In November 1969, the Indian National Congress underwent a vertical split as a result of which two Congress parties - the new Congress led by Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress (Organization) led by Nijlingappa - began functioning in all the states of India. In West Bengal also, two Congress organizations functioned. In this chapter and the succeeding ones, an attempt will be made to narrate briefly the activities of the Congress (Organization). It is expected that from that account it will be possible to assess the role performance of the Congress (O).

From the day of the split in the Congress party in 1969 till the merger of the Congress (organization) into the Janata party in 1977, the leaders and the activists of Congress (organization) claimed theirs to be the original Congress. Even as late as in July 1978, the leader of the former Congress (organization) and the then "Janata" Prime Minister of India, Morarji Desai, told this author that the Congress (O) was the real Congress and that Mrs. Gandhi's party was one composed of defectors from the original Congress.  

1 See Appendix iii for a synopsis of the interview with Morarji Desai.
The Election Commission of India® however recognized Mrs. Gandhi's party as the real Congress. The Congress (organization) practically declined soon after its birth into a minor party. After the 1971 general election its strength in the Lok Sabha was a meagre sixteen (out of a total number of 525 members). In West Bengal, the party had only two members in the state assembly (total membership : 280) after both the 1971 and 1972 elections.

In spite of the fact that Congress (organization) was a minor party, it played a historic role which had a major impact upon the Indian political system. Rightly has Leslie Bell commented:

The organization of a minor party ... and its internal problems are as important for the understanding of the behavior of a minor party as any analysis of the political system within which it acts.

An analysis of the role of the Congress (organization) will, the author believes, help us to appreciate how partly through the influence of the party the nature of the country's political system itself underwent a noteworthy transformation through the emergence of the Janata party.

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The West Bengal Context

For a meaningful discussion of the role of the Congress
(organization) in West Bengal politics, it is necessary that,
we first attempt to narrate in brief the "state-wide political
context" within which the Congress (organization) started
functioning from November 1969.

Through the mid-term poll of 1969 the second United Front
Government - a coalition composed of the Bangla Congress, the
CPI(M), the R.S.P., the Forward Bloc, and a few other leftist
parties - was installed in April with the leader of the Bangla
Congress, Ajoy Mukherji, as the chief minister. The CPI(M) was
the dominating partner in the government with 80 members in
the assembly. Organizationally too, it was the leading partner
in the front with a strong industrial base behind it. Now, after
being entrenched in the citadel of power, the party not only
encouraged militant trade union struggles of the urban working
class but also initiated a programme of organizational expansion
in the rural areas mainly through organizing the landless pea-
santry and the bargadars⁴ (share croppers). The CPI(M) naturally
came into clash with the rural gentry which had so long
formed the main support-base of the Congress as well as of the
Bangla Congress, a party formed mainly by dissident Congressmen.

⁴ Landless peasants or small peasants who cultivate others' lands in exchange of rent which is paid to the owner in the form of a share of the crops produced. These owners who do not themselves cultivate but receive a share of the crops produced, are called, "lotadars". Under the law, they are entitled to one-fourth of the total produce, but, in practice, the bargadars were, in many cases, denied their share and were evicted by the owners whenever the latter so wished.
This led to serious inter-party clashes (often armed encounters) involving even the partners of the United Front coalition itself in the rural areas and a situation of industrial unrest in the urban areas. This was the context in which the Congress (organization) started functioning in November 1969.

In November 1969, the Congress elements (of the new Congress as well as Congress-organization) were decidedly in a minority in the state politics. But, the anti-Congress political forces, then combined under the United Front umbrella, were not able to reap the benefit out of the weakness of the Congress and the recent split in that party because of their own inter-party differences. Within the United Front government, all the non-CPI(M) parties were feeling the impact of the CPI(M) onslaught and the leaders of a few of them were even thinking of organizing a "mini-united front government" by eliminating the CPI(M) with the support of Mrs. Gandhi's new Congress. The CPI(M) leader, Jyoti Basu was the deputy chief minister and home minister of the U.F. government. The non-CPI(M) parties within the Front alleged that the home minister was utilizing the police for aiding and assisting the CPI(M)'s political campaign and violence against other political parties. Matters went to such a head that even the chief minister, Ajoy Mukherji declared that there was no precedent for such "a state of affairs in the civilized world".

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5 For a list of the parties constituting the second United Front government in West Bengal see Appendix IV.

6 Ananda Bazar Patrika (Bengali daily), Calcutta 8 February 1970.

7 The Statesman (English daily), Calcutta 11 November 1969.
A hunger-strike demonstration to protest against the situation of lawlessness was started on 1 December 1969 at Esplanade (the heart of the city), Calcutta under the leadership of the chief minister himself. Indications were very clear in November-December 1969 that the United Front ministry was a house divided against itself.

Congress (O)'s Lame Start in West Bengal. Between the two-groups in the Congress party, the Syndicate group and the group led by Mrs. Gandhi, the syndicate group was the dominant faction in the West Bengal party organization in 1969. A large majority of the P.C.C. members supported Chunder, the state party president who sided with the organization leaders, and most of the A.I.C.C. members from West Bengal also pledged their allegiance to Nijlingappa. In the state Congress legislature party however only 25 (out of a total of 55) had voted Reddy in the presidential election and when on 13 December a meeting of the Congress (O) state legislators was convened, only 11 M.L.As attended the same. Thus in December 1969, the syndicate group was dominant in the party's organizational wing while the majority in the legislative wing were clearly with Mrs. Gandhi.

A mass party in a parliamentary democracy, no doubt, depends to a large extent on its organizational wing for its successful functioning and for winning elections. But one cannot also deny that, in a party, between the organizational and parliamentary wings, the latter is superior. There is enough truth in

Robert T. Mackenzie's remark: 9

And no emphasis on the auxiliary functions of the mass organizations outside Parliament can be allowed to obscure the basic proposition that the mass parties are primarily the servants of their respective parliamentary parties.

The Congress (O), thus, had from the beginning, a lame start in West Bengal. The rallying of most of the undivided party's legislators behind Mrs. Gandhi's Congress weakened the image of Congress (organization) in West Bengal.

**Congress (O)'s initial handicaps** The Congress (Organization) faced other handicaps also. One was its political isolation in West Bengal at a time when alignments among political parties in the state was the practice of the day. Among the United Front partners, the Congress (O) befriended neither the CPI(M)-led group nor the group of parties led by the Bangla Congress and the CPI. The party president Chunder declared, "Congress (O) has no relation with either the CPI(M) or any other partner of the United Front." 10

In their attitude to the two groups of the Congress party, all the U.F. partners were sympathetic to Mrs. Gandhi's new Congress and opposed to the Congress (O). The CPI was Mrs. Gandhi's closest ally, and the leader of the Bangla Congress, Ajoy Mukherji, the then chief minister of West Bengal, warmly congratulated Mrs. Gandhi on her success in having destroyed the

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conspiracy of the die-hard reactionery syndicate members*.11 The CPI(M) politburo resolution of 5 January 1970 declared that though both the Indira group and the syndicate group of the Congress represented the same class interests, the CPI(M) would support the anti-syndicate campaign and all progressive activities of the the Indira group.12 In sum, the Congress(O) stood isolated.

Failure to put up a Determined Opposition In the circumstances in which the split had taken place, it was only proper and also logical that the Congress(O) should put up a determined opposition against Mrs. Gandhi, her government and her party, the new Congress. Peculiarly however, the leaders of Congress (O) in West Bengal behaved otherwise. Thus, in January 1970, the most prominent Congress(O) leaders including P.C.Sen expressed in a public meeting in Calcutta the hope that a reunion of the two Congresses would soon take place and Mrs. Gandhi being "a daughter of the family would realize her mistakes and come back home".13 Even the state executive stated in a resolution in January 1970 that everybody was sorry that the split had taken place and those who had imposed the split on the party would realize their mistakes and reunite.14 During a period when Mrs. Gandhi and the Union government leaders were launching a determined all-out tirade against the Congress(O), the behaviour

11 *ibid.*, 15 November 1969.
of the state Congress(0) leaders only exposed their weakness and lack of conviction.

An opposition party can never succeed when its leaders lack the energy and resoluteness of a true opposition. Otto Kircheimer puts it thus:

... The stage acting is essential only to get the show before the mass audience, the voter. In such circumstances, resoluteness, and energy is (sic) needed to prevent opposition from degenerating into mere routine, and to relate it to the lives and expectations of a political clientele. The energetic inclinations of the opposition leader are the weaker the more he has come by habit, or just occupational disease to react as part of the overall governmental machine. He may fall easy prey to the comfortable belief that his political chances increase by minimizing rather than by magnifying the policy differences between opposition and government.

Plus points of the Congress(0)

In spite of the above-mentioned handicaps, internal and extraneous, the Congress(0) in West Bengal possessed certain political resources which were the object of envy of its immediate rival, the new Congress. During Atulya Ghosh's stewardship of the undivided Congress of West Bengal between 1948 and 1962, there had emerged in the party, both at the state and the district levels, a band of leaders who were not only efficient political organizers, but also individually popular in their areas and worked in close cooperation with one another. Most of them remained in the Congress(0).

Therefore, when after the split, the state Congress(0) faced the dual dangers of unpopularity outside and a crisis of confidence among the more prominent leaders inside the party, the organization could sustain itself on the strength of the unswerving support and dogged perseverance of this band of sincere organizers and their follower-activists spread throughout the state. No party in West Bengal, other than the CPI(M), could claim to possess such a vast network of organizational bases as the Congress(0) had in 1969. This was indeed, a very valuable asset, a mass party could count upon.

The other plus point in favour of the Congress(0) was the subjective sense of commitment to the ideology and programme of the Indian National Congress which inspired even the ordinary Congress(0) activists. Most of the Congress(0) workers had been recruited into the undivided Congress during the 1942 "Quit India" movement or even earlier during the salt satyagraha of the thirties or the non-cooperation movement of the twenties. Most of them had passed through great sufferings and sacrifice during the freedom struggle and the leading among them had also been members of the legislature and local self-governing bodies between 1952 and 1967. Any political party would consider itself fortunate to have possessed such a precious team of ideologically committed, militant and experienced rank and file.

Doctrinaire Attitude The leading activists of the Congress(0) in West Bengal, we have noted, were mostly men with extreme ideological bias. They had a sort of doctrinaire attitude
towards politics. At a time when no party in West Bengal could aspire to form government singly, the Congress(O) people would agree to no electoral adjustment with any other party. They considered both the Bangla Congress and the CPI(M) their worst enemies at the same time. They would make no compromise with any other group even if such a group might be equally opposed to Mrs. Gandhi as themselves. The now Congress very easily developed a friendly relationship with the Bangla Congress and the CPI, but the state Congress(O) condemned all the United Front partners indiscriminately. The Congress(O) in West Bengal behaved more as a doctrinaire group than as an electoral party.

But too much of an attachment to a doctrinaire stand may sometimes create disadvantages for a party operating in the arena of an election-based democracy. The new Congress had no ideological affinity with the CPI or the Muslim League or the DMK, but Mrs. Gandhi took a pragmatic stand and arrived at electoral understanding with them and won the 1971 election. Similarly, the central leadership of the Congress(O) also allied itself with the Jan Sangh and the Swatantra in the states other than West Bengal and fared better than it would have, had it fought single-handed.  

16 By making a comparative constituency-by-constituency analysis of the Lok Sabha contests in 1967 and 1971 elections in U.P., Stanley J. Heginbothom of the Asian Institute at Columbia University, concludes: "The bulk of the evidence then suggests that the four-party alliance (composed of the Jan Sangh, the Swatantra, the S.S.P. and the Congress-O) did not substantially contribute to the ill-fortunes of the opposition and may, in fact, have kept the opposition from doing somewhat worse than it did in 1971". See article "The 1971 Revolution in Indian Voting Behaviour"; ASIAN SURVEY, December 1971, Vol. XI, No. 12, pp. 1151-1162.
The West Bengal Congress(O), however, remained firm in its stand of opposing the new Congress, the leftists, the Bangla Congress—all at the same time—in the 1971 elections and failed miserably. No doubt, this was due to the strong doctrinaire attitude of the State party's leading activists.

Hugh A. Bone (speaking of American parties) writes:

American major parties have learned that they must be flexible, essentially non-doctrinaire and pragmatic, ever sensitive to changing conditions and to historic processes and issues. Unless they adapt to these realities, they invite defeat. What is true of American parties, also applies to mass electoral parties of any country possessing a system of election-based parliamentary democracy.17

The West Bengal Congress(O) had not learnt the lesson in 1971, nor did they learn later, in 1972.

Post-split Developments in West Bengal The Congress Working Committee, under the presidency of Nijlingappa, at its meeting on 12 November 1969, expelled Mrs. Gandhi from the party. The reaction in the state Congress was immediate. The state party president, Chunder commented: "I wholeheartedly support the decision of the highest authority of the organization to which I belong". But Siddhartha Shankar Ray, leader of the Congress legislature party, remarked: "The decision of the Working Committee is an exercise in madness, autocratic and illegal. To us, Congress remains where the Prime Minister is."18

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In Calcutta, thirteen Congress corporation councillors including the Chairman of the Congress municipal party expressed their support for Mrs. Gandhi while the chief whip of the municipal party along with five other councillors declared that they would remain in the original Congress.\(^{19}\)

The students' wing of the state Congress, "Chhatra Parishad" maintained for some time, an ambiguous stand of sitting over the fence. Only after a few weeks, the "Chhatra Parishad" underwent a clean split. Two "Chhatra Parishes"—one qualified by "Mahajati Sadan" and the other bracketed as "Chowringhee"—came into existence.\(^{20}\) The BPNTUC, the labour wing of the undivided Congress, however, declared its support for Mrs. Gandhi.\(^{21}\)

The pro-Mrs. Gandhi elements in the undivided Congress convened a requisitioned meeting of the A.I.C.C. in New Delhi on 22 November 1969. Only 16 A.I.C.C. members from West Bengal (out of a total of 57) attended the meeting which elected Subramaniam as the president of the new Congress. Subramaniam then suspended the WBCCC and its president Chunder and appointed an ad hoc West Bengal committee of his party with K.K. Shukla, a trade-union leader, as its convener.

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19 ibid., 18 November 1969.

20 The names of the two Chhatra Parishes were coined as above on the basis of the location of their respective headquarters. The Congress(O) faction retained the possession of the state Congress headquarters at 59B, Chowringhee Street, Calcutta and this building housed the party's students' wing. The new Congress faction set up the office of its students' wing in a room at "Mahajati Sadan", a building owned by the state government in central Calcutta.

After the requisitioned A.I.C.C. meeting was held, it became clear that the Indian National Congress had been finally split into two parties. The state Congress(O)'s leading activists then met at Chandernagore (a suburban town, 34 kms from Calcutta) in a convention and adopted a resolution condemning Mrs. Gandhi. This resolution highlighted the event of Subramaniam's suspension of Chunder and the WBPCC but spoke nothing about a programme for consolidating the anti-Mrs. Gandhi forces in the party, nor about the need for organizing a mass movement against the U.P. government of West Bengal "for the prevailing situation of lawlessness and disorder" in the state. The Chandernagore convention's resolution was ratified by the state Congress(O) executive committee on 7 December, 1969.

While the state Congress(O) was thus spending its energies on condemning Mrs. Gandhi and her party, its immediate rival, the new Congress was trying to utilize the existing political environment of West Bengal to its advantage instead of involving itself only in recriminations against the Congress(O). The new Congress in West Bengal directed its main thrust of attack against the CPI(M), the leading partner of the United Front. The new Congress rightly understood that the pro-Congress electorate in West Bengal, at that moment, was more interested in an anti-CPI(M) political campaign than in the "Syndicate-Indiraites" controversy. One might conclude that the Congress(O)

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22 Resolution of the West Bengal state Congress(O) Workers' convention (unpublished), 6 December 1969.
failed to assess correctly the prevailing temper of its own political clientele when it laid a greater emphasis on the all-India conflict between the organization leaders and Mrs. Gandhi than on a local movement against the CPI(M).

In the meantime, the two Congresses convened two separate all-India party rallies—the Congress(O), its plenary session at Ahmedabad on 20 December 1969 and the new Congress, its A.I.C.C. meeting at Bombay on 27 December 1969. Nearly 300 Congressmen from West Bengal attended the Ahmedabad rally of the Congress(O) while only 18 out of 57 A.I.C.C. members from the state attended the Bombay meeting of the new Congress. The Congress(O) was still then decidedly ahead of its rival in the race for winning the support of the undivided party's rank and file.

Environmental Demands and Congress(O)'s response While discussing the impact of environmental pressures upon a political party, Samuel Eldersveld writes: 23

... there are three major clusters of factors responsible for the party structure as it is. One such cluster consists of environmental pressures, both the socio-economic conditions with which the party has to contend in a particular area and the political history and climate of the area. The competitive conditions of political life interact with the social complexion of the area to impress on the party structure certain properties which are, in a sense, structural responses to environmental demands.

West Bengal, at the end of 1969, was witnessing a new spurt in the class-struggle-oriented politics of the Marxists. In the villages, the landless peasantry was adopting a militant stance, the industrial working-class in the cities was staging frequent

strikes and other forms of movement and the lower-middle class blue-collar employees in the mercantile and government establishments were engaged in an agitational trade-union movement demanding rise in wages. Usually, the CPI(M) was the leader in all these movements.

In such a situation, the traditional supporters of the Congress party - the landholding peasantry in the villages and the upper middle-class and the rich in the urban areas were acutely feeling the need for a resistance-struggle against the CPI(M)-sponsored movements. The Congress(O) could not remain unresponsive to the demands of its political clientele for a long time. Consequently, structural changes in the Congress(O)'s party organization took place very soon.

In order the the party might rise to the occasion, a shake-up in the party secretariats at the state and the district levels was gone through. Active young whole timers were put in charge of the organization; the old comrades (by retiring or by becoming gradually indifferent and inactive) happily made room for the new leadership. Saurin Mishra, a militant Congressman of north Bengal, was made the new general secretary of the state party. The new entrants in the state leadership included people like Ashoke Krishna Datta (38 years), a young barrister, Amar Bhattacharya (40 years), a former youth leader, Biren Maitra (37 years), a prominent social worker and Subir Chowdhury (27 years), a student leader. The district committees were also reconstituted and a large number of young activists took up responsible executive positions in the party. This reconstitution had also become necessary for filling up vacancies caused by
defection of some members to the new Congress.

In the meantime, two by-elections—one for the Assembly and the other for the Lok Sabha—were held on 22 February and 1 March respectively. The Congress(O) fared miserably in both of them. In the Assembly seat, the Congress(O) candidate secured only 1610 votes as against 16,924 polled by his new Congress rival. In the Lok Sabha election the Congress(O) polled 6,481 votes as against the new Congress's 50,096 votes. Electorally, the Congress(O) was lagging far behind the new Congress.

Resistance against the CPI(M). After the party's miserable performance in the abovementioned by-elections the state Congress(O) leadership realized the need for an effective programme of resistance against the CPI(M)-led movements. The state committee organized a party workers' camp at Mayapur (Arambag), Hooghly on 11 and 12 March 1970. The camp resolved that "satyagraha" (non-violent resistance) would be offered by the Congress(O) workers against all acts of violence resorted to by the CPI(M) or any other constituent of the United Front. It decided to organize a series of protest-meetings, demonstrations and satyagraha in the form of sit-in strikes in government offices demanding restoration of rule of law.24

Only three days after the Congress(O) camp at Mayapur had prepared its plan for an all-out resistance campaign against

the CPI(M)-dominated United Front government, on 16 March, 1970, Ajoy Mukherjee, the chief minister, submitted to the governor the resignation of his government. Thus ended the second United Front regime in West Bengal. President's rule was imposed on 18 March. Being enraged at the resignation of the U.F. chief minister, the CPI(M) gave a call for a state-wide general strike on 17 March 1970 to protest against what they called, "a stark betrayal of the peoples' mandate by the Bangla Congress". On that day, an angry crowd brutally killed three young Congressmen of Burdwan, a town nearly 90 kms. from Calcutta.

Both the Congresses—the Congress(O) and the new Congress—reacted to the incident immediately and alleged that the murder was a political one committed by the CPI(M) activists with the help of the police and the administration. Leaders of both the Congress parties rushed to Burdwan, a large silent mourning procession was taken out in the town and both the Congress groups demanded an open judicial inquiry into the incident.

President's Rule and after After Ajoy Mukherjee's resignation, Jyoti Basu, the CPI(M) leader, claimed that he had the support of a majority of the M.L.As and demanded that he be invited to form the government. S.S. Dhawan the governor promised to examine his claim. The governor also made a radio speech expressing his determination to keep an open mind even with regard to the CPI(M)'s claim. All the three Congresses—the Congress(O), the new Congress and the Bangla Congress—became enraged at this which they said was "a soft and sympathetic attitude of the governor towards the CPI(M)". These parties
now unitedly demanded the immediate removal of the governor on the grounds of his failure to maintain law and order as evidenced in the murder incident of Burdwan and his alleged partiality for the CPI(M).

Thus, interestingly enough, in spite of their very recent split and mutual antagonism, the West Bengal units of the Congress(O) and the new Congress found themselves unitedly fighting shoulder to shoulder in a movement against the murder of Burdwan Congressmen and against the governor. The two Congresses jointly organized a mass rally of peasants and youths from Burdwan in Calcutta on 26 March 1970. In Burdwan town itself, on 29 March, a big public meeting was jointly addressed by the Congress(O) leader P.C. Sen and Asoke Sen of the new Congress.

This intimacy between the Congress(O) and the new Congress, however, had a very brief spell. Subsequent meetings and demonstrations on the "Burdwan killing" issue, began to be held separately. The state Congress(O) found the Burdwan incident to be politically useful for putting up its anti-communist image. The radio-speech of Ehawan also was exploited to the party's advantage since a movement against the governor meant actually a movement against the central government run by Mrs. Gandhi.

The Congress(O) state executive at a meeting at the end of March 1970 decided to launch a statewide movement against the "Burdwan Killings" and for demanding the governor's removal. It was decided that a "Burdwan Week" would be observed from 5 to 12 April 1970. Many big public meetings and processions...
were held in observance of the week and a deputation of Congress(O) leaders even went to Delhi to appraise the MPs of the Congress(O)'s demands.

The Congress(O) and the new Congress had a first-round victory when (on 4 April) the governor ordered a judicial inquiry into the Burdwan incident and also rejected the CPI(M)'s claim of forming the government. Immediately, did the CPI(M) began a campaign demanding the early holding of a mid-term assembly election. All the three Congresses—the Congress(O), the new Congress and the Bangla Congress—however opposed the immediate holding of the mid-term poll. P.C. Sen declared in a public meeting that the Congress(O) was not opposed to the holding of election, but it could not be held in the prevailing situation of lawlessness and political murders. Elections could be held only after peace and normalcy were restored.26

The Naxalite Movement Indeed, in April 1970, there were grave dangers to peace in West Bengal. For, now started the process of a very alarming development—the Naxalite movement.27


27 The Naxalites originally belonged to the CPI(M) but having been exasperated with what they condemned as "bourgeois-democratic deviation of the CPI(M) leadership and its politics of contesting elections and running government within the capitalist system", this group broke away from the CPI(M) and formed the Communist Party of India(Marxist-Leninist) on 22 April 1968. The Naxalite movement had first started in the Naxalbari police station area of Jalpaiguri district in north Bengal, in the form of an armed struggle of the landless labour against big landlords and setting up of something like a "liberated zone" in that area. This movement emerged in the city of Calcutta and various other parts of the state in the form of armed attacks on policemen, political activists, big and small traders, educational institutions, libraries and laboratories, etc. Within a few weeks, the Naxalites were successful in creating widespread terror throughout the state.
With this new disquieting development, the "rightist" elements in the state politics were put to a great disadvantage. Since the dissolution of the second United Front ministry, the Congress(O) and the new Congress had been subjected to CPI(M) onslaughts. Now there appeared a second adversary, the Naxalites. Under the impact of these dual attacks the two Congresses reacted in different ways.

The new Congress strategy for meeting the CPI(M) onslaught was that of cultivating a friendlier relationship with the Bangla Congress, the CPI, the Forward Bloc and other non-CPI(M) partners of the erstwhile United Front so that the CPI(M) might be isolated. With regard to the Naxalites, the new Congress seemed to think it wise not to launch any direct attack against them, since perhaps, "an enemy's enemy was a friend", and therefore the Naxalites did not need to be resisted in their anti-CPI(M) operations.

In contrast, the state Congress(O) remained firm in its resolve to befriend none of the constituent parties of the United Front. The party openly opposed the Naxalite politics of violence. The state executive meeting in May 1970 unequivocally condemned the acts of violence emanating from the inception of class-struggle, political murders, attacks on educational institutions and the attempts to create anarchy in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy. The resolution called upon all the Congress(O) workers to organize resistance to such acts of violence and anarchy.28

28 West Bengal state Congress(O) executive resolution (unpublished) dated 6 May 1970.
When the Naxalite operations had assumed quite dangerous proportions, the Chhatra-Parishad (Chowringhee) organized a students' camp at Debra, a village in Midnapore. The Naxalites had declared that a "liberated zone" had been established at Debra. Several policemen and local peasants had been murdered, fire-arms had been forcibly taken away and a reign of terror prevailed in the Debra police-station area at that time.

The members of the Congress(O) camp travelled in groups through the interior villages holding street-corner and public meetings and group discussions with the villagers, selling and publicizing literature on Gandhism, propagating the Congress ideology and exhorting people to unitedly resist all communist and Naxalite acts of violence.\textsuperscript{29} Leaders of the state Congress(O), P.C.Sen, P.C.Chunder, Nirmalendu Do, Abha Haiti and others stayed in the camp for days together and participated with their student-comrades in the programme. The Congress(O) thus made a commendable effort but it could not maintain a continuation of the programme in other parts of the state for the lack of a sufficient number of young cadres.

From May 1970 onwards, a series of public meetings and processions were held under the party's auspices in Calcutta and in the districts demanding the restoration of law and order. Along with political demands the Congress(O) rallies also focused other local grievances for drawing popular support. In

\textsuperscript{29} West Bengal state Congress(O) Committee's reports (unpublished) regarding the Debra camp and newspaper reports.
the districts, the Congress(O) organized mass deputations to
the offices of the District Magistrates, Sub-divisional Officers,
and the B.D.O's demanding gratuitous relief to the poor,
implementation of relief employment programme, agricultural loans,
sinking of tubewells, starting of free primary schools and so on.
The ancillary organizations of the party, particularly the
Chhatra Parishad and the Krishak Congress (peasants' wing), took
everywhere a leading part in these demonstrations.

Thus from April 1970, the state Congress(O) leadership
seriously tried to gear up the party apparatus and extend the
party's mass-base, keeping before itself the possibility of a
mid-term poll of both parliament and the assembly. Mrs. Gandhi
was then running a minority government at the centre with the
uncertain support of the DMK, the Muslim League and the left
parties and the state of West Bengal was under President's rule.
Hence elections were an obvious possibility.

It would however be a travesty of truth to say that the
Congress(O) organized mass protests against the prevailing law­
lessness and disorder and carried out its campaign against the
Naxalites simply with the mid-term elections in view. Ideological
considerations played an important part in determining the
Congress(O) programme. The national Working Committee of the

30 For purposes of effective implementation of the developmental
programmes under the Five-year Plans, the rural area of the
state is divided into Blocks under the charge of Block
Development officers (BDO). The Block area roughly corres­
ponds to the area covered by a police station in the rural
area.
party held that "the propaganda of the ruling party and the Naxalites had to be met by the Congress on an ideological basis". The Working Committee requested, "the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee to take concrete action to counteract some of the specific activities of the Naxalites". The West Bengal party faithfully tried to implement the directive.

Differences between the Central and the State Party In a multi-party parliamentary democracy, compromises and alliances between like-minded parties sometimes become necessary for fighting a powerful adversary. The national leadership of the Congress(O) realized this need for an alliance with other democratic parties in the opposition (the Swatantra, the Jan Sangh and the Socialist parties) for putting up a broad-based united challenge against Mrs. Gandhi's new Congress. On 28 and 29 June 1970, the A.I.C.C.(O) meeting in Delhi decided in its main political resolution to appeal to "all nationalist, democratic and socialist parties, groups and individuals in the country to cooperate ... both in Parliament and outside". The West Bengal members of the A.I.C.C.(O) however were not at all happy at this.

Opposition to the June decision of the party continued to be expressed by some of the state committees. In July 1970, at the meeting of the central parliamentary board the two West Bengal members, Chunder and Atulya Ghosh, strongly opposed the national


32 Political resolution of the A.I.C.C.(O) meeting of 28 and 29 June 1970 held in New Delhi.
leadership's attempt to form a sort of "Grand Alliance" (with the Swatantra, the Jan Sangh and the Socialist parties) in parliament. Under pressure from the anti-alliance forces within the party the parliamentary board ultimately decided not to go ahead with the idea of forming a united bloc of opposition parties in parliament.

"Land-grab" Movement and the Congress(O). The situation in West Bengal continued to be the same as before. The Naxalite operations continued unabated. The CPI(M) activists carried on their militant trade union movement in urban areas and localized clashes and armed conflicts occurred practically every day. To make things worse, a new disquieting development took place.

From 1 July, in pursuance of its national committee's decision to launch the "land grab movement", the West Bengal CPI started its operation of forcibly occupying the surplus land of the rich peasants by the landless labour in the villages. Considering that the organizational strength of the CPI in West Bengal was only localized and negligible and that the CPI was a potential ally in the next election, the new Congress and the Bangla Congress did not publicly oppose the movement. But true to its traditional doctrinaire stand, the state Congress(O) executive declared in a resolution the land-grab movement to be a dangerous development and decided to oppose it.

33 West Bengal state Congress(O) executive resolution (unpublished) dated 9 July 1970.
On 2 July, the "land grab" movement in Midnapore took a violent turn. The house of a peasant family at Bhoglusol village was attacked and four people were killed. The Congress(G) immediately started a protest campaign against the "Bhoglusol murder" incident. Meetings were organized throughout the state demanding judicial inquiry into the incident. The Congress(G) leader P.C. Sen accused the new Congress and the Bangla Congress of remaining indifferent to the gruel murder at Bhoglusol. He suspected an "unholy conspiracy" among the new Congress, the Bangla Congress and the CPI.

**Mid-term Poll alliances and Congress(O)** By the end of July 1970, it was evident that elections were imminent. The very rationale of party position in parliament demanded a mid-term poll, because, through it alone Mrs. Gandhi might rid herself of the uneasy situation of always seeking the unpredictable support of the leftist parties and the regional forces like the DMK and the Akali Dal in the Lok Sabha.

The political parties of West Bengal were therefore busy building up poll alliances and alignments. In early August, it seemed that the parties would be aligned in three distinct combines. One would be the U.L.D.F. composed of the CPI, the Forward Bloc, the S.U.C.I (the non CPI-M left parties in the erstwhile United Front); the second would be the U.L.F. combining the CPI(M) with four small Marxist leftist parties;

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the R.C.P.I., the Marxist Forward Bloc, the Workers' Party, the Biplabi Bangla Congress; and the third would be the alliance group made up of the new Congress, the Bangla Congress and the Progressive Muslim League of Syed Badruddoja. The Congress(O) could fit itself into none of these combinations.

The state Congress(O) leadership therefore concentrated its energies on building up a state-wide cadre-base and its frontal organizations. Party cadres' training camps were organized and new frontal organizations were formed for enlisting the support of the school teachers, the industrial working class and women. A Madhyamik Sikshak Parishad (secondary teachers' association), a Nationalist Employees' and Workers' Association and a Women's sub-committee of the Congress(O) began functioning. The peasants' wing, the Krishak Congress and the students' wing, the Chhatra Parishad (Chowringhee) were further geared up.

The doctrinaire bias of the party's leading activists and the Congress(O)'s incompatibility with other parties led to the adoption by the state party executive of a resolution in mid-August in which it was stated that the party would contest the ensuing assembly election alone and set up candidates for all the 280 assembly seats. The resolution also declared that the Congress(O) alone could form an ideology-based government and this only could achieve stability, peace, order and rule of law in the state.35

35 West Bengal state Congress(O) executive resolution (unpublished) dated 17 August 1970.
At a press meeting in Bombay, P.C. Chunder, the state party president, told the representative of a vernacular daily that the Congress(0) would not go for any sort of united front with any other party since that might result in a compromise of the party’s ideology of democratic socialism. On the very day that Chunder was briefing the press about the doctrine-based democratic socialist stand of his party, the Congress(0) members of parliament were voting against a government bill of constitution amendment aimed at abolition of the privy purses and privileges and the M.Ps included four from Chunder’s own state.

It was an unfortunate experience for the state Congress(0) activists that at the moment they were trying to consolidate their position in the state by declaring their sincerity to the ideology of democratic socialism and their resolve to fight an ideology-based struggle against all the forces representing communalism, totalitarianism and reaction, their central leadership was opposing the government’s socialist measures and openly trying to hatch up an “opportunism alliance” with parties like the Swatantra and the Jan Sangh.

Then came the disheartening Kerala state assembly mid-term poll results. The election returns revealed that the Congress(0) was no match against the new Congress. In this election, the new


37 Based on interviews with the district leaders of the Congress(0), prominent among them being Biren Maitra M.L.A. of Maldah, Dr. G.R. Mitra of Asansol, Dr. Arun Chatterjee of Bankura.
Congress won 32 out of the 56 seats they fought in alliance with the CPI, the Muslim League, the PSP and the RSP while the Congress(O) drew a blank in its contest in 39 assembly seats. The Kerala poll was a real damper. 38

The Grand Alliance and the State Congress(O) The Congress(O) president, Nijlingappa, had been trying to form a united opposition coalition of the Congress(O), the Swatantra, the Jan Sangh and the Socialist parties since the split in the undivided Congress. The proposal for such an alliance had received the A.I.C.C.(O)'s approval in June 1970, but could not be acted upon as the parliamentary board of the party rejected the idea of forming such a united bloc in parliament. But after the Kerala poll defeat, Nijlingappa revived the proposal.

In the meantime, the Congress(O)'s prospects brightened in Uttar Pradesh, the biggest state in India, in early October, when serious rifts appeared there in the new Congress-B.K.D. coalition. The New Congress withdrew its support from Charan Singh, the chief minister who then promptly sought the Congress(O)'s support. Negotiations among the opposition parties resulted in coalition, the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (united legislature party). A new government under the chief ministership of T.N. Singh, a Congress(O) leader, was installed in U.P. on 1 October 1970.

A section of the Congress(O) leadership found in the formation of the SVD ministry in U.P. the practical

38 Interview with the Congress(O) leaders in the state party's election committee.
effectiveness of its "grand alliance" plan and went ahead with the idea of using the strategy for the ensuing mid-term parliament election. 39

Only after a few days of the installation of the alliance ministry in U.P., the Congress(O) Working Committee met in Delhi on 12 and 13 November 1970 and adopted a resolution which authorized the Congress president "to take such steps as were necessary to achieve maximum understanding for united action by all democratic parties to meet effectively the organized challenge to democracy". 40 The next month on 5-6 December, the A.I.C.C.(O)'s Lucknow meeting approved the grand alliance proposal by a majority of the delegates. 41

Iqbal Narain describes the development in the following words:

"The idea of the grand alliance alleged to be in the minds of the syndicate at the time of the last presidential election, had been struggling to be born throughout the year. It tended to actualize itself from the State ... to the national arena. We have already indicated how it could assume an embryonic form in Kerala where the alliance could not be credited with any dividends new in terms of the poll verdict. It was, however, in U.P. that the alliance idea received real encouragement when the EKO, Jan Sangh, the Congress(O), Swatantra and the SSP joined hands to form a government after a brief spell of President's rule. Thereafter in spite of the opposition from States like Gujarat, and to a lesser extent, Mysore, the Congress(O) was encouraged to go ahead with the implementation of the Grand Alliance idea without any ideological qualms of conscience." in his article, "Ideology and Political Development : Battle for Issues in Indian Politics", Asian Survey February 1971, Volume XI No.2, pp 192-193.


Ibid, p.42.
The West Bengal committee of the Congress(O) tried to adjust itself with the new stand of the party as adopted at Lucknow. The executive committee expressed its desire to enter into alliance with any nationalist, democratic and socialist party, provided, such a party completely dissociated itself from communist, communalist or Marxist elements. The state executive gave a call to all democratic, socialist and non-communal parties to draw up a common programme for forming an ideology-based, democratic and stable government in West Bengal.

Perhaps the state party's leadership knew very well that no alliance with any other party in West Bengal would be possible under the conditions laid down by itself. This way, the state Congress(O) would be able to maintain the central party's new political line and at the same time implement its original plan of contesting all the state assembly seats single-handed.  

Mid-term Poll and the Congress(O)
On 26, 26 and 27 December 1970, the Congress(O) held a state convention in Calcutta. The convention lent support to the party's A.I.C.C. resolution adopted at Lucknow and declared that the state committee would strive for a unity of all secular, democratic and socialist parties in West Bengal for opposing the authoritarian, communist and Marxist forces but would fight the mid-term poll alone if such a unity could not be achieved.  

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42 Interview with the state Congress(O) leaders.
43 Main political resolution of West Bengal state Congress(O) convention dated 26 December 1971.
27 December, a big rally was held at the Brigade parade ground, Calcutta. On the same evening the news broadcast from All India Radio announced that Mrs. Gandhi had advised the President to dissolve the Lok Sabha and order a mid-term election.

The state Congress(O) then began active preparations for the election. In its election manifesto, the state Congress(O) gave a call to "Save democracy, save Bengal" and promised to provide the state with a clean, stable, democratic administration which would establish rule of law, peace and security. The manifesto also announced the party's pledge to implement an extensive programme for removing unemployment and recession in industrial and agricultural production, rural development, rehabilitation of refugees, introduction of free secondary education and setting up of health centres and hospitals throughout the state.44

In early January 1971, the all-India alliance of the Congress(O), the Jan Sangh and the S.S.P. was formally announced. Morarji Desai and K. N. Patel visited West Bengal and talks for an electoral alliance between the state Congress(O) and state Jan Sangh started. This however failed. Closely following the announcement of the grand alliance, at the Maniram (U.P.) by-election held on 26 January, the Congress(O) leader and U.P.'s S.V.D. chief minister, T.N. Singh, was defeated by a margin of over 16000 votes by his new Congress rival, Dwivedi. This was an indication of how the mind of the electorate was working.

44 West Bengal state Congress(O) election manifesto for the 1971 mid-term election.
The state party's list of 230 assembly and 34 parliamentary candidates was announced in two instalments in the third week of February. But, immediately, began a series of announcements of withdrawals by quite a large number of the party candidates. Among those who withdrew were even important leaders of the party including Smarajit Banerjee and Dasarathi Tah, two former ministers. In all, nearly ten per cent of the candidates withdrew from contest.

Between the last date for filing of nominations and the poll date, there were severe Naxalite attacks on leaders of different political parties. Hemanta Bose, leader of the Forward Bloc and a renowned freedom-fighter, was assassinated in Calcutta in broad daylight. A Bangla Congress candidate in Burdwan was killed and many were subjected to bomb-attacks. On 4 and 5 March 1971 respectively, two important Congress(O) leaders, Bejoyananda Chatterji and Pijush Kanti Ghosh (party's candidate in Calcutta's Dum Dum constituency) were killed. Chatterji was the main prop of the Congress(O) election campaign organization and his assassination caused a statewide demoralization among the Congress(O) workers. On the poll-day, 10 March, it seemed as if the Congress(O) was not contesting the election.

A political commentator and journalist had remarked before the mid-term election, on 8 March 1971:

Many seem to write off the Congress(O). But the party has a tight-knit organization and its strategy of contesting all seats left out by Congress(H) may pay dividends. Some observers believe that its seats may even exceed 20 under favourable circumstances.

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45 Karlekar Hiranmoy, The Statesman, Calcutta 8 March 1971
But when the results were announced, the Congress(0) found itself defeated in all the Lok Sabha seats with all the party stalwarts including Chunder, falling miserably and Atulya Ghosh forfeiting his deposit. In the assembly, only P.C. Sen from a constituency in Hooghly district and Radhagovinda Biswal from another in Midnapore, could get elected. The Congress(0) had falsified even the most conservative estimate about its poll prospects.

The humiliating defeat had an instant reaction. P.C. Sen, the topmost Congress(0) leader, said in a statement immediately after the results were known:

...the verdict of the people (given through the 1971 poll) should end all controversies and Congressmen should accept gracefully the decision of the people - the organization led by Mr. Jagjivan Ram is the Indian National Congress.46

Atulya Ghosh and P.C. Chunder the State Congress(0) president also were reported in the press to be subscribing to the views of Sen. The party suffered a rude shock. With the admission by the state Congress(0) leaders that the new Congress was the real Congress, it seemed as if the Congress(0) would be wound up in West Bengal.