In her years as chief minister, Mamata Banerjee’s leadership has also been questioned for her authoritarian tendencies.

West Bengal was one of the last states to go to polls, and it is also a state in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has not been able to make sufficient inroads. Being the third largest electorate, a large enough loss in West Bengal might prevent a BJP majority in Parliament. Before the state went to polls, there were spirited speculations about how Mamata Banerjee and her brand of “doing politics” is the only way that the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah duo can be countered. She has been vocal about how Modi and his brand of politics is bad “for the country” and how the opposition’s priority is to remove him from the prime ministerial seat. Banerjee’s reputation as a politician was built on her role as a “street-fighter,” a mantle that seems to have taken up again as she takes on the BJP this year.

But since coming to power in West Bengal, Banerjee and her party have also faced criticism from several quarters for her authoritarian tendencies. Certain sections of the urban middle class have found her “high-handedness” problematic. Furthermore, there have been concerns that the internal organisation of Trinamool Congress (TMC) is extremely dictatorial and feudal, even as the party has been mired in several scandals. Several members of the party have been implicated in a number of high-profile scams, such as the
Sharada chit-fund scam.

In this reading list, we look at Mamata’s brand of politics to see how different it is from Modi’s.

1) Accusations of ‘Fascism’

When Banerjee was elected as chief minister of West Bengal, Ishita Mukhopadhyay wrote that, “We saw the unmaking of Banerjee the volatile street activist and the making of Banerjee the ruler of a state.” The intelligentsia, or the “sushil samaj” in West Bengal had greatly contributed to this transformation by lending their support to Banerjee and her party and their call for “Parivartan,” or change. Prior to her victory, Banerjee had derived her support base primarily from what was considered the “lumpen” side of politics, of which the former upwardly-mobile educated middle-class supporters of the Left Front were dismissive of. The hope was that the ideological fabric of the TMC could be changed if the party was catering to the educated urban vote bank. However, after her victory, it did not take long for the “sushil samaj” to be disillusioned as the TMC turned back to its “lumpen-politics”.

The Trinamool Congress is essentially a one-person show that is devoid of internal democracy. There is no party spokesperson other than Banerjee. No minister makes a statement without uttering her name at least thrice and she is the only one who speaks on behalf of all her ministers. Some say she is the ultimate authoritarian - incapable of accepting any censure. Indeed, her intolerance of cartoons portraying her borders on this. But what makes Banerjee different from the authoritarian figures seen in many other political parties and gives her clout in New Delhi is the power she demonstrated in overturning the Left Front, which had ruled West Bengal for 34 years.

2) Too Harsh on Mamata

In response to Mukhopadhyay’s article, Sujay Ghosh has argued that her assessment of Banerjee may be too harsh. He does not agree with Mukhopadhyay’s assertion of West Bengal taking a “semi-fascist” turn, because the TMC does not have a very organised ruling elite that is capable of ideological mobilisation at the grass roots. Furthermore, he argues, Banerjee has not brought forth the threat of the “other,” which he believes is a primary necessity for any government to be called fascist. Though Ghosh agrees that the TMC has been as corrupt at the Left Front government before, he argues that the “sushil samaj” has proven their ideological independence by denouncing Banerjee when she did not remain committed to her vision and promises.

Mukhopadhyay correctly diagnoses it as “a one-person show” The chief
minister personally visits the local police station on a law and order issue, reportedly to get some rowdy elements released! Under similar circumstances in the LF regime, visits by a local CPI(M) leader from the neighbourhood would have been enough. That is the difference. The evils that were efficiently managed by the LF regime, such as society’s domination by the party bureaucracy, the culture of intolerance, etc, are openly exposed today. It is true that groupism and infighting among TMC activists in many parts of West Bengal are creating law and order problems, but this is also a boon in disguise: disorganised ruling elites cannot control or monitor the people with any efficiency, who shivered under the suffocating “peace” during CPI(M) rule.

3) A Parallel Economy

During the course of Banerjee’s time in office, there were claims that she had lost her popularity in the urban areas because the Bengali middle class had realised that it had lost political influence. This had led the local media to raise scathing criticisms of the chief minister. However, Rajat Roy argues that in reality, the 2016 assembly elections tell a very different story because the TMC was able to retain its urban vote share, despite popular discontentment about the lack of opportunities and development in the state. This may be attributed to the creation of a parallel economy that is lucrative to TMC loyalists.

In Bengal, the absence of growth in manufacturing industry has resulted in loss of jobs. Contrary to the chief minister’s claim of having created 70 lakh jobs in the last five years, the state government has not been able to substantiate its claim with hard facts and figures. The absence of growth of employment opportunities has given rise to extortion as an alternative source of income for the unemployed. While a section of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers has been migrating in great numbers to distant states, another section of the unemployed youth in the West Bengal has been occupied in the lucrative occupation of extortion.

4) Muscle Power and Politics

One of the primary accusations that have been levelled against Banerjee has been that her party relies heavily on muscle power. When Banerjee was re-elected for a second term as the chief minister of West Bengal, Sumanta Banerjee put it down to the lack of a credible alternative in addition to the use of threats that “her musclemen” made against political opponents. She was also accused of buying voters.

Along with these measures, she seduced the unemployed youth in villages and towns by distributing money among them, in the name of funding their clubs.
Numerous clubs—that get financial aid and other benefits from the Trinamool patrons—have sprung up in cities, mofussil towns and villages. These unemployed young people were encouraged by her party to emerge as mastans, ever ready to satisfy the demands of their “didi” (sister; a term used by her Bengali devotees, like “amma,” mother, is used by Jayalalithaa’s protégés in Tamil Nadu). The Mamata regime provided them with enough muscle power and police protection, to allow them to make money through extortion; and in exchange used them as mercenaries to crush any political opposition or dissent.

Based on the last assembly elections, it is clear that Banerjee continues to enjoy popular support in West Bengal. And while it may be true that she can give Modi and Shah a taste of their own medicine, one must be wary of thinking of Banerjee as an alternative. Banerjee has often displayed intolerance that, though apparently not ideologically guided, has sought to stifle any sort of opposition. The most recent incident has been that of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha worker who was arrested for sharing a meme of Banerjee. The emancipatory rhetoric that she frequently employs in her speeches must, therefore, be considered carefully and tallied with her actions before she can be considered as a viable alternative.

Read More:

- Washing Dirty Bengali Dhuti in Public | Sumanta Banerjee, 2010
- Transformation of Opposition Politics in West Bengal | James Mayers, 1998
- Is There A Second Wave of Dalit Upsurge in West Bengal? | Ayan Guha, 2019
- Making and Unmaking of Trinamul Congress | Dwipayan Bhattacharyya, 2004