



## Has countdown to polls begun?

**F**irebrand Trinamul Congress supremo and West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee cut her links from the UPA-2 government on Tuesday. The decision cannot but take the Congress, which heads the United Progressive Alliance, by surprise. While Trinamul leaving the coalition government has been speculated on regularly for the past year in the light of the Trinamul chief's bristling personality and her tendency to raise the question of federal ties and the respect given to West Bengal, a simultaneous sense prevailed that the unpredictable Trinamul boss would not quit her partnership with the Congress wholesale. The worst-case scenario was that she would lend the UPA-2 government "outside support" on what may be called an "issue-by-issue" basis.

Evidently, appeals by the Congress leadership to Ms Banerjee, in the light of recent pro-reform decisions to raise the price of diesel and permit FDI in multi-brand retail, had little effect on the West Bengal leader who apparently still believes that she can rally her state single-handedly and come up trumps in an electoral battle.

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While addressing the media to announce her party's decision, Ms Banerjee sought to make the case that the Centre's recent pro-reform decisions would grievously hurt ordinary people, most of whom existed in the unorganised sector of the economy. Such an argument is meant to ensure that the Left — which remains a political force of some significance in West Bengal — does not undermine the TMC's political élan. Ms Banerjee signalled that she was taking the battle to the Congress camp as well, which individually is placed well behind Trinamul and the Left on the state's electoral terrain. Without mincing

words, she accused the Centre of playing with West Bengal's self-respect and pursuing discriminatory policies vis-a-vis the states, including her own. She also had harsh words for the Congress — in her words — seeking to play off one regional party against another in various states.

A purely arithmetical calculation suggests that the Manmohan Singh government is not falling. But will it be stable from now on? That is a question the answer to which lies in the hands of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati, two UP stalwarts whose dislike for each other is no secret even as both support the Centre for their own reasons. With Trinamul gone, both may be expected to up the price of support. The government thus has a huge public relations task on its hand, primarily of persuading the country that its economic reforms agenda is pro-people, whatever the Congress' opponents may "opportunistically" argue. Potential international investors could also be timid in this uncertain political climate. All things considered, the advancing of the next Lok Sabha election cannot now be a possibility that is obscured from view.