RJOC#2633515, VOL 0, ISS 0

Toppling the First Ministry: Kerala, the CIA, and the Struggle for Social Justice

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BOOK REVIEW

Toppling the First Ministry: Kerala, the CIA, and the Struggle for Social Justice. T. M. Thomas Isaac and Rickard W. Franke, New York: Monthly Review Press 2025.

At the dawn of a new cold war, there are good reasons to recall the devastating dynamics of the old, especially in what was then referred to as the Third World, and what it took to stand tall. T.M. Thomas Isaac and Richard W. Franke have written an important book that reminds us of the issues of that earlier era. It addresses the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, well known for its progressive development. In contrast to the mainstream narratives, the authors show how Kerala – like so many other Third World cases – was also affected by direct US interventions to undermine radical popular aspirations but managed to fight the negative effects and develop alternatives with democratic means.

To appreciate this, it is useful to start with the wider context. In the early 1950s, the global conflicts between conservative hawks and communist rebels receded somewhat into the background. The old western empires disintegrated, even if the French and Portuguese tried to stay on. The new Chinese leaders consolidated their positions. A ceasefire was negotiated in Korea. The US and Soviet Union agreed informally on their respective northern spheres of interest. The new UN system of international rules and regulations made some difference. And a new Third World emerged. People stood up against centuries of foreign domination and colonialism. Not just by revolutionary means, but also through struggle for democratic emancipation and equal citizenship. For some time, both the West and the East adhered to the ideas of modernisation. Liberals who advocated capitalist expansion with middle classes, as well as Marxists who were in favour of national planning with land reforms and working-class aspirations, argued that social and economic development might generate democracy in the South too. Most remarkably, the world's largest and third largest democracies emerged in India and Indonesia, respectively. This was appreciated in the West as well as the East, but soon enough, there were second thoughts. Remarkably, the rethinking began with the worry in the Western camp that the Left had become more capable than its foes at nourishing progress by democratic means.

The best examples of this wider context are Indonesia and the Kerala of Isaac's and Franke's Kerala analysis. From 1951 the Indonesian Communist Party expanded rapidly along with labour, peasant, women, and youth movements, and with a new focus on democratic reforms in critical co-operation with the Nationalist Party and President Sukarno. In the country's first free and fair elections four years later, the communists emerged as *the* modern political force, in contrast to religious and clientelist parties, and the liberal socialists who failed miserably. Subsequently the communists preceded by winning the partial local elections in 1957, mobilising support for Sukarno's nationalisation of Dutch companies, and preparing for the next general elections which they were generally expected to win. Consequently, their political opponents in Indonesia and in the West were alarmed, given their inability to advance with democratic means as well as their fear that the Left might be less interested in freedoms and rights if it won. Hence there were coup attempts and regional rebellions, supported by the West, including the US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). And when they all failed, the next step (subsequently theorised by Samuel Huntington) was to win over the military in favour of a strong state and so-called politics of order, supposedly

"ahead of democracy." Tragically, the communists reacted similarly. Democracy was given up, "to fight imperialism." Support was provided to Sukarno's emergency regulations and "guided democracy," along with the central military leaders and other loyalists. This certainly enabled the Left to mobilise against the West and to propagate a land reform but did not contain the opponents of such a reform. And the mobilisation did not prevent the military and its political and administrative allies from first gaining control of nationalised companies, then capturing the state and reducing rights and freedoms, and finally using some left-wing leader's failed attempt to secretly unseat a few top generals as a pretext for the elimination of the world's then third largest communist party and largest radical popular movement. With the support of the West and by way of army-led mass arrests and a genocide – along with conservative and religious militias – of nearly one million people. Paving the way for General Suharto's dictatorship until 1998 (see Törnquist 2020, 2022).

Indonesia was possibly the worst but far from the only case of onslaught on Third World democratic popular movements. So-called middle-class coups in favour of the "politics of order" spread like a wildfire, with severe effects until today. Commendably, Isaac and Franke situate their case study of Kerala within this broader framework, especially with references to Latin America in their second chapter. But unfortunately, they avoid the Left's own common problem of de-prioritising democracy, as in Indonesia.

From their third chapter onwards, then, Isaac and Franke focus on India and Kerala which – initially along with Indonesia – was the other success story of democratic development. What were the similarities and differences?

Kerala's emancipatory movements were stronger than in Indonesia. In their historical background chapter, Isaac and Franke point to the roots in the peasant protests in Malabar from the early nineteenth century, tenancy reforms in the princely state of Travancore from around 1850, as well the socio-religious reform movements in the late nineteenth century against the probably most rigid caste system in the sub-continent. Under the direct colonial administration in Malabar in the north and especially within the princely states of Cochin and Travancore in the south, brahmins were in control of most land, with upper caste tenants, lower caste sub-tenants, and untouchable Dalit tillers and workers. Benevolent Christian missionaries did some good, but most importantly the colonial and princely interest in tenancy reforms, commercial crops, trade, and revenues generated and strengthened new social strata. Capitalists, planters, farmers, traders, professionals, and workers demanded and organised for better conditions, education and, increasingly, for equal social and economic rights and freedom. This in turn called for cooperation beyond separate religious and caste communities, which was then supported by congress-socialist activists, both within and outside the traditional communities. By adding popular education as well as the issues of land reform and workers' rights to the general anti-colonial aspirations, the activists became increasingly significant, especially during the world economic crisis in the 1930s. Meanwhile the mainstream Congress leaders hesitated, which made the socialist activists prefer instead communist and like-minded groups. Hence the stiff conflicts until today between the Left and the Congress in Kerala.

The brief period immediately after the Second World War of Moscow- and Beijing-inspired insurrections was problematic in Kerala too. But the broad alliances from the 1930s survived thanks to the combination of emancipatory and class issues along with the cultural educational aspirations in the struggle for a unified and democratic Malayalam-speaking state within independent India. Moreover, as in Indonesia, the party and adjoint movements themselves firmly decided (with revised blessings from Moscow) on transformative democratic strategies of equal citizenship, land reforms, and welfare combined with industrialisation. This was largely in line with Jawaharlal Nehru's perspective, but his

Congress party did not fight hard for it. Already in 1954, leftist parties thus won the combined elections in Cochin and Travancore but soon split. In the first assembly election in the unified Kerala, however, there was better discipline. Thanks to the support of independents, the first Communist-led government was installed in March–April 1957 with the widely respected brahmin-turned-leftist E.M.S. Namboodiripad (known as EMS) as chief minister, along with a host of the country's most celebrated intellectuals as ministers and advisors.

There was of course stiff opposition, particularly from the Catholic Church and anti-communist movements; in mid-1959 there were even signs of insurrection. In short, the conventional truth has been that the government had to be dismissed, as it had lost popular support and could not uphold law and order. Finally, the central government instructed the dismissal of EMS' government and imposed presidential rule. This was certainly subject to critique, but it was not massive. Even Moscow was eager not to annoy its crucial friends in the central government. Another "truth" was that peace and democracy was restored thanks to presidential rule, after which Kerala made great progress.

But is this accurate? Had the EMS government really lost popular support? Was the unrest perhaps provoked and fabricated? Was the US government and its CIA involved? Was authoritarianism avoided and democracy restored less thanks to New Delhi's intervention than to the progressives in Kerala, in contrast to the common less democratic leftist reactions, as in Indonesia? And were the effects of the dismissal of the government more severe than they are usually presumed to have been?

These remain crucial questions – and the foremost relevance of *Toppling the First Ministry* is that it provides convincing answers to them. The authors have made in-depth studies of the newspapers at the time and of other media and documents from both parties of the conflict. They have also gone through recently declassified US documents, including from the CIA and the Eisenhower presidential library. What are the major results?

Firstly, it is substantiated in Chapter 4 that the EMS government really did limit itself to the kind of policies and reforms that Nehru and the Congress party also formally adhered to. Kerala is India's plantation enclave. The plantations cover almost one-third of the cropped area focusing on rubber, tea, spices, coffee and cashew. They were deemed productive and only subject to a higher tax. The top priority was instead a comprehensive but cautious land reform. Landowners would retain sufficient land for their families, and the state would buy their "surplus land" for distribution to the tillers, who themselves would be allowed to prove their cases. In addition, agricultural workers would get secured rights to their small dwellings and kitchen gardens.

Most importantly, the government immediately prohibited evictions of tenants and workers and other ways of avoiding the reform while it was worked out, with the bill passed in June 1959. In addition, employees' bargaining power was increased by preventing the police intervention in labour conflicts and by promoting tripartite negotiations of minimum wages and various benefits as well as co-operatives. The government also introduced various health and welfare measures as well as fair price shops, plus granted preferential treatment of subordinate castes and Dalits.

By also initiating democratic political and administrative decentralisation to enable local political participation, the hope was that the various reforms would together stimulate balanced development with increased demand and investments in more agricultural and industrial production, private as well as cooperative. The second major cluster of reforms related to education. Education had long been a success story in Kerala but was dominated by the Church and other private institutions. Management and accountability

were poor, and teachers' positions were vulnerable. Moreover, there were not equal educational chances for all children.

On most accounts the new government did well. It is true that the Church was especially worried regarding the educational reforms and there was of course widespread resentment against communism of the kind that had recently been exposed in Hungary in 1956. But as is clear from Chapters 4, 5, and 6, the EMS government engaged in compromises, and the Kerala communists were rooted in popular emancipatory movements rather than in avant-garde terror as in some other parts of the country. Perhaps the remark by Fr. Vadakkan many years later, when the reviewer met this founder of the then best-known anti-communist front, in 1993, is illustrative: "One must differentiate between communism and the best of our communists." In any case it is undisputable that the leftists won several popular votes of confidence at the time, both in a highly contested by-election in May 1958 and in numerous village council elections (113–14).

But then things changed. As analysed in Chapters 6–9, the opponents broadened their front beyond the Christian communities to several parties and groups. And when they anyway were short of sufficient popular support, the conclusion was that the only way to unseat the government and block its reforms would be to create sufficient unrest and law and order problems – to thus convince the central government to impose presidential rule.

Congress Young Turks in Delhi were willing, as was Indira Gandhi, but Nehru hesitated. To tip the balance, international Christian organisations and, covertly, the American Embassy as well as the CIA contributed more funding and advice to the crusaders in Kerala. For example, the conclusion in a CIA report dated June 23, 1951 (203) stated: "If further violence does not occur, and if the anti-Communist campaign loses additional momentum, [Prime Minister] Nehru would find it difficult to institute President's Rule – direct rule from New Delhi – in Kerala on the grounds of a breakdown of law and order."

This was dated the day after Nehru arrived for a four-day visit to Kerala, suggesting that the educational reforms should be postponed until there was a compromise, that there would be an inquiry into alleged police violence against the militant dissidents and a deal on numerous other complaints. Chief Minister Namboodiripad accepted it all, but not the Congress Party and the local anti-communist "Liberation Committee" *Vimochana Samithi*. So the situation escalated. On July 31 Nehru gave up and instructed the President of India to dismiss the Kerala government.

It is ironic that two scholars who in 2003–2004 were falsely accused by orthodox communists of connections with the CIA and similar agencies when studying Kerala's democratic decentralisation have thus proved in *Toppling the First Ministry*, by examining local media and relevant documents at the time as well as declassified US documents, that these very agencies nourished and financed a campaign to generate violence and law and order problems to make India's Prime Minister and President topple the democratically elected Kerala government, which, moreover, had recently proved its popular support in by-elections and accepted the Prime Minister's compromise proposal. There is no longer any doubt.

Similarly, Isaac and Franke proceed in Chapter 9 by also identifying convincingly the troublesome and underestimated effects of this on Kerala's development. The postponement of the land reform paved the way for the selling and donation of potentially surplus land. When a revised land reform was finally implemented in 1971, it weakened the big landowners but there was hardly any land left for distribution to the poor tillers and workers. These were only able to increase their bargaining power thanks to secured

hutments and efficient organisation. Meanwhile, farmer-beneficiaries often preferred to speculate in land and turn their land into small plantations (that were exempted from the land reform) and invest outside agriculture. This speculation and not always productive investment might have been possible to counter if the land reform had been combined with democratic decentralisation to local governments with participatory development projects. But the EMS' ministry's efforts at decentralisation had also been scrapped. And with better wages but few improvements in production it was less profitable to invest in industrialisation than, for example, in real estate and commerce, as well as in private education to get good jobs and opportunities outside Kerala.

In addition, the externally nourished polarisation of Kerala politics was sustained in elections as well as in party-politicisation of welfare and development measures to gain votes and funds, including among Christian and Muslim minorities. All of which in turn nourished and was worsened by political transactions and fragmentation, especially after the communists split in 1964. EMS (in the breakaway major Communist Party of India–Marxist or CPI–M) returned briefly in office with a coalition government in 1967–1969, but he was soon unseated by the rivals who had remained in the Communist Party of India, and who preferred to co-operate for ten years with the Congress Party and even supported Indira Gandhi's State Emergency Rule in 1975–1977.

The general argument for supporting the Emergency was much the same as that which had made the Indonesian and most other Third World leftists set aside democratisation in favour of statist and left populist anti-imperialism several years earlier. It was only when the Indian communists who supported Gandhi's Emergency finally regretted this in early 1980, that the Kerala progressives could join hands again in a Left Democratic Front and renew its politics and policies, both in opposition and when in office during 1987–1991, 1996–2001, 2006–2011, and from 2016 until the time of writing.

Against this backdrop, *Toppling the First Ministry* would have benefitted by paying more attention to how most leftists in Kerala uniquely stood tall on democratisation – from the anti-colonial emancipatory struggle to the humble reaction by EMS when his cabinet was toppled and the immediate efforts to get back online.

Commendably, however, the book does conclude by also mentioning the efforts from the 1980s. This is mainly about the attempts to counter party-political clientelism based on EMS' as well as many civil society-activist's quest for local development cooperation through democratic decentralisation, facilitated by a People's Planning Campaign in 1995–2001. Much thanks to the positive results, Kerala was, for example, able to later on counter huge floods in 2018 as well as the Covid-19 pandemic with remarkable efficiency and focus on welfare and solidarity. Thereafter the government was also able to connect the local and wider dynamics by nourishing investments in infrastructure and to pioneer a knowledge-based development strategy.

In this regard too, the book could have been even better by indicating the challenges that cannot be blamed on others and history alone. Will it be possible now to, for example, facilitate popular participation (beyond parties and unions) in linkages between local development and state-level mission-agencies to reach democratically decided targets? This issue is especially significant since the critical mass of activists who made possible the Planning Campaign is no more. And how might it be possible to revitalise co-operatives and engage employee-led companies and other private investments in line with public (not just private) priorities through innovative partnership governance? Especially since Narendra Modi's central government tries to starve Kerala financially by, among other things, preventing publicly guaranteed investments. There was also an

anti-incumbency factor in recent local polls and it remains to be seen if confidence and hope can be restored in face of the forthcoming assembly elections.

In any case, *Toppling the First Ministry* is certainly a major contribution to Kerala's as well as the global history of emancipatory politics. It establishes beyond reasonable doubt how the first Kerala ministry was toppled, the long-term negative effects, and how the Left, in comparative perspective, has stood tall in its efforts at democratic development.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2026.2633515
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