

# A by-poll like no other

Trinamool Congress is pulling out all the stops to prepare for the by-election in Bhabanipur



DISCRETION is the better part of valour, but not quite when it comes to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. She has a penchant for rushing into political terrains where not many would dare to tread—a trait that has characterised her political career. Who else, for instance, would have been brave enough to take on senior Marxist leader Somnath Chatterjee and pull off the giant-killing feat in the Lok Sabha poll in 1984, when Mamata was a young feisty leader from the Congress party, contesting from Jadavpur constituency? Fast forward to September 2021: Mamata is no longer young, but remains as feisty and fleet-footed as ever, and has often defied conventional political wisdom. That is why when she chose Nandigram as her assembly constituency in the state assembly elections this year, she knew she was taking a calculated risk by moving out of her safe bastion of Bhabanipur in south Kolkata, her home and a cosmopolitan constituency from where she had won twice in the 2011 and 2016 elections. Many would say that Mamata had chosen Nandigram because her agitation in 2007-08 against land acquisition for industries by then Left Front government had catapulted her to power for the first time in 2011. But a decade is too long a time in politics for things to change. Nandigram disappointed Mamata by giving the victory to aide-turned-adversary Suvendu Adhikari of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the latter's home turf this year. But she knew she always had the option of winning a by-poll within the six-month mandatory timeframe provided under Article 164 (4) of the constitution, and retain her chief ministerial chair. But things did not turn out as smoothly as she might have thought about the by-election since her defeat in Nandigram on May 2. Mamata is, no doubt, a charismatic mass leader, and has been keen on getting elected as a member of the legislative assembly to shed the tag of an unelected chief minister.

It required several meetings between the Mamata-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Election Commission, as well as her own pleas with the poll body, to ensure that the Bhabanipur by-poll would be held before the six-month deadline expires in early November. Tension had been building up within the TMC as to when the Election Commission would announce the by-poll. When the schedule was announced with the polling to be held on September 30 and the

of EVMs without an iota of evidence. In fact, the Election Commission allowed the Bhabanipur by-poll even as it continued to postpone by-elections in three Lok Sabha and 31 other assembly constituencies across India, including four others in West Bengal itself, in view of the pandemic and flood situation there. Obviously, keeping Mamata in mind, West Bengal Chief Secretary HK Dwivedi had written to the commission seeking an early by-poll in Bhabanipur on the grounds of

*In the last assembly polls in March-April this year, Bhabanipur gave victory to Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay by a margin of 28,000 votes against BJP nominee Rudranil Ghosh. Soon after Mamata's defeat in Nandigram, Sobhandeb vacated the Bhabanipur seat so that Mamata could contest the by-poll from there.*



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banarjee.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

result declaration on October 3, a sense of relief ran through the ruling party, which had at times apprehended—albeit without any basis—that if the Election Commission did not hold the democratic exercise on time citing Covid-19, Mamata would face the embarrassment of stepping down as chief minister.

The poll body's decision to hold the Bhabanipur by-poll is a resounding rebuff to those in the opposition, including the TMC, who had been attacking it by questioning its fair play capability and the dependability

“constitutional exigency and public interest to avoid a vacuum” in the state. And the commission acknowledged that. It is going to be a battle between the unequals and two generations of politicians in Bhabanipur as Mamata, in her late 60s, is pitted against much younger rivals Priyanka Tibrewal, 39, of the BJP, and Srijib Biswas, in his early 40s, of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The Congress party, which is in talks with Trinamool Congress for overall unity among the opposition parties to take on the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha

poll, has decided not to field a candidate against Mamata in Bhabanipur. While Priyanka is not new to electoral politics as she had unsuccessfully contested the recent assembly elections from Entally constituency in Kolkata, Srijib is set to make his debut in elections. Priyanka's claim to fame is that she is among the petitioners on whose pleading the Calcutta High Court ordered a comprehensive investigation into the post-poll violence, an exercise that was stonewalled by the TMC. The TMC is leaving nothing to chance in Bhabanipur. The party's campaign is spearheaded by Mamata, and it has pressed into service its entire organisational machinery, deploying three senior ministers—Subrata Mukherjee, Firhad Hakim and Partha Chatterjee, Kolkata Municipal Corporation Administrator Debasish Kumar, Mamata's brother Kartick, and activists of the party's student front in different parts of the constituency. The BJP, on the other hand, has lined up a motley collection of its Bengal leaders led by state unit President Dilip Ghosh and at least three federal ministers to woo the voters of Bhabanipur. In the last assembly polls in March-April this year, Bhabanipur gave victory to Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay by a margin of 28,000 votes against BJP nominee Rudranil Ghosh. Soon after Mamata's defeat in Nandigram, Sobhandeb vacated the Bhabanipur seat so that Mamata could contest the by-poll from there. Although dominated by the Bangalee middle class, a sizable chunk of the 206,389-electorate in Bhabanipur consists of Muslims in Ekbalpur, Khidderpore and Mominpur areas, as well as Marwaris, Punjabis and Gujratis, who will be a key factor in tilting the scale. Almost three-fourths

of Sobhandeb's victory margin of 28,000 votes in the last assembly poll came from the Muslim-majority areas, while the TMC did not do that well in areas of non-Bangalee Hindus. The TMC was first off the bloc as far as publicity blitz is concerned in Bhabanipur—with banners, festoons, posters, and graffiti—all of which describe Mamata as “Bhabanipurer meye (Bhabanipur's daughter),” a hyper-local version of the slogan “Bangla taar meyekey chai (Bangla wants its daughter)” in the run-up to the state assembly election earlier this year. Considering that Bhabanipur has a significant number of non-Bangalee voters, the TMC has so far refrained from playing up the Bengal subnationalism card, which it had successfully done in the assembly elections. The religious symbolism in Mamata's campaign was quite evident as she herself visited a temple, a mosque and a gurudwara in Bhabanipur. In the cut-throat world of competitive politics, at times, past performance in an election counts little for the future. Therefore, Mamata rightly told the TMC workers not to take her victory in Bhabanipur for granted. She has raised the stakes in the outcome of Bhabanipur by-poll by telling them that the election result will have an impact on the forthcoming civic body polls across West Bengal and set the tone for the 2024 general elections. Whether this strategy pays off or not will be known on October 3, when the final vote counts of the by-poll are out. But for Mamata's presence, the Bhabanipur by-poll would pass off as just another routine democratic exercise.

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# China's strategic interests in post-US Afghanistan



AFTER the complete withdrawal of the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces from Afghanistan last month, the Taliban took over the country for the second time. Although the Taliban-led government has yet to be recognised by any country, China is one of the few that has expressed interest in developing friendly relations with the Taliban. China has reiterated its stand for non-interference in Afghanistan's internal affairs and firm support for the country's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. While the US and its NATO allies have evacuated their embassy staff from Afghanistan, the Chinese embassy is still functioning normally in the country. China's State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted a Taliban delegation led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, head of the Afghan Taliban Political Commission, on July 28, in the northeastern Chinese port city of Tianjin. China has given a clear indication that it wants to make contact and establish effective communication with the Taliban. As per the policy, during an informal meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on September 16, China along with Russia, Pakistan and Iran agreed to strengthen communication and coordination, exert positive influence and play constructive role in order to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan. China has also announced USD 31 million worth of emergency aid to Afghanistan, which includes food supplies, medicines, and coronavirus vaccines. These developments imply that China has increased engagement with Afghanistan moderately

under the Taliban rule. It is important to note that China never established an official relationship with the Taliban when the group was previously in power in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. Then what is the reason behind China's remarkable policy shift towards the Taliban in post-US Afghanistan? Protecting its national interests is one of the key reasons why China is willing to build good relations with the Taliban. The Chinese government perceives the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)—referring to the alleged Uyghur extremist group—as a direct threat to the country's national security and territorial integrity. According to Chinese news agency Xinhua, there are currently 200-300 ETIM members in Afghanistan. The fact of the matter is that the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of territory in Afghanistan, borders China's Xinjiang province. Given that China is concerned about the possible connection between the Taliban and the ETIM, and a potential rise of terror attacks within its borders, the country seeks clear assurance from the newly empowered Taliban to break ties with all kinds of international terrorist forces. According to a press statement on the China-Taliban meeting issued by the Chinese foreign ministry, Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked: “We hope the Afghan Taliban will make a clean break with all terrorist organisations, including the ETIM, and resolutely and effectively combat them to remove obstacles, play a positive role, and create enabling conditions for security, stability, development and cooperation in the region.” China has gained assurance from the Taliban that it will not allow any forces to use Afghanistan's land to endanger other countries—including China. The country has urged the new Taliban government to take effective measures to crack down on terrorism within its territory. Neil Thomas, analyst on



China's shift from its previous policy regarding the Taliban is geared towards protecting its national and economic interests.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

China and Northeast Asia at Eurasia Group, said: “Chinese authorities may also be trying to protect their country from terror attacks by building a relationship with the Taliban.” Thus, the Taliban attaches a great deal of significance to China to ensure an ETIM-free Afghanistan. China is also willing to develop good relations with the newly formed Taliban government to pursue its economic interests through economic diplomacy. As Afghanistan has been facing daunting challenges and uncertainties, China is considered to have emerged as the best partner in Afghanistan's reconstruction process, according to the

Global Times, a mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party. Chinese companies seek investment opportunities in Afghanistan's severely damaged infrastructures. It attempts not only to expand Chinese business through establishing a long-term industrial platform in Afghanistan, but also to facilitate the development of economic corridors across the region, under the framework of China's most ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. Whereas building cross-border infrastructure connectivity remains the prime agenda of BRI, such investment opportunities can accelerate China's infrastructure projects in war-torn Afghanistan. It also opens the

door for the potential expansion of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship and fastest growing project of the BRI, into Afghanistan. The Taliban has already expressed its desire to join the CPEC to protect overseas investment. Enhancing economic engagement with Afghanistan in sectors such as utilities and mining has been of significant interest for China for years. For instance, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC Group), a state-owned Chinese company, won the right to develop a large copper deposit and extract high-quality copper from the Aynak copper field near Kabul in November 2007. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a 25-year deal with Afghanistan in December 2011, to explore three fields in the basin containing about 87 million barrels of oil. These projects have been stalled due to the instability and security concerns in Afghanistan. Amid the dramatic power shift with the Taliban takeover, Chinese firms are eying a resumption of these projects. China also seeks to start new projects to extract rare earth metals and minerals in Afghanistan. In this regard, China plans to boost cooperation in the energy sector with the mineral-rich country. It is apparent that China's gradual engagement with the Taliban has both geostrategic and geo-economic implications. Being one of the neighbouring countries of China, it is crucial to restore long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan in order to ensure China's territorial integrity and national security. Hence there is a huge possibility of expanding China's BRI project to Afghanistan, which would, of course, depend on China's successful diplomacy with the Taliban.

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ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

**ATIFETE JAHJAGA**  
 Former President of Kosovo  
 (born April 20, 1975)

*When there is no sharing of power, no rule of law, no accountability, there is abuse, corruption, subjugation and indignation.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- Dispatch
- Group of actors
- North Pole name
- Javelin's kin
- Juliet's love
- Heart, for one
- tree (cornered)
- Players at the plate
- Improves
- Writer Harper
- Concise
- Young fellow
- Concerning
- Spot to jot
- Left, on a liner
- Maximum amount
- Manhattan

**ingredient**

- Tops, as toast
- Atlas page
- Provinces
- Mirror sight
- Bakery buys
- Gymnast
- Comaneci
- "Frozen" queen
- Dealer's need

**DOWN**

- Wash thoroughly
- Skips a ceremony
- Joe of the Jets
- Expected
- Golf course
- Germany's Merkel
- Trembling

**8 Keyed up**

- Gets serious
- A bunch
- Craft show's kin
- Warty creature
- Easy gait
- Chooses to participate
- Like mice and men
- Changes
- Newly fashioned
- Calamitous
- Let up
- Porgy's love
- Command to
- Spot
- "See ya!"
- Fuming

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT