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■ SUBRATA NAGCHOUDHURY

Behind Mamata clash with SEC, dent in rural base

THE STATE ELECTION Commission moving the Calcutta High Court against the Mamata Banerjee government's unilateral declaration of panchayat election dates is a stunning development. Whatever the outcome of the court battle, the state already stands to accept that the dates it had proposed — April 26, 30 — are not going to be the schedule for the rural polls under any circumstances.

Besides, it is largely believed that the court would not do anything to undermine the power and authority of the SEC as enshrined in the Constitution. The Constitution vests in the SECs the power of superintendence, direction and control of elections to panchayats and municipal bodies.

What's puzzling is why has the All India Trinamool Con-

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gress, which till sometime ago was unanimously tipped to sweep the panchayat polls, allowed things to drag to such an end? Disillusionment among Mamata's supporters, if any, was considered to be largely restricted to the urban core; her rural sway being intact. Various internal assessments pegged the TMC tally to be between 11 and 14 zilla parishads of the total 17 going to the polls.

Zilla parishads or district councils

are the uppermost level in the three-tier panchayat system - the other two being panchayat samitis and gram panchayats. Even CPM insiders, till recently, admitted in private the prospect of a whitewash.

Against such a backdrop, the Mamata government's rigidity over the panchayat polls is being seen as an indication of cracks in its confidence. The TMC supremo's latest round of district tours indicated some dent in its rural base. Her Junglemahal trip must have been particularly discouraging given the crowd turnout. In North Bengal, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha is planning to fight the polls with the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and independent of the TMC. The rift with the Congress will also hurt Mamata's party. Some quarters see a game-plan to postpone the polls behind the face-off with the SEC.

However, it's not the first time the TMC government has taken on statutory bodies or constitutional authorities. One can even see a pattern in its disregard towards such bodies, from the governor to the State Human Rights Commission, from police chiefs to judicial commissions, when differences occur.

With the SEC going to court, the Mamata regime may finally be forced to admit the limits of its powers.

Subrata is Editor, Kolkata

subrata.nagchoudhury@expressindia.com