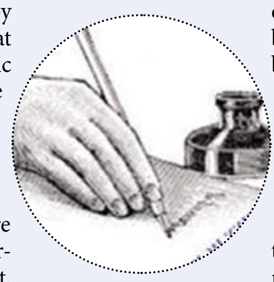
Battle for Nabanna: Bengal polls turn high stakes

AMID widespread speculation and deliberate narratives over the possible imposition of President's Rule, the Election Commission of India has announced two-phase polling for West Bengal. In fact, the Commission has reduced the number of phases—from eight in the 2021 Assembly elections to two this time.

Much like the 2021 Assembly polls, the Saffron brigade has already built a narrative suggesting it is on the verge of toppling the three-term government led by Mamata Banerjee. The All India Trinamool Congress, however, remains confident that Nabanna, the State's seat of power, will remain firmly in its hands, possibly with an increased tally.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has also attempted to build momentum around the recent rally addressed by Narendra Modi at Kolkata's historic Brigade Parade Ground, claiming a record turnout.



However, the same ground has witnessed far more historic gatherings in the past, such as rallies addressed by Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin during the height of Indo-Soviet friendship in 1955, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1972, and joint anti-Congress rallies featuring leaders like Jyoti Basu, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani. The venue has also hosted several major rallies of Mamata Banerjee during her days in the Opposition.

By comparison, Modi's rally last Saturday appeared modest. Only a portion of the sprawling ground was utilised and large gaps between attendees were visible. The vibrancy, spontaneity and thunderous response typical of historic Brigade rallies seemed largely absent.

That said, public anger, grievances and disappointment are natural when a government that has been in power for 15 years faces the electorate again. As the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt. Mamata Banerjee, the astute politician that she is, understands this well.

In response, she has somewhat reversed roles, at least in the eyes of many voters, and has taken to the streets to protest against the Centre on issues such as the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls and the cooking gas crisis. Banerjee has always performed effectively as a street fighter and opposition leader, a role that resonates strongly with her political persona.

At the same time, while the BJP leadership under Narendra Modi and Amit Shah focuses on expanding its voter base, Banerjee is banking heavily on the large beneficiary network created through various state welfare schemes.

Another advantage for the Trinamool Congress is its youth wing, widely considered one of the strongest among political parties in the state, driven by the initiatives of Abhishek Banerjee. For the BJP, the challenge remains formidable. To dislodge the Mamata government, it would need to make significant inroads into the Trinamool's Muslim vote base, attract disillusioned voters from the Left, and expand its appeal beyond its current support base.

Perhaps the most crucial factor will be whether the BJP can convincingly position itself as a party representing the quintessential Bengali identity, including all domicile Bengalis. So far, the party has struggled to achieve this.

Iran war turns into domestic political battle for Don Trump

Lack of public backing and economic fallout threaten to erode support ahead of US midterms

DAVID SMITH

NO US president in living memory has gone to war with less public support than Donald Trump has for the war in Iran. Even Barack Obama's much-maligned Libyan intervention began with 60% of Americans in support in 2011. There is no poll that shows a majority of Americans supporting the Iran war, and multiple polls showing clear majorities against it. And wars usually lose public support as they go on. Trump did not make a public case for the war before it began, because he preferred quick, surprising strikes preceded by theatrical suspense. He presented the vast military buildup in the Persian Gulf as a high-pressure negotiating tactic in the short-lived bargaining sessions over Iran's nuclear enrichment. Trump was undoubtedly emboldened by the tactical success of his removal of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, though that too was not very popular with Americans.

Wars are not necessarily better when the US government invests a huge effort in justifying them. The justification for the disastrous Iraq War, after all, was based on misperceptions, distortions and falsehoods. But by completely disregarding US public opinion before the war, Trump now finds himself in all kinds of trouble as he tries to fight it

Americans don't like seeing themselves as aggressors

Political scientist Bruce Jentleson argued that public support for war in the United States depends not just on how the war is going, but on the public's understanding of the war's aims. The US public is much more likely to support wars aimed at imposing restraints on aggressive powers than wars aimed at bringing political change to other countries. That theory explains why the Bush administration made such an effort to claim Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and was linked to the September 11 terrorist attacks, even though "regime change" was the aim of the Iraq war. Regime change is also, quite clearly, the aim of the Iran war. Trump has been talking about it for months, and is still talking about it. It was only after the bombs started falling on Iran that Trump and his administration began to make the case that Iran was an "imminent threat" to the US. It wasn't very convincing. After all, Trump had been boasting until recently that he had "completely obliterated" Iran's nuclear program the year before. In a video released shortly after the attacks, Trump complained about the 1979 Tehran hostage crisis, the 1983 Hezbollah attack on US marines in Beirut, and the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, which he said Iran was "probably involved in". It was left to Secretary of State Marco Rubio to make the convoluted argument that the US was acting in preemptive self-defence, because it knew Israel was going to strike Iran, and that Iran would retaliate against Americans in the Middle East. That did not play well in a country increasingly wary of Israel. A Gallup poll released just before the war began showed that, for the first time this century, more Americans said their sympathies were with Palestinians than Israelis. Recently, the biggest drop in support for Israel has been among political Independents, whose views have shifted significantly during the Gaza War. Tucker Carlson, the loudest critic of the Iran war on the right, immediately labelled it "Israel's war". Joe Rogan, an influential figure among Trump's 2024 support base of disillusioned young men, said they felt "betrayed" by the war. Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has tried to sell the war to Americans by gloating about the death, destruction and fear being inflicted on Iran. Even as investigations show the US military was responsible for the bombing of a school that killed more than a hundred children, he dismisses rules of military engagement as "stupid". The most recent Quinnipiac Poll showed Hegseth's approval rating at 37%.

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Americans are unprepared for sacrifice

Despite high-profile opponents like Carlson and Marjorie Taylor Greene, Trump still has most of the MAGA base with him for now. They were never really opposed to foreign wars. What they hated was losing foreign wars, and Trump is promising them swift victory in Iran. But Trump has not prepared them or anyone else, including his own cabinet, for the costs this war will incur. Especially the disruption to global oil markets, which the International Energy Agency is calling the largest in history, and which will elevate the cost of everything from travel to food. Trump's rhetoric about the price of war has hardly been Churchillian. One night he posted on social media that a short term increase in oil prices is "a very small price to pay for U.S.A., and World, Safety and Peace. Only fools would think differently!" But the next day he was forced to calm markets by claiming the war was nearly over. The Iranian regime, whose main goal is survival, is well aware of the political and economic vulnerabilities of the US and its Middle Eastern allies, and these appear to be what it is targeting. At the beginning of the war, Iran's seemingly scattered attacks on infrastructure, embassies and hotels in Gulf states were a source of mirth for some American commentators. But these were eventually enough to shut down large swathes of energy production and shipping, and inflict far more pain than Trump or his supporters were expecting. Trump was already facing the same domestic problem that Joe Biden faced. It doesn't matter how much you tell Americans about positive GDP, stock market and employment numbers; if they are struggling with the cost of living, their view of both the economy and the President will be bleak. Trump's glib dismissals of the price of oil are sounding a lot like his airy reassurances at the beginning of the pandemic. Few Republicans in Congress have been prepared to stand up to Trump over the war. But as midterm elections approach, many of them will be silently praying he finds an excuse to end it as soon as possible.

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Poland's great transformation: How a former Communist state became a growth champion

Education, entrepreneurship and EU support helped transform Poland into a major European growth engine

CLAUDIA CIOBANU AND DAVID MCHUGH

A generation ago, Poland rationed sugar and flour while its citizens were paid one-tenth what West Germans earned. Today its economy has edged past Switzerland to become the world's 20th largest with over $1 trillion in annual output. It's a historic leap from the post-Communist ruins of 1989-90 to today's European growth champion that economists say has lessons on how to bring prosperity to ordinary people - and that the Trump administration says should be recognized by Poland's presence at a summit of the Group of 20 leading economies later this year. The transformation is reflected in people like Joanna Kowalska, an engineer from Poznan, a town of half a million people midway between Berlin and Warsaw. She returned home after five years in the US. "I get asked often if I'm missing something by coming back to Poland, and, to be honest, I feel it's the other way around," Kowalska said. "We are ahead of the United States in so many areas." Kowalska works at the Poznan Supercomputing and Networking Center, which is developing the first artificial intelligence factory in Poland and integrating it with a quantum computer, one of 10 on the continent financed by a European Union program. Kowalska worked for Microsoft in the U.S. after graduating from the Poznan University of Technology in a job she saw as a "dream come true." But she missed having a "sense of mission," she said. "Especially when it comes to artificial intelligence, the technology started developing so rapidly in Poland," Kowalska added. "So it was very tempting to come back."

Multiple factors in breaking out of poverty

The guest invitation to the G20 summit is mostly symbolic; no guest country has been promoted to full member since the original G20 met at the finance minister level in 1999, and that would take a consensus decision of all the members. Moreover, the original countries were chosen not just by GDP rank, but by their "systemic significance" in the global economy. But the gesture reflects a statistical truth: In 35 years - a little less than one person's working lifetime - Poland's per capita gross domestic product rose to $55,340 in 2025, or 85% of the EU average. That's up from $6,730 in 1990, or 38% of the EU average and now roughly equal to Japan's $52,039, according to International Monetary Fund figures measured in today's dollars and adjusted for Poland's lower cost of living. Poland's economy has grown an average 3.8% a year since joining the EU in 2004, easily beating the European average of 1.8%. It wasn't simply one factor that helped Poland break out of the poverty trap, says Marcin Piatkowski of Warsaw's Kozminski University and author of a book on the country's economic rise. One of the most important factors was rapidly building a strong institutional framework for business, he said. That included independent courts, an anti-monopoly agency to ensure fair competition, and strong regulation to keep troubled banks from choking off credit. As a result, the economy wasn't hijacked by corrupt practices and oligarchs, as happened elsewhere in the post-Communist world. Poland also benefited from billions of euros in EU aid, both before and after it joined the bloc in 2004 and gained access to its huge single market. Above all, there was the broad consensus, from across the country's political spectrum, that Poland's long-term goal was joining the EU. "Poles knew where they were going," Piatkowski said. "Poland downloaded the institutions and the rules of the game, and even some cultural norms that the West spent 500 years developing." As oppressive as it was, communism contributed by breaking down old social barriers and opening higher education to factory and farmworkers who had no chance before. A post-Communist boom in higher education means half of young people now have degrees. "Young Poles are, for instance, better educated than young Germans," Piatkowski said, but even half what Germans do. That's "an unbeatable combination" for attracting investors, he said.

An electric bus ride to success

Solaris, a company founded in 1996 in Poznan by Krzysztof Olszewski, is one of the leading manufacturers of electric buses in Europe with a market share of around 15%. Its story shows one hallmark of Poland's success: entrepreneurship, or the willingness to take risks and build something new. Educated as an engineer under the Communist government, Olszewski opened a car repair shop where he used spare parts from West Germany to fix Polish cars. While most enterprises were nationalized, authorities gave permission to small-scale private workshops like his to operate, according to Katarzyna Szarzec, an economist at the Poznan University of Economics and Business. "These were enclaves of private entrepreneurship," she said. In 1996, Olszewski opened a subsidiary of the German bus company Neoplan and started producing for the Polish market. "Poland's entry to the EU in 2004 gave us credibility and access to a vast, open European market with the free movement of goods, services and people," said Mateusz Figaszewski, responsible for institutional relations. Then came a risky decision to start producing electric buses in 2011, a time when few in Europe were experimenting with the technology. Figaszewski said larger companies in the West had more to lose if switching to electric vehicles didn't work out. "It became an opportunity to achieve technological leadership ahead of the market," he said.

An aging population is still a challenge

Challenges still remain for Poland. Due to a low birth rate and an aging society, fewer workers will be able to support retirees. Average wages are lower than the EU average. While small and medium enterprises flourish, few have become global brands. Poznan Mayor Jacek Jaskowiak sees domestic innovation as a third wave in Poland's post-socialist economic development. In the first wave, foreign companies opened factories in Poland in the early 1990s, taking advantage of a skilled local population. Around the turn of the millennium, he said, Western companies brought more advanced branches, including finance, IT and engineering. "Now it's the time to start such sophisticated activities here," Jaskowiak says, adding that one of his main priorities is investing in universities. "There is still much to do when it comes to innovation and technological progress," added Szarzec, the Poznan economist. "But we keep climbing up on that ladder of added value. We're no longer just a supplier of spare parts."

From Strait of Hormuz to Indian kitchens: The hidden risks of LPG dependence

Global energy disruptions are reshaping LPG supply, prices and policy responses

VINCENT FERNANDES

IN kitchens across India, the familiar blue flame of a gas stove symbolises both modern convenience and the basic ability to cook and feed families.

India is the world's second-largest importer of LPG (liquefied petroleum gas), or cooking gas, after China, consuming about 31 million tonnes annually. Around 60 per cent of this is imported, mostly through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow shipping route linking the Persian Gulf to the open sea. The remainder is produced domestically, largely as a byproduct of crude oil refining.

India has capped commercial LPG supply at 20 per cent to curb price rises, hoarding amid the West Asia crisis

The price shock and fears of supply disruption have triggered panic booking, hoarding and black-market activity in several cities. The broad industrial and commercial category includes hotels, dhabas, roadside eateries, canteen-style restaurants and community kitchens, all of which now face a 35 per cent cut in gas supply.

In a major decision, the Centre has introduced a 20 per cent limit on the average monthly commercial LPG supply by oil marketing companies (OMCs), in coordination with state governments, Union Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri announced in Parliament on March 12, 2026. Effective from this date, the restriction aims to prioritise domestic LPG consumption and prevent hoarding and black marketing. This means OMCs will now reduce LPG allocation to commercial entities by up to 80 per cent compared with their average monthly supply in previous months.

The measure comes as India, like many other countries, grapples with the fallout from the escalating conflict involving Iran, Israel and the United States. The conflict has disrupted commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic chokepoint that carries about 20 per cent of the world's crude oil, natural gas and LPG trade. With shipping through the route severely affected, the government has begun rationing some energy supplies while trying to shield households and essential sectors.

> Authorities have also tightened consumption rules to conserve supplies. Domestic LPG deliveries remain available, but the minimum refill booking gap has been extended to 25 days to prevent panic buying and diversion

Across the country, the crisis is already visible in the LPG market. The price of a 14.2 kg domestic LPG cylinder was raised by Rs60 earlier this month, while commercial cylinders used by hotels and restaurants rose by about Rs114, the first increase in nearly a year, as global fuel markets reacted to the West Asia conflict, according to data from Indian Oil Corporation (IOC).

A 14.2 kg domestic non-subsidised LPG cylinder now costs between Rs913 and Rs928.5, depending on the city, applicable since March 7, 2026, according to IOC.

The price shock and fears of supply disruption have triggered panic booking, hoarding and black-market activity in several states, prompting the Centre to ask states to closely monitor LPG distribution and crack down on illegal stockpiling. Authorities have also tightened consumption rules to conserve supplies. Domestic LPG deliveries remain available, but the minimum refill booking gap has been extended to 25 days to prevent panic buying and diversion.

Commercial LPG supply, meanwhile, has been curtailed, affecting restaurants, bakeries and catering businesses in several cities. Some establishments have reduced their menus or temporarily shut operations due to the cooking gas shortage.

Transport and small businesses are also feeling the squeeze. In parts of southern India, thousands of autorickshaws running on auto-LPG and CNG have been forced off the roads due to fuel shortages. Meanwhile, railway kitchens and institutional canteens are exploring induction cooking and other alternatives.

To stabilise the market, the government has prioritised LPG supply for households and essential services such as hospitals and educational institutions. Refineries have been instructed to increase LPG production and divert additional output to cooking gas supply chains.

Under the framework, piped natural gas (PNG) for households, compressed natural gas (CNG) for vehicles, and natural gas used for LPG production will receive full supply. Several industrial sectors, however, will face reductions. Refineries and power plants will receive 80 per cent of their previous six-month average gas supply, petrochemical and fertiliser plants 70 per cent, and other industrial and commercial users 65 per cent.

Many of the country's roughly 100 million migrant workers rely on low-cost neighbourhood eateries and dhabas for their daily meals because they lack cooking facilities at home. Any disruption to fuel supplies for these establishments could push up meal prices or reduce food availability.

Street vendors and small food stalls that serve the cheapest meals — often operating on small LPG cylinders or informal gas connections — are among the most vulnerable. Many require frequent refills and operate on thin margins, meaning supply cuts could quickly translate into reduced operations.

The ministry has prioritised domestic LPG supply to households and introduced a 25-day inter-booking period to prevent hoarding and black marketing.