, consider rescheduling travel dates if subscribers are slated to travel in areas where campaign events are planned. Remain distant from all political gatherings and refrain from engaging in public discussions on the ongoing elections. Avoiding perceptions of being linked to any political parties significantly reduces exposure to such violence. Use credible and vetted sources for information and avoid public discussions on sensitive topics such as politics.

**This Insight Report was prepared by our team in the South Asia Regional Security Centre, which includes security experts with extensive on-the-ground experience and linguistic abilities capturing all frequently spoken languages in the region. Additional inputs have been drawn from security professionals currently in West Bengal who have been closely monitoring the elections. For follow-up questions about the assessments or recommendations in this Report, please call your dedicated line and ask to speak with the Regional Security Centre.**

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