

MASTER SWITCH

As Saradha taint grows, Trinamool Congress leaders may begin exodus to BJP

After a member of Mamata Banerjee's cabinet joins the saffron party, Trinamool insiders say many desertions are likely to follow.

Swati Sengupta

Jan 16, 2015 · 06:45 am



IANS

As the Central Bureau of Investigation's investigation into the Saradha scam circles in on the Trinamool Congress, a dark cloud has formed over the party's future. On Thursday a member of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's cabinet, Minister of State for Refugee Relief Manjul Krishna Thakur, quit the Trinamool Congress and joined the Bharatiya Janata Party. He was the first to sense the gathering storm and leave, according to Trinamool insiders. More desertions are likely to follow.

There are lingering whispers that former Union Railway Minister Dinesh Trivedi could soon depart from the Trinamool Congress for the BJP, which is considering pitting him as a challenger to Banerjee in Bengal. In 2012, Trivedi was unceremoniously replaced as the rail minister by Banerjee when he stood his ground on hiking train fares. Also weighing a goodbye to the Trinamool are a leader from North 24 Parganas, two from East Midnapore, a flamboyant minister in Banerjee's cabinet, and many state legislators.

Asked about the rumours around him on Thursday, Trivedi hedged: “I have also heard them. But at this point, I have nothing to say.”

For Trinamool leaders, the sense of foreboding is growing, and in these times the BJP appears as good a bet to them as any. In the 2014 general election, the BJP had secured its highest vote share ever in West Bengal – 17%. It has since then resolved to plant its saffron flag in the traditionally Left state.

“Let us admit it, things are bad,” said a Trinamool MP on condition of anonymity. “This is not what people expected of us. Our party faces a moral crisis.” He candidly acknowledged that his shift to the BJP is imminent. “It is a matter of time.”

Anatomy of a scam

There is no doubt that in Saradha scam Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress is facing its worst crisis ever. The decline began in 2013, when a Ponzi scheme that had enriched the West Bengal-based Saradha Group collapsed, washing away the investments of millions of poor people. Its chairman Sudipta Sen, upon arrest, alleged that some Trinamool bigwigs had blackmailed and coerced him to pay them great amounts of money. Ever since, the noose has continued to tighten around the Trinamool Congress.

A state investigation led to the arrest of Trinamool MP Kunal Ghosh, who accused Banerjee of being the “biggest beneficiary” of the scam.

Later, as the CBI initiated its own investigation, a string of arrests followed – Banerjee’s sports minister Madan Mitra, Trinamool MP Srinjoy Bose, former director general of police Rajat Mazumdar. Apart from this, the CBI called a series of Trinamool leaders for questioning, including minister Shyamapada Mukherjee and MP Subhendu Adhikary.

Next in CBI’s sights are expected to be Trinamool general secretary Mukul Roy and his son Subhrangshu, a Trinamool legislator. And, depending on the beans Roy spills, maybe eventually Mamata Banerjee?

At a crossroads

“No one is above the law, and the truth has to prevail,” said the Trinamool MP who conceded mulling a switch to the BJP. “The less forthright we are, the more the people will be suspicious. In public life, perception is important. If there is a CBI inquiry, one must follow the law. Why is there such a panic?”

The senior leader – who won by wide margins in the last few elections – said that many leaders like him are at a crossroads. The taint on a small group in the party, he complained, is sullyng everyone. “That’s not fair. So it’s time for the honest people in the party to think what they must do.”

If some leaders have sent out feelers, others have got “offers” from the BJP to join it. What has thus far stopped them from taking the plunge is the hope that the Trinamool Congress will not fall to pieces. Another question until now has been: who will bell the cat? Thakur answered that for the others on Thursday.

BJP wooing leaders

There are other tests ahead for the Trinamool leaders. “One may quit the Trinamool Congress and join the BJP, but the next challenge will be winning the by-election,” said another parliamentarian. “Before the final move, they need to be confident about that as well.”

According to another Trinamool leader, “There are many who desperately want to join the BJP but wonder if they will be able to win on a BJP ticket without the minority vote.” Yet another Trinamool leader added: “It is not a one-way traffic. The BJP, in order to come to power in West Bengal, needs able leaders, which it currently lacks in the state. Therefore, there is an equal push from the BJP top leadership – which is keeping a close eye on Bengal from Delhi – to woo leaders from the Trinamool Congress.”

Most Trinamool functionaries pointed out that the exodus from the party is expected to take place after the crucial municipal elections in Kolkata, scheduled in three months’ time. But even until then, not a day in West Bengal’s politics is likely to be boring.

© 2023 Scroll.in