

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

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

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

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

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

91 The brief period immediately after the Second World War of Moscow- and Beijing-
92 inspired insurrections was problematic in Kerala too. But the broad alliances from the
93 1930s survived thanks to the combination of emancipatory and class issues along with the
94 cultural educational aspirations in the struggle for a unified and democratic Malayalam-
95 speaking state within independent India. Moreover, as in Indonesia, the party and adjoint
96 movements themselves firmly decided (with revised blessings from Moscow) on trans-
97 formative democratic strategies of equal citizenship, land reforms, and welfare combined
98 with industrialisation. This was largely in line with Jawaharlal Nehru’s perspective, but his

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

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

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

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

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

135 Most importantly, the government immediately prohibited evictions of tenants and
136 workers and other ways of avoiding the reform while it was worked out, with the bill
137 passed in June 1959. In addition, employees’ bargaining power was increased by prevent-
138 ing the police intervention in labour conflicts and by promoting tripartite negotiations of
139 minimum wages and various benefits as well as co-operatives. The government also intro-
140 duced various health and welfare measures as well as fair price shops, plus granted prefer-
141 ential treatment of subordinate castes and Dalits.

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

148 were poor, and teachers' positions were vulnerable. Moreover, there were not equal educa-
149 tional chances for all children.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

215 The general argument for supporting the Emergency was much the same as that which
216 had made the Indonesian and most other Third World leftists set aside democratisation
217 in favour of statist and left populist anti-imperialism several years earlier. It was only
218 when the Indian communists who supported Gandhi's Emergency finally regretted this in
219 early 1980, that the Kerala progressives could join hands again in a Left Democratic Front
220 and renew its politics and policies, both in opposition and when in office during 1987-
221 1991, 1996-2001, 2006-2011, and from 2016 until the time of writing.

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

226 Commendably, however, the book does conclude by also mentioning the efforts from
227 the 1980s. This is mainly about the attempts to counter party-political clientelism based
228 on EMS' as well as many civil society-activist's quest for local development cooperation
229 through democratic decentralisation, facilitated by a People's Planning Campaign in
230 1995-2001. Much thanks to the positive results, Kerala was, for example, able to later on
231 counter huge floods in 2018 as well as the Covid-19 pandemic with remarkable efficiency
232 and focus on welfare and solidarity. Thereafter the government was also able to connect
233 the local and wider dynamics by nourishing investments in infrastructure and to pioneer
234 a knowledge-based development strategy.

235 In this regard too, the book could have been even better by indicating the challenges
236 that cannot be blamed on others and history alone. Will it be possible now to, for
237 example, facilitate popular participation (beyond parties and unions) in linkages between
238 local development and state-level mission-agencies to reach democratically decided tar-
239 gets? This issue is especially significant since the critical mass of activists who made
240 possible the Planning Campaign is no more. And how might it be possible to revitalise
241 co-operatives and engage employee-led companies and other private investments in line
242 with public (not just private) priorities through innovative partnership governance?
243 Especially since Narendra Modi's central government tries to starve Kerala financially
244 by, among other things, preventing publicly guaranteed investments. There was also an
245

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

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

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