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Political Violence and Electoral Culture in West Bengal Since 1977

Malay Khan

Editor-in-Chief, Star National Productions

ABSTRACT:

This article examines the persistence and changing functions of political violence in West Bengal from the establishment of Left Front rule in 1977 through the Trinamool Congress (TMC) period to 2025. It asks why electoral violence persists despite partisan alternation and how coercion can reshape political competition beyond individual elections. Using a qualitative historical-comparative design, it draws on secondary scholarship, Election Commission and State Election Commission materials, government and human-rights reports, judicial records, election-monitoring evidence, and selected contemporary reporting. It proposes a Local Dominance Cycle, a mechanism-oriented framework linking control of local institutions, patronage, electoral stakes, coercive capacity, opposition demobilization or non-contestation, and renewed institutional control, and argues that violence can function not only as an outcome of electoral rivalry but also as a means of restructuring the competitive field. The 2018 and 2023 panchayat elections show contrasting patterns: severe non-contestation in 2018, and higher contestation combined with greater lethality and intra-party coercion in 2023. The 2021 post-election violence and the Sandeshkhali case are used to develop the concept of the democratic afterlife of violence: the persistence of displacement, weakened organization, material insecurity, and expectations of retaliation after immediate violence ends. The evidence is consistent with the proposed mechanisms but does not demonstrate each link of the cycle, since the cases are purposively selected and the data heterogeneous. The article concludes that partisan alternation does not by itself produce institutional transformation, because durable local control, patronage networks, and uneven enforcement can sustain coercive incentives across regimes, with implications for substantive democratic competition.

Keywords: West Bengal; Electoral Violence; Political Coercion; Local Dominance; Democratic Competition

Introduction

The coexistence of electoral democracy and political violence presents a fundamental paradox in contemporary Indian politics. Regular elections, competitive party systems, judicial institutions, and constitutional protections do not necessarily ensure that political competition is experienced as free and equal at the local level. Electoral participation can be formally available while the conditions necessary to exercise that participation—organizing, campaigning, standing for office, mobilizing supporters, and expressing political preferences without fear—remain unevenly distributed. Political violence is therefore significant not merely because it produces physical harm, but because it can alter the structure of political competition itself.

West Bengal provides an especially important case for examining this problem. Since the establishment of Left Front rule in 1977, political competition has repeatedly been accompanied by violence, intimidation, territorial struggles, and coercive mobilization. The 2011 transfer of power from the Left Front to the Trinamool Congress (TMC) did not eliminate these practices. Instead, episodes of violence surrounding local and state elections continued under a substantially different partisan configuration, and after 2016 they increasingly involved a third organized actor, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), rather than a simple two-party contest. This persistence raises a question that cannot be adequately answered by attributing violence to the ideology, organizational culture, or conduct of a particular political party. If the dominant party changes while important patterns of political coercion remain, the explanation must also be sought in the institutional environment within which political parties compete.

The central argument of this article is that the persistence of electoral violence in West Bengal is associated with the unusually high political value of controlling local institutions, the organizational penetration of political parties into community life, and the material and political resources connected with local government. Panchayats and other local institutions are not merely administrative bodies: control over them can provide access to distributive resources, political networks, employment opportunities, contracts, welfare benefits, and local authority. Where electoral competition threatens such networks, coercion can become a means of protecting territorial and organizational dominance.

Recent research on West Bengal has shown that electoral violence can be associated with uncontested local elections, suggesting that coercion may reduce competition before voters reach the polling booth (Das, 2025). This article builds on that insight in two ways. It places non-contestation within a longer historical framework, asking what happens when the immediate electoral effects of coercion become embedded in local institutions and patronage networks; and it draws on more recent research suggesting that coercion in West Bengal operates through more than one logic simultaneously (Daxecker, Deglow, & Fjelde, 2025).

The article accordingly proposes a Local Dominance Cycle, a mechanism-oriented framework set out in Section 3 and Figure 8, through which electoral coercion can have effects extending beyond individual elections. Because intimidation that contributes to candidate withdrawal, opposition demobilization, or displacement may persist into later electoral cycles, the article also introduces the concept of the democratic afterlife of electoral violence, which distinguishes the immediate electoral effects of violence from its longer-term effects on the structure of political competition.

The framework also allows the Left Front and TMC periods to be compared without assuming that they were identical. The argument is not that the forms, scale, actors, or contexts of violence remained unchanged after 2011, but that the persistence of coercive mechanisms across partisan alternation suggests a distinction between party change and institutional transformation.

The article makes four contributions. First, it develops a longitudinal explanation of West Bengal's electoral violence by connecting the historical literature on party organization and "party-society" with contemporary research on electoral coercion and non-contestation. Second, it conceptualizes political violence as a process that can reshape the competitive field rather than simply as an outcome of electoral rivalry. Third, it introduces the idea of the democratic afterlife of electoral violence to capture the institutional and political consequences that may survive beyond the immediate episode of violence. Fourth, it incorporates recent micro-level survey evidence indicating that coercion in West Bengal operates through two distinct logics—demobilization of an external opposition and disciplining of an internal support base—which accounts centred on opposition suppression alone do not distinguish.

The West Bengal case also bears on a broader question: can electoral competition remain substantively democratic when political actors have the organizational capacity to prevent meaningful competition before, during, or after elections? Gibson's (2012) work on subnational boundary control, and Levitsky and Way (2010) and Schedler (2013) on competitive and electoral authoritarianism, treat the quality of competition, rather than its mere existence, as the object of explanation. West Bengal's panchayats and municipalities are not authoritarian regimes in the sense these authors describe, and the article does not claim otherwise; it adopts only their analytical move, applied at the local-government level, and it is this move that the article's later use of the term "electoral culture" is intended to capture. See Figure 1.

Research Questions

The article addresses the following questions:

RQ1: How do control over local political institutions, patronage resources, and partisan organizational networks shape incentives for electoral violence in West Bengal?

RQ2: How did the forms and functions of political violence change between the Left Front period (1977–2011) and the TMC period (2011–2025), and which institutional mechanisms persisted across partisan alternation?

RQ3: Under what conditions does electoral violence produce consequences beyond the immediate election, particularly opposition demobilization, candidate withdrawal, non-contestation, and durable local political dominance?

RQ4: What does the West Bengal case reveal about the relationship between decentralized government, patronage, coercion, and substantive democratic quality?

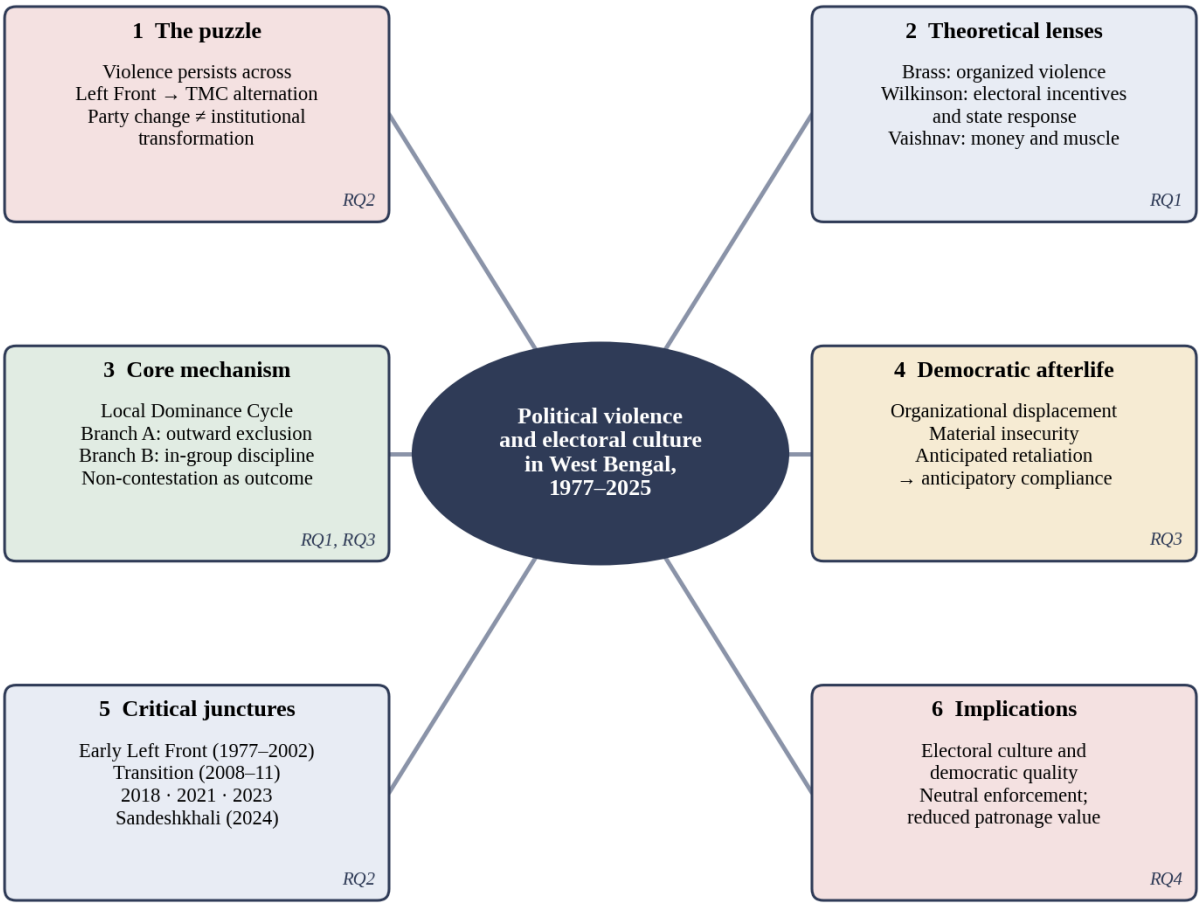


Figure 1. Conceptual map of the study: puzzle, theoretical lenses, core mechanism, democratic afterlife, critical junctures and implications, with the research question(s) each addresses. Source: Author's conceptualization.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical-comparative methodology to examine the relationship between political violence and electoral competition in West Bengal from 1977 to 2025. Rather than treating the period as a continuous sequence of violent episodes, the analysis compares critical phases of political transformation and identifies mechanisms that recur, disappear, or change form across them.

The study draws on secondary scholarship, Election Commission and State Election Commission materials, government reports, National Human Rights Commission documents, judicial records, academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, election-monitoring reports, and carefully selected contemporary reporting. The principal analytical units are not individual incidents alone but electoral episodes and institutional transitions. Four periods receive particular attention: the consolidation of Left Front dominance after 1977, the crisis and transition of 2007–2011, the post-2011 reconfiguration of political dominance under the TMC, including the 2018 panchayat elections and the post-election violence following the 2021 Assembly election, and the 2023 panchayat elections, which occurred against the background of a consolidated BJP opposition and intensifying competition within the TMC itself. See Figure 2.

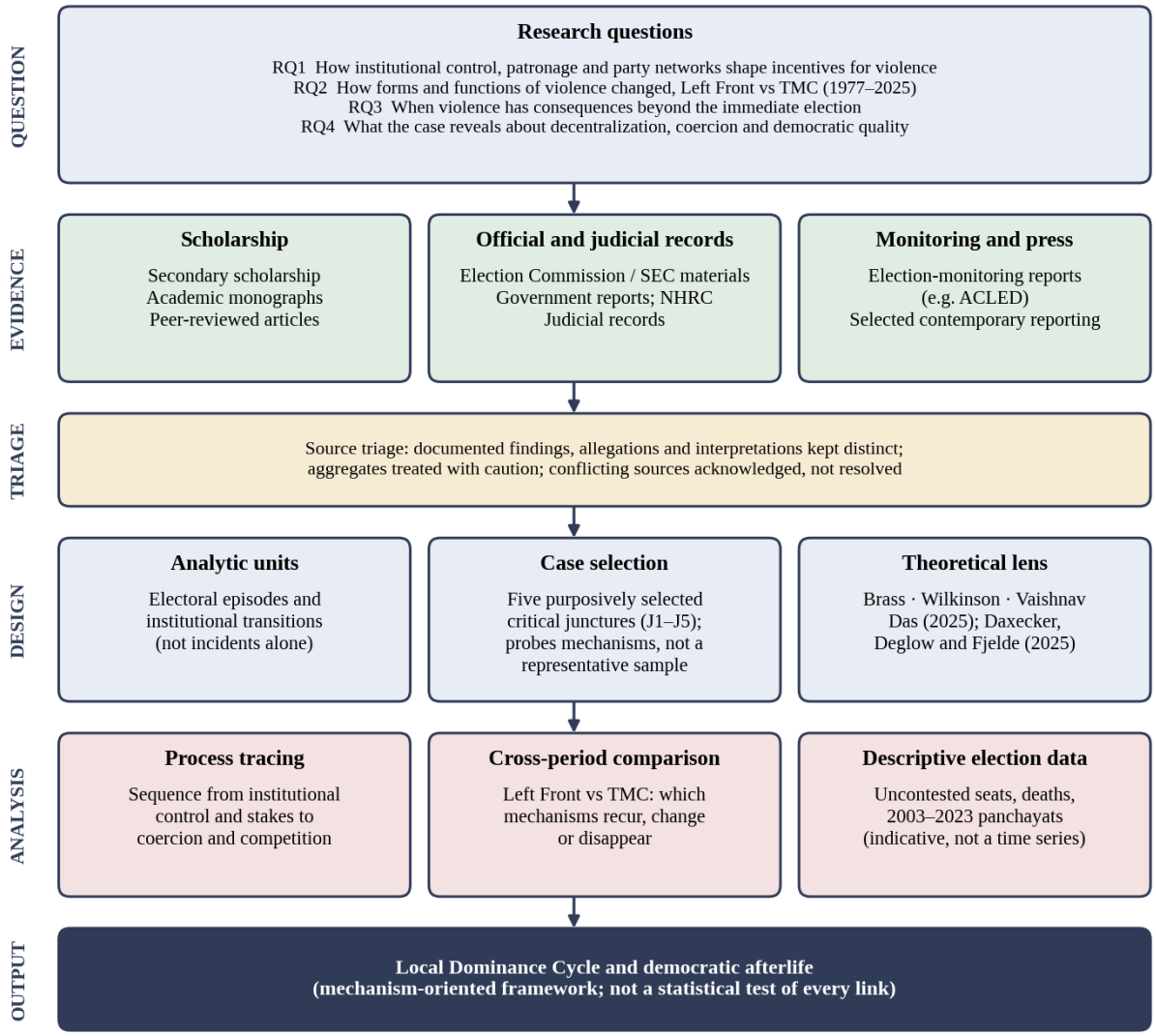


Figure 2. Research design: from research questions and evidence base, through source triage and critical-juncture selection, to the mechanism-oriented framework. Source: Author's conceptualization.

A major methodological challenge is the politicization and uneven documentation of political violence. Official agencies, courts, human-rights organizations, political parties, and media organizations employ different definitions and record different categories of incidents. The source protocol is therefore as follows. Aggregate figures are treated with caution. Numerical claims are drawn wherever possible from identifiable institutional or scholarly sources, and the article distinguishes documented findings, allegations, and interpretations. Where sources conflict, the disagreement is acknowledged rather than resolved through selective use of figures, and figures taken from press reporting are flagged as approximate.

The article uses several related terms in specific senses. Political violence is the broadest category, encompassing any use or threat of physical force for political ends. Electoral violence refers to political violence specifically intended to influence electoral competition, whether before, during, or after polling. Electoral coercion is wider than electoral violence, encompassing threats, intimidation, and other pressure that shapes electoral participation or political behaviour without necessarily involving physical force; this is the sense in which Daxecker, Deglow, and Fjelde (2025) use "intimidation." Non-contestation refers to an electoral outcome or mechanism, the absence of a contested race, rather than to an act of violence; it may result from coercion, but it may equally result from organizational weakness, strategic withdrawal, or resource constraints unrelated to coercion, a possibility the article does not discount. These distinctions matter because the empirical sources use these terms differently and the article's causal claims depend on which concept is doing the analytical work. See Figure 3.

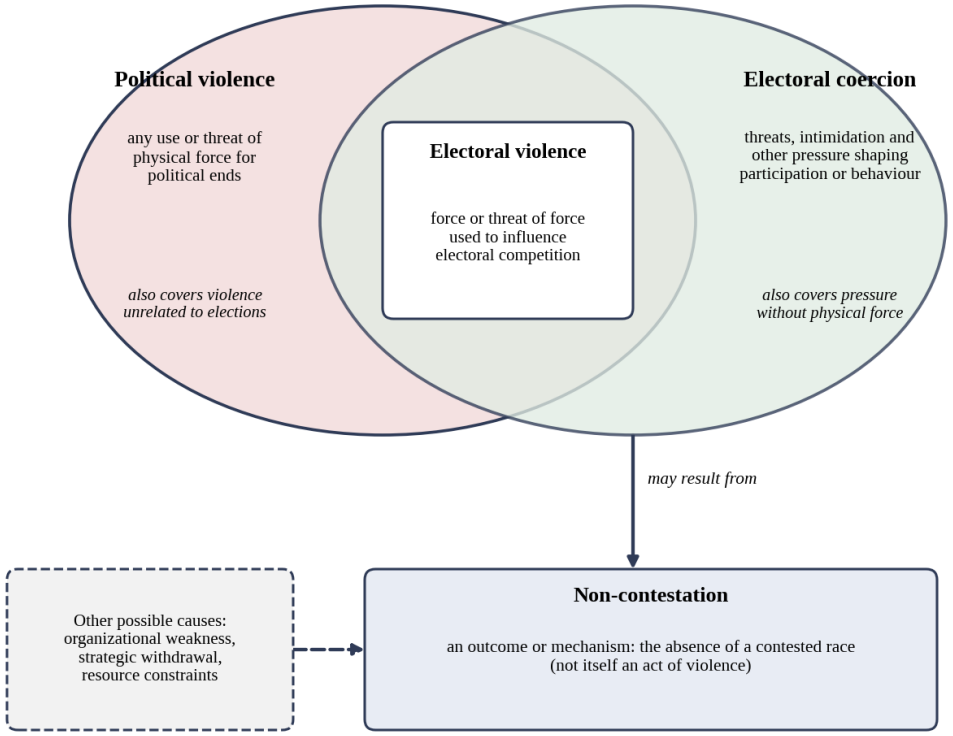


Figure 3. Conceptual relationships among political violence, electoral violence, electoral coercion, and non-contestation. The diagram is illustrative; areas are not to scale. Source: Author's conceptualization.

The critical junctures examined below—the early Left Front period, the 2008–2011 transition, the 2018 panchayat elections, the 2021 post-election violence, and the 2023 panchayat elections—were selected because each represents a distinct configuration of political competition in which the proposed mechanism can be observed operating under different conditions: an early period of one-party consolidation, a period of acute inter-party uncertainty, a period of pronounced non-contestation, a period in which the effects of violence became visible only after polling had concluded, and a period combining renewed contestation with intensified inter-party and intra-party coercion. This purposive selection is intended to probe whether the Local Dominance Cycle's component mechanisms recur across qualitatively different electoral circumstances, rather than to establish a representative sample of all electoral violence in the state. See Figure 4.

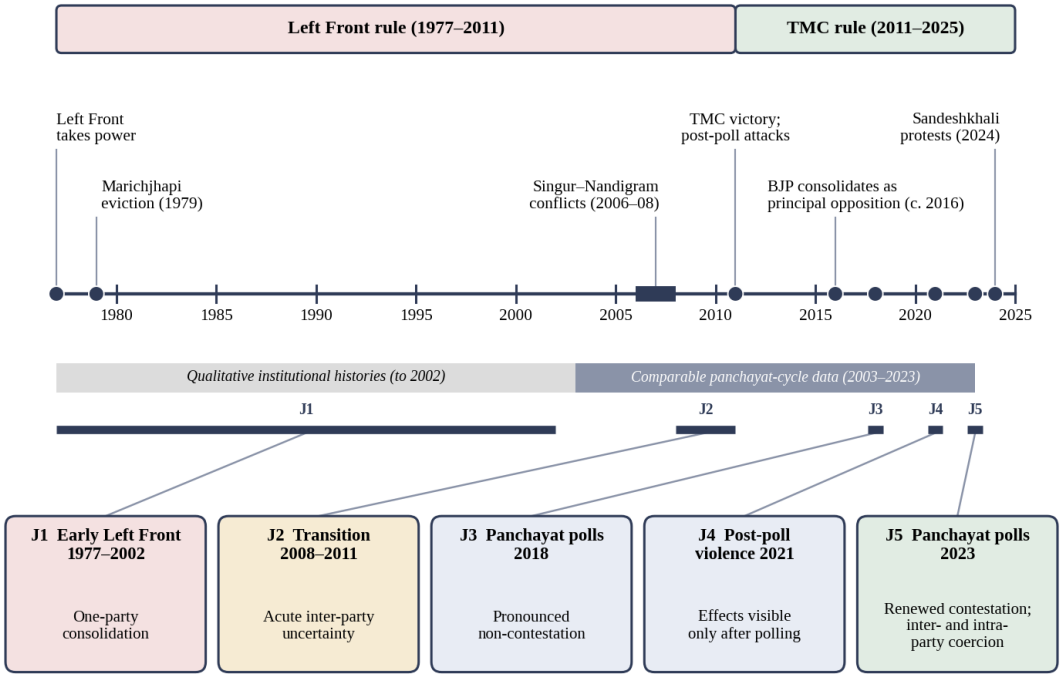


Figure 4. Regimes and critical junctures (J1–J5), 1977–2025, with the type of evidence available for each period. Source: Author's compilation from the

sources cited in this article.

The absence of a comprehensive and methodologically consistent longitudinal dataset covering all forms of political violence in West Bengal is an important limitation. The article therefore does not claim to establish a precise statistical trend from 1977 to 2025. It uses historical process tracing and cross-period comparison to assess whether similar political functions of coercion recur under different partisan regimes, and it evaluates the Local Dominance Cycle through mechanism-oriented comparison of purposively selected junctures rather than a statistical test of every link in the sequence. Election-cycle data on uncontested seats and reported deaths for the 2003–2023 panchayat elections are presented descriptively and should be read as indicative rather than as a validated time series, given the definitional and reporting inconsistencies noted above. The analysis considers a broad range of consequences, from attacks and killings to candidate suppression, opposition withdrawal, non-contestation, displacement, post-election retaliation, intra-party factional violence, and the consolidation of local control, so that the democratic significance of violence can be assessed even where it does not directly determine an election's numerical outcome. Because case selection is purposive and the sources heterogeneous, the evidence can show that the proposed mechanisms are consistent with the cases examined; it cannot establish their generality or isolate violence from other causes of non-contestation.

Historiographical and Theoretical Framework

The literature on West Bengal's political history has extensively examined land reform, decentralization, party organization, and the emergence of a distinctive form of party-society (Bhattacharyya, 2016). Chatterjee's (2009) influential account of the state's political trajectory and Banerjee's (2008, pp. 17–19) study of panchayats as instruments of partisan patronage both identify local government as the principal site where party organization is converted into durable political control, a theme that anticipates much of the argument developed here. The literature on political violence is comparatively fragmented, however, often treating violence as an episodic feature of electoral competition rather than examining how coercion can reshape the institutional conditions under which political competition takes place. This article brings these strands together through a framework that connects party organization, local institutional control, patronage, coercive capacity, non-contestation, and the reproduction of political dominance.

The central theoretical proposition is that electoral violence should not be understood only as an outcome of intense political competition. Under particular institutional conditions, it can become a mechanism through which competition itself is altered. When control over local institutions provides access to valuable material and political resources, the stakes of local electoral competition increase. Dense partisan networks can then provide the organizational infrastructure for coercion. If coercion successfully deters opposition mobilization or induces candidates and supporters to withdraw, the immediate result may be reduced contestation. Reduced contestation, in turn, can strengthen incumbent control over local institutions and reproduce the patronage structures that made political control valuable in the first place.

The article in turn develops a Local Dominance Cycle:

Local institutional control → access to patronage and political resources → high stakes of electoral competition → dense partisan organization and coercive capacity → opposition intimidation and demobilization → candidate withdrawal / non-contestation → electoral dominance → renewed institutional control.

What this model adds is a temporal dimension often missing from event-based accounts of electoral violence. Violence may have consequences beyond the immediate election. Where coercion weakens opposition organization, produces displacement, or contributes to non-contestation, its political effects can persist into subsequent electoral cycles. The article refers to this longer-term process as the democratic afterlife of electoral violence.

The Local Dominance Cycle does not imply that violence is inevitable whenever one party controls local government. Nor does it assume that every uncontested election is produced by coercion. Rather, it identifies a set of institutional conditions under which coercion can become politically useful and proposes that the democratic consequences of violence should be assessed partly through its effects on the structure of political competition. As the discussion below of coercion as in-group discipline makes clear, the cycle also does not assume that every violent incident is directed outward against an opposition; a full account must allow for coercion generated by uncertainty inside the dominant organization itself. See Figure 5.

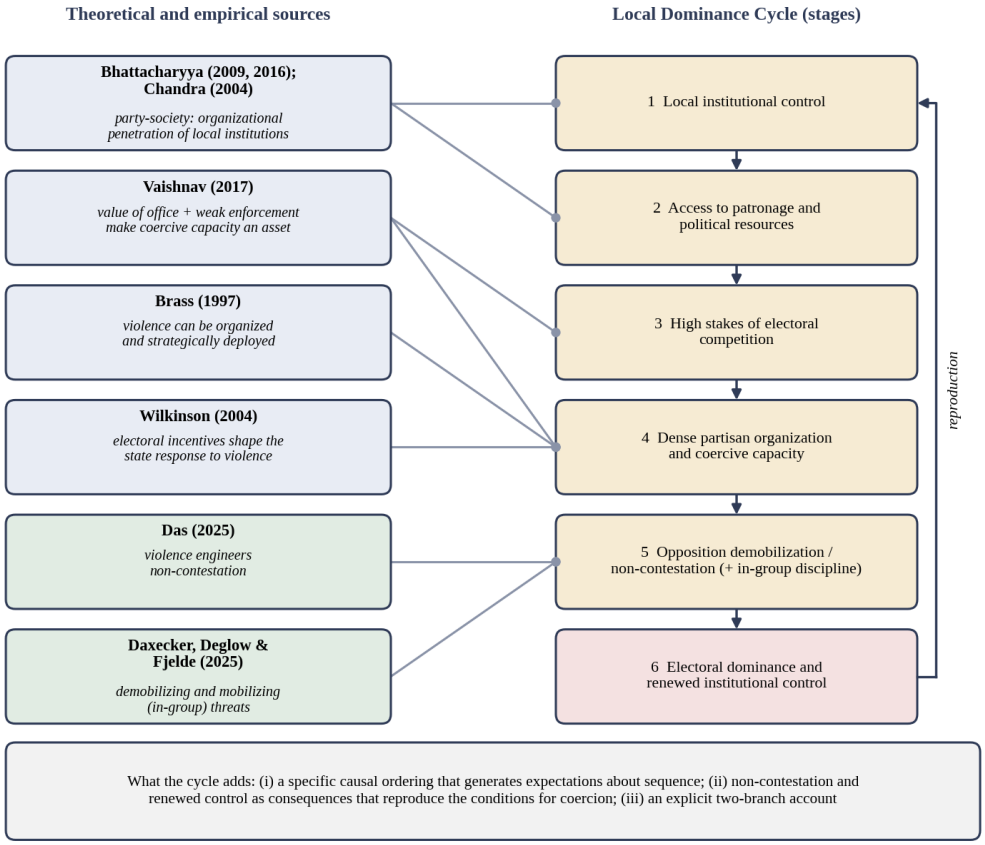


Figure 5. Mapping of the theoretical and empirical literature onto the stages of the Local Dominance Cycle. Lines indicate the stage(s) each source most directly informs. Source: Author's conceptualization, drawing on the works cited.

Paul Brass: Organized Violence and the Institutionalized Riot System

Paul Brass's concept of the institutionalized riot system provides an important starting point because it challenges the assumption that political violence is spontaneous, irrational, or merely expressive. Brass demonstrates how violence can involve political organization, specialized actors, strategic timing, and incentives to produce, manage, or suppress violence.

Brass's framework was developed principally for organized communal violence rather than partisan electoral violence, so the article does not treat West Bengal as a direct instance of the institutionalized riot system. It adopts the broader organizational insight: violence becomes politically functional when organized actors have the incentives and capacities to deploy it strategically. The relevant question is therefore whether political organizations develop recurring mechanisms through which violence, intimidation, retaliation, and territorial control are coordinated around electoral competition, which helps explain why violence appears before elections, during campaigns, and after results.

What Brass contributes to the synthesis is the organizational dimension of the cycle, its coercive capacity. Because that perspective allows for continuity in coercive organization beneath a change of governing party, it also motivates the comparison of the Left Front and TMC periods, without implying that actors, forms, or magnitude of violence were identical across them.

Steven Wilkinson: Electoral Incentives and the Strategic Response of the State

Steven Wilkinson's analysis of electoral incentives provides a second component of the framework. Wilkinson demonstrates that political leaders' responses to violence are shaped by the electoral consequences of protecting particular groups. State institutions do not operate in a political vacuum: governments have incentives to suppress violence when intervention protects politically valuable constituencies and incentives to tolerate inadequate enforcement when intervention imposes greater political costs.

For West Bengal, this framework shifts attention from the existence of violence to the institutional response to it. Police intervention, investigation, prosecution, deployment of central security forces, and judicial intervention can influence whether coercive strategies succeed: where local actors expect coercion to carry limited or uneven costs, violence becomes more useful as an electoral strategy, whereas credible and politically neutral enforcement can alter the calculation of potential perpetrators.

What Wilkinson adds to the synthesis is that coercive capacity alone is insufficient: violence becomes politically consequential when institutions fail to impose sufficiently predictable costs on those who employ it. The relationship between partisan organization and state response is thus a central mechanism connecting political violence with durable political dominance.

Milan Vaishnav: Money, Muscle, and the Value of Political Control

Milan Vaishnav's analysis of criminality in Indian electoral politics provides a third component of the framework. Vaishnav demonstrates that in contexts where political office generates substantial material benefits and the enforcement of law is weak, criminality and coercive capacity can become political assets. The ability to mobilize "muscle" can provide electoral advantages when political competition involves high stakes and institutional enforcement is uncertain.

This perspective is particularly useful for understanding West Bengal's local political arena. Control over panchayats and municipalities can provide access to networks associated with public employment, welfare distribution, contracts, development projects, and local political influence. The value of such control raises the stakes of electoral competition. Under these conditions, the capacity to threaten or physically exclude political competitors can acquire instrumental value.

The argument, however, is not that all local political actors are criminals or that all violence is generated by individuals with criminal records. Rather, Vaishnav's framework helps identify the political economy of coercive capacity: where control over political institutions has high material value and enforcement institutions are weak or uneven, actors capable of deploying coercion may become valuable to political organizations. See Figure 6.

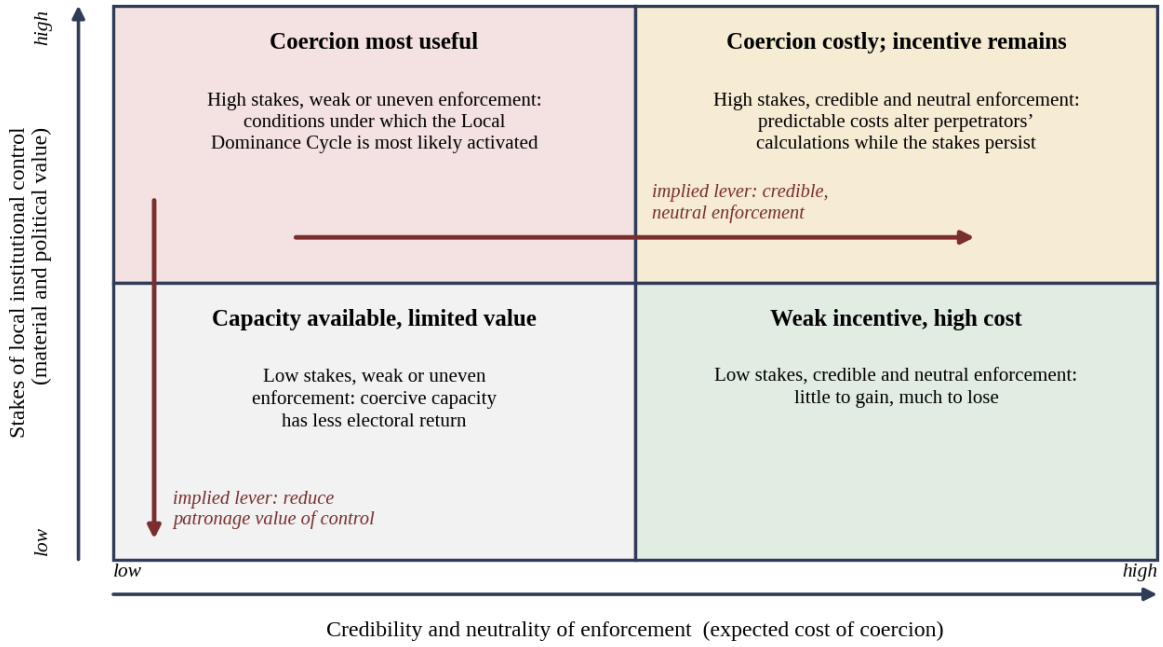


Figure 6. Illustrative typology of conditions under which coercion is politically useful: stakes of local institutional control and credibility of enforcement. Arrows indicate implied reform levers. Source: Author's conceptualization, drawing on Wilkinson (2004) and Vaishnav (2017).

From Coercion to Non-Contestation

The three theoretical perspectives become more analytically useful when connected to a fourth concept: non-contestation.

Conventional accounts of electoral violence often measure its severity through deaths, injuries, attacks, arrests, or incidents of booth capture. These indicators are important but do not fully capture the democratic consequences of coercion. Violence may matter politically even when it does not alter the vote count directly. If prospective candidates withdraw, campaign organizations dissolve, opposition supporters leave an area, or parties decide not to contest particular seats because the expected costs are too high, political competition has already been altered before voting begins.

Recent research on West Bengal provides important empirical support for this mechanism. Das's (2025) study of local elections examines the relationship between violence and uncontested seats and argues that incumbent actors can use violence to engineer non-contestation. This scholarship provides a crucial bridge between the study of physical coercion and the study of democratic competition.

The implication for this article is that non-contestation should be treated as an intermediate outcome of electoral violence rather than merely as an electoral

statistic.

Once an incumbent secures local dominance, access to institutional resources and patronage networks may be reproduced, increasing the value of retaining control in the next electoral cycle. Violence can consequently have a self-reinforcing effect.

A Complication: Coercion as In-Group Discipline

The account developed so far treats coercion primarily as a weapon directed outward, against opposition candidates, workers, and voters. Recent micro-level survey research complicates this picture in a way that matters for the argument of this article. Daxecker, Deglow, and Fjelde (2025, pp. 1232–1257) distinguish between demobilizing violence, aimed at deterring rival-party supporters from voting, and mobilizing violence, aimed at disciplining a party's own supporters and preventing defection. Using a list experiment embedded in a post-election survey conducted after the 2019 Lok Sabha election in West Bengal, together with a systematic reading of local newspaper reports, they find that demobilizing threats are concentrated in closely contested constituencies, which is broadly consistent with the logic developed above. Mobilizing threats, however, are concentrated inside the incumbent party's own strongholds, where dense organizational networks and influence over local police give the party both the information needed to identify potential defectors and the capacity to monitor whether threats have been obeyed.

This finding qualifies the Local Dominance Cycle. Coercion is not only a tool that incumbents deploy against an external opposition to produce non-contestation; it can also discipline insiders, enforce loyalty, deter defection, and manage factional competition within the dominant organization. A given level of violence in a locality may therefore reflect two logics operating side by side: coercion against opponents, which narrows the field of competition from outside, and coercion against uncertain insiders, which stabilizes the dominant coalition from within. An account that reduces West Bengal's electoral violence to opposition suppression alone risks overstating the coherence of the dominant party as a unitary actor. The distinction is revisited in the discussion of the 2023 panchayat elections. See Figure 7.

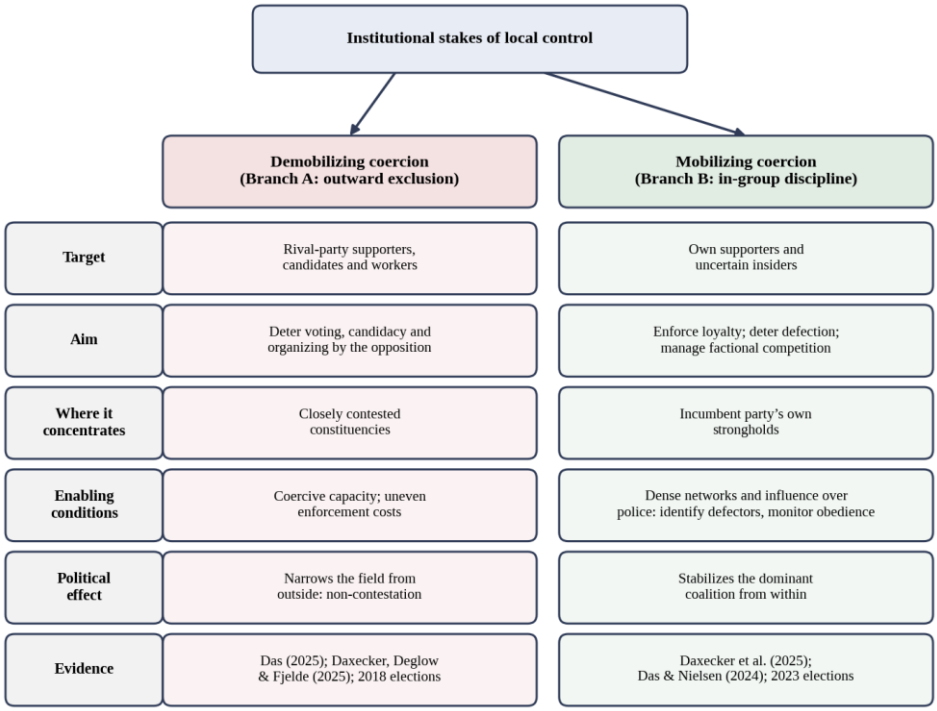


Figure 7. Two logics of coercion within the Local Dominance Cycle: demobilizing (outward exclusion) and mobilizing (in-group discipline). Source: Author's conceptualization, drawing on Das (2025), Das and Nielsen (2024), and Daxecker, Deglow, and Fjelde (2025).

The Local Dominance Cycle

Bringing these theoretical perspectives together, this article proposes that political violence in West Bengal operates through a recurrent institutional cycle rather than through isolated episodes, while also incorporating, as the discussion above shows, an internal disciplinary dimension that the cycle's outward-facing logic does not by itself capture**Figure 8.** The Local Dominance Cycle, with outward exclusion (Branch A) and in-group discipline (Branch B). Source: Author's conceptualization, drawing on Brass (1997), Wilkinson (2004), Vaishnav (2017), Bhattacharyya (2009, 2016), Das (2025), and Daxecker, Deglow, and Fjelde (2025).

The model differs from a simple "electoral violence cycle" because it introduces non-contestation and institutional reproduction as intervening

mechanisms and distinguishes two branches, shown in Figure 8, through which the same institutional stakes can generate coercion. Violence matters not only because it may influence a particular election but because it can alter who is willing and able to participate in later ones, whether the target is an external or an internal rival.

What the Local Dominance Cycle Adds

Each component of the framework already exists, in some form, in the literature: Bhattacharyya's (2009, 2016) party-society scholarship explains the organizational penetration of the dominant party into local institutions; Vaishnav (2017) explains the material value of office and the resulting demand for coercive capacity; Brass (1997) and Wilkinson (2004) explain how violence is organized and how state responses to it are politically conditioned; and Das (2025) and Daxecker, Deglow, and Fjelde (2025) provide direct evidence of non-contestation and of the dual targeting of coercion. The question is what the cycle contributes beyond synthesizing these accounts.

The contribution is threefold. First, the existing literature explains these mechanisms largely as separate and parallel phenomena; the Local Dominance Cycle proposes a specific causal ordering among them—institutional control precedes patronage value, patronage value precedes the escalation of electoral stakes, escalated stakes precede the mobilization of coercive capacity, and so on—that generates testable expectations about sequence, not only about correlation. Second, the cycle explicitly treats non-contestation and renewed institutional control as consequences through which coercion reproduces the conditions that made it valuable in the first place, rather than treating an election as a closed, self-contained event; this is what licenses the article's subsequent claim about a "democratic afterlife" extending beyond any single election. Third, by incorporating both an outward-facing branch and an in-group disciplinary branch, the cycle offers an explicit account of why the same overall level of measured violence can coexist with very different patterns of contestation across electoral cycles, a pattern consistent with the contrast between the 2018 and 2023 panchayat elections discussed below. The article's originality therefore lies less in any individual component than in their integration into a sequential, reproductive, and two-branch account of coercion.

The Democratic Afterlife of Electoral Violence

The concept of the democratic afterlife extends the Local Dominance Cycle beyond election day. An episode of political violence may produce immediate effects—injury, death, intimidation, destruction or displacement—but its political consequences can be longer lasting. Formally, the democratic afterlife refers to the longer-term political and institutional effects through which an episode of coercion changes the future opportunity structure of political competition. The term is used here specifically to denote the persistence of effects on the future structure and perceived costs of electoral competition, rather than long-term social or psychological effects in general.

Where violence is followed by opposition candidates withdrawing, weakened party organization, displaced political families, or a credible expectation of future retaliation, it can alter subsequent political behaviour even after the immediate violence has ceased. Citizens may continue to support the dominant political organization because the expected cost of opposition is perceived to be high. Opposition parties may reduce organizational activity in particular localities because the expected benefits of contestation no longer justify the risks.

The democratic consequence is correspondingly cumulative:

Violence today → reduced contestation tomorrow → stronger institutional dominance → greater capacity for patronage and coercion → altered expectations about future competition.

This concept provides the article's principal analytical departure from an incident-centred understanding of political violence. It suggests that the democratic significance of violence should be evaluated not only through the number of violent incidents but through its capacity to change the future opportunity structure of political competition. See Figure 9.

The case also supports a more limited proposition: partisan alternation need not constitute institutional transformation. A change in the governing party may alter who benefits while leaving intact the institutional incentives associated with local control, patronage, territorial organization, and coercive competition.

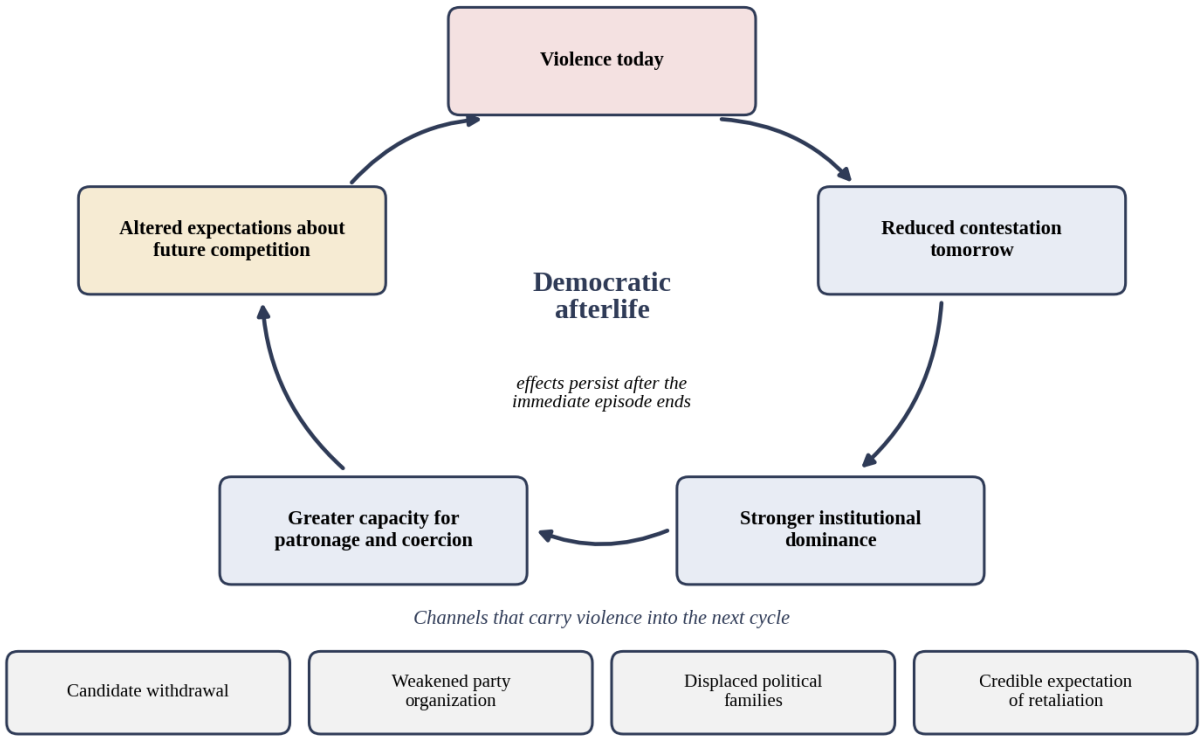


Figure 9. The democratic afterlife of electoral violence: a cumulative loop and the channels that sustain it. Source: Author's conceptualization.

The Dynamics of Electoral Violence: From Organization to Political Exclusion

Political violence in West Bengal should not be understood simply as an accumulation of isolated clashes or spontaneous expressions of partisan hostility. Its political significance lies in the different functions it can perform at different stages of the electoral cycle. Three forms are particularly important: preventive violence, which seeks to deter opposition mobilization before an election; competitive violence, which occurs during campaigns and struggles over political territory, meetings, processions, and voter mobilization; and retributive violence, which follows electoral outcomes and seeks to punish opponents, discourage defection, or establish the authority of the victorious political organization. These forms should not be treated as mutually exclusive. In many instances, they constitute successive stages of a broader process through which political actors attempt to control the local competitive environment. See Figure 10.

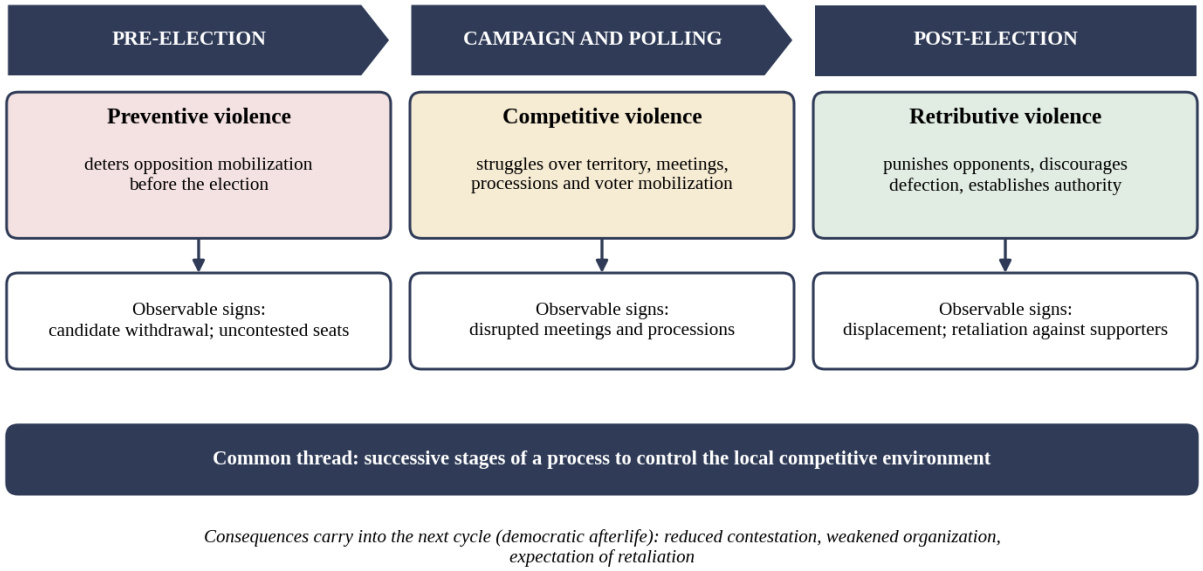


Figure 10. Functions of electoral violence across the electoral cycle, with observable signs. Source: Author's conceptualization.

This distinction is important because the consequences of political violence cannot be measured solely by deaths, injuries, or individual incidents. Violence can have political effects even when it does not directly determine the numerical outcome of an election. Threats against candidates, attacks on party workers, destruction of political offices, displacement of activists, or intimidation of voters may reduce the capacity of an opposition organization to campaign effectively. The relevant outcome is, in consequence, not only whether violence occurred, but whether it changed the capacity of political competitors to participate.

The institutional basis of this process lies partly in the relationship between party organization and control over local government. In West Bengal, panchayats and municipalities have considerable political significance because local institutions connect electoral authority with access to public programmes, development resources, welfare distribution, employment, contracts, and other forms of state-mediated benefit. Where partisan networks become closely connected with these institutions, political competition can acquire a material dimension in addition to its ideological one. Political alignment may consequently become important not only because citizens identify with a party but because control over local institutions affects access to resources and political protection.

This does not mean that poor households necessarily support the governing party or that welfare distribution is everywhere determined by partisan loyalty. Rather, the argument is that where access to public resources becomes strongly mediated through partisan networks, the perceived cost of political defection can increase. Violence can reinforce this structure by demonstrating the potential consequences of opposing or abandoning the locally dominant political organization. Vaishnav's (2017) analysis of the relationship between political power, criminality, and coercive capacity is relevant here because it shows why the ability to mobilize "muscle" can acquire political value when the stakes of political control are high and the expected costs of coercion are uncertain or limited.

Violence is thus connected to political exclusion. The objective of coercion need not be the physical defeat of an opponent; it may be to make opposition organization sufficiently costly that candidates withdraw, party workers become inactive, or voters become reluctant to participate openly in opposition politics, so that violence narrows the field of electoral competition.

Recent research on West Bengal local elections makes this mechanism particularly significant. Das (2025) provides evidence, drawn from disaggregated data on roughly 3,000 local electoral units, consistent with engineered non-contestation: increased violence against opposition actors is associated with seats going uncontested. This finding does not by itself demonstrate every link of the Local Dominance Cycle proposed here, but it supports the more specific proposition that the political consequences of violence may be visible not simply in violent incidents but in whether opposition candidates are able to contest elections at all, and it strengthens the case that formally competitive elections can become substantially less competitive through coercion applied before voting begins.

Gender, Political Organization, and the Social Reach of Violence

The effects of political violence are also socially differentiated. Research by Basu (1992) on women's political activism within the CPM demonstrates that party organization could simultaneously expand women's political participation and reproduce gendered structures of political authority. Women therefore cannot be treated simply as passive victims of political violence or, alternatively, as politically empowered participants. Their experiences were shaped by the intersection of political mobilization, household structures, gender hierarchy, and partisan organization.

This observation has broader implications for the concept of the democratic afterlife of violence. Political coercion can extend beyond the individual political worker who is directly targeted. Threats, displacement, sexual violence, economic insecurity, and the destruction of political networks can affect entire households and communities. The political consequence may consequently survive the immediate violent episode. A family that experiences political retaliation may subsequently calculate the risks of opposition differently, while political organizations may reduce their activities in localities where the expected costs of contestation have become high.

Coercive Capacity in the Early Left Front Period, 1977–2002

If the argument of this article is correct, the institutional incentives associated with local political control should already have been visible in the early years of Left Front rule, well before the crises of 2008–2011 that are more commonly treated as the origin point of West Bengal's contemporary political violence. The evidence for this earlier period is less amenable to the kind of election-cycle statistics available for 2003 onward, and the article does not claim otherwise; but several documented episodes indicate that organized coercion was already an available and, at times, employed instrument of governance and territorial control soon after 1977.

The clearest and most extensively studied example is the eviction of refugee settlers from Marichjhapi island in the Sundarbans between January and May 1979, within two years of the Left Front's assumption of power. Refugees who had resettled from camps in Dandakaranya were subjected to an economic blockade, and the eviction that followed involved police firing and a death toll that remains disputed in the scholarly literature (Mallick, 1999). Marichjhapi was not an episode of electoral violence in the narrow sense, and it is included here for a more limited reason: it indicates that the Left Front government was willing to deploy organized coercive force to enforce a territorial and political decision within its first two years in office, at a moment when its local organizational networks were still being consolidated. It therefore supports the historical discussion of coercive capacity, but it does not independently demonstrate the later electoral mechanism, and it is not counted as evidence of electoral violence anywhere in the analysis that follows.

A second body of evidence concerns the enforcement of land reform and the consolidation of panchayat-based party organization through the 1980s and 1990s. Mallick's (1993) and Bhattacharyya's (2009) accounts both describe how the CPI(M)'s cadre-based party structure became deeply embedded in the administration of land records, sharecropper registration, and local dispute resolution, creating dense networks through which political loyalty could be monitored and rewarded. Chandra's (2004) comparative analysis of patronage-based party organization elsewhere in India is instructive here: where access to state resources is channelled through partisan networks rather than impersonal bureaucratic criteria, maintaining control over the local unit that administers those resources becomes valuable independent of any single election, which is precisely the condition under which this article expects coercive capacity to acquire long-term political value rather than being deployed only in the immediate run-up to a vote.

The evidentiary basis for this early period differs in kind from the panchayat-cycle data presented later. It rests on qualitative institutional histories rather than comparable election statistics, and it does not support longitudinal claims about uncontested seats or reported deaths of the kind Table 2 provides for 2003 onward. The Marichjhapi evidence does, however, establish that the organizational and coercive infrastructure examined in later sections was not created anew in 2008 or 2018 but has a documented history reaching back to the first years of Left Front rule.

The Transition: Violence During Political Change, 2008–2011

The period from 2008 to 2011 represents a critical juncture in West Bengal's political history because the institutional equilibrium that had sustained Left Front dominance was increasingly challenged. The crises surrounding Singur and Nandigram transformed the relationship between the Left government, sections of the rural population, and the emerging Trinamool Congress opposition. What had previously appeared to be a relatively stable system of political dominance increasingly became a struggle over territorial control, organizational networks, and the political legitimacy of the ruling party.

This period's importance cannot be reduced to the occurrence of violent incidents. As the Left Front's organizational dominance weakened and the TMC expanded its presence in areas previously controlled by the Left, the political value of controlling local territory increased. Panchayats, party offices, local organizations, and networks of political influence became sites of intensified competition. Violence in this context can, as a result, be interpreted as a symptom of institutional uncertainty: neither the incumbent nor the challenger could be certain that existing patterns of local dominance would survive the transition.

The 2008 panchayat elections and the 2009 Lok Sabha election occurred against this background of intensified political competition. The deployment of substantial central security forces reflected the Election Commission's concern about the security environment surrounding electoral participation. Reports of clashes, intimidation, killings, and displacement in several districts further demonstrated the extent to which the political transition had become territorialized.

However, numerical claims concerning the aggregate number of political deaths or displaced families during this period should be treated cautiously because different institutions used different definitions and reporting methodologies. Not every instance of violence in this period is electoral violence in the narrow sense: the analysis distinguishes violence tied to electoral contests, such as the 2008 panchayat and 2009 Lok Sabha elections, from violence arising from land and policy conflict. Rather than relying on a single aggregate figure, the more significant analytical finding is the recurrence of violence in areas where political control was being contested.

The transition is consistent with Collier's (2009) broader argument that political violence can become particularly attractive during periods of political uncertainty. When incumbents face the possibility of losing power but retain substantial organizational resources, and challengers have acquired sufficient strength to threaten established territorial control, the expected benefits of coercion can increase. Wilkinson's (2004) electoral-incentive framework similarly suggests that political actors' calculations regarding violence change when electoral coalitions fragment and the political costs of losing control increase.

The weakening of the incumbent did not automatically produce institutional neutrality: uncertainty over the distribution of local power intensified competition for the institutional and patronage networks associated with local dominance, and violence became part of the struggle over who would inherit them.

Singur and Nandigram should accordingly not be classified simply as episodes of electoral violence. They are better understood as critical episodes in which policy conflict, territorial mobilization, party organization, and electoral competition became intertwined. Their eventual electoral consequences indicate how political conflicts occurring outside the formal electoral period can reshape the subsequent competitive environment.

The TMC Era: Partisan Alternation and Institutional Continuity

The TMC's decisive electoral victory in 2011 produced the most significant partisan alternation in West Bengal since the establishment of Left Front rule. Yet the change in the governing party did not automatically eliminate the institutional conditions that had made local political control highly valuable. Reports of post-election attacks, displacement, and politically motivated retaliation against Left-associated activists and supporters demonstrated that the transfer of political authority could itself generate a period of intense local conflict.

The important analytical question is thus not whether violence under the TMC was identical to violence under the Left Front. The evidence does not justify such an assumption. The more useful question is whether similar institutional incentives continued to operate after partisan alternation.

The post-2011 period suggests considerable continuity in the political importance of local institutional control. As the TMC consolidated its organizational presence, competition over panchayats and other local institutions remained consequential, and violence could serve functions similar to those observed earlier: deterring opposition organization, punishing defection, controlling territory, and consolidating local dominance. The party occupying government changed; the value of controlling local institutions did not disappear.

The comparison should not be overly symmetrical. The two periods differed in ideology, organization, historical circumstances, opposition structure, and forms of mobilization. What persisted was not a single "system of violence" transferred intact from one party to another, but similar incentives generated by the institutional environment and encountered by different organizations.

If violence were explained primarily by the character of a particular party, alternation should fundamentally transform the pattern; if similar mechanisms recur under different parties, institutional incentives become a more plausible part of the explanation. Table 1 summarizes continuity and change across the two periods. See Figure 11.

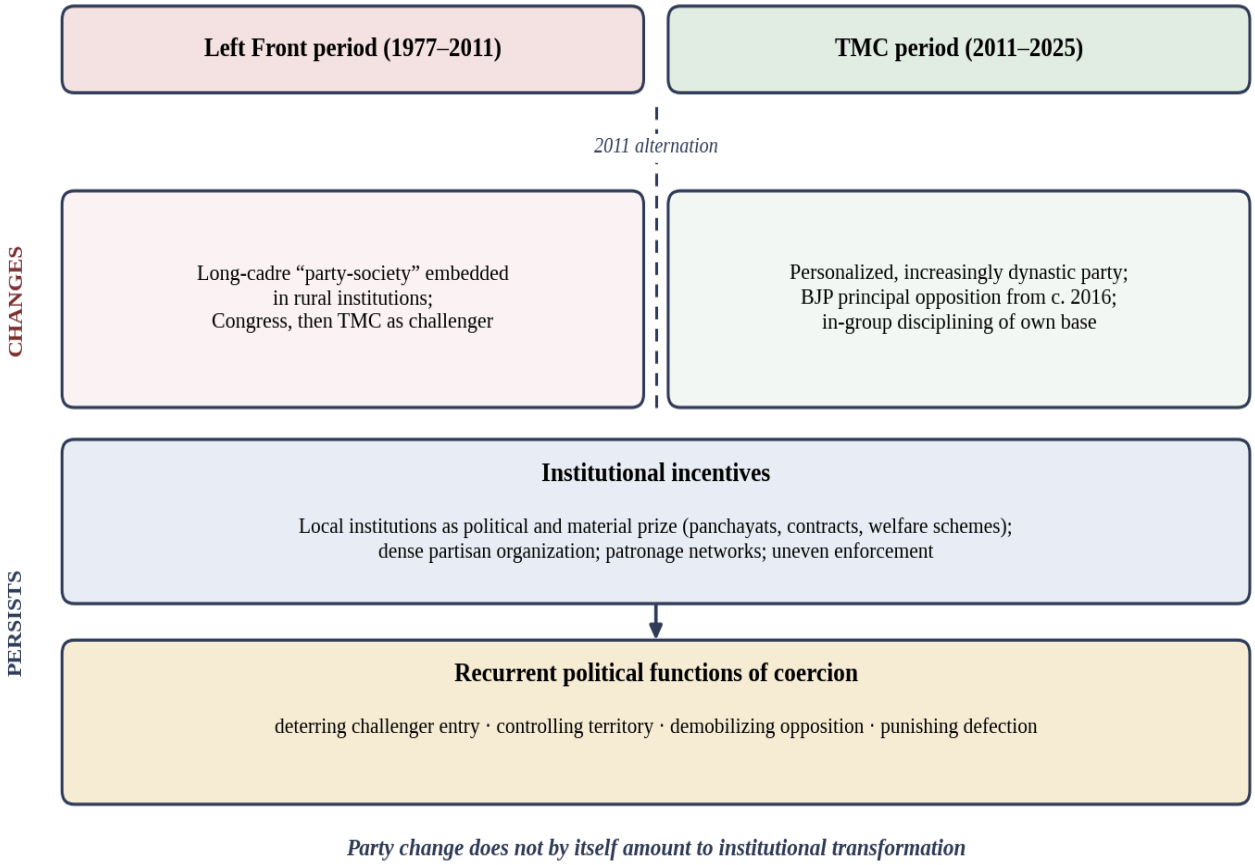


Figure 11. Institutional continuity beneath partisan change, Left Front and TMC periods (compare Table 1). Source: Author's conceptualization.

Dimension	Left Front period (1977–2011)	TMC period (2011–2025)
Dominant organizational form	Long-cadre "party-society" embedded in rural institutions (Bhattacharyya, 2016)	More personalized and increasingly dynastic party organization (Das & Nielsen, 2024)
Principal opposition	Congress; Trinamool Congress emerges as challenger from the late 1990s	BJP consolidates as principal opposition from c. 2016; residual Left-Congress-ISF opposition
Primary locus of coercion	Panchayats; land reform and welfare distribution networks	Panchayats; contracts and welfare schemes; internal nomination processes
Dominant function of violence	Deterrence of challenger entry; territorial control	Opposition demobilization together with in-group disciplining of TMC's own base (Daxecker, Deglow, & Fjelde, 2025)

Dimension	Left Front period (1977–2011)	TMC period (2011–2025)
Institutional/judicial response	Limited central intervention; sporadic human-rights scrutiny	More frequent judicial intervention (Calcutta High Court, Supreme Court, NHRC, CBI probes)
Emblematic episodes	Land-reform-era local clashes; Singur and Nandigram (2006–2008)	2018 panchayat elections; 2021 post-poll violence; 2023 panchayat elections

Table 1. Continuity and change in local political violence, Left Front and TMC periods.

The picture of a bipolar contest between an incumbent and a single opposition, implicit in much of the comparison above, requires modification for the period after 2016. The BJP's emergence as the principal opposition force in West Bengal introduced a better-resourced and more organizationally capable challenger than the fragmented Left-Congress opposition of the early TMC period, drawing in particular on cadres who had defected from the TMC and the CPI(M) and who were themselves versed in the state's established repertoires of political mobilization and coercion (Das & Nielsen, 2024). Much of the post-2016 violence, including the large-scale post-poll violence of 2021 discussed below, occurred specifically along the TMC-BJP axis, with each party accusing the other of using coercion for both offensive and retaliatory purposes. This shift does not overturn the article's central argument: control of local institutions and patronage remained the underlying stake, and demobilization pressure against a numerically stronger opposition arguably raised, rather than lowered, the value of coercive capacity. It does mean, however, that the TMC period cannot be treated as a simple continuation of the Left Front's earlier near-monopoly on organized coercion; from 2016 onward, West Bengal's local political violence increasingly involved two well-organized partisan machines competing for the same institutional prize, in addition to the residual Left and Congress presence in parts of the state.

1. **The 2018 Panchayat Elections: Violence and Non-Contestation**

The 2018 panchayat elections provide an especially important opportunity to assess this argument because they make visible the relationship between political coercion and the absence of electoral competition. The scale of uncontested seats became a major political and judicial issue, and independent conflict-monitoring corroborated the pattern of pre-election intimidation surrounding the cycle (ACLED, 2018). The Supreme Court record reported that 20,159 of 58,692 seats across the three tiers were uncontested — approximately 34.3 percent of all three-tier seats combined — including 16,860 of 48,650 Gram Panchayat seats, or approximately 34.7 percent of Gram Panchayat seats specifically. The two figures are close but not identical, and this article reports the all-tier figure of 34.3 percent throughout unless a tier-specific figure is explicitly indicated, to avoid the two being confused as interchangeable.

Uncontested elections cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of coercion. Candidates may withdraw for many reasons, including weak organizational capacity, strategic decisions, lack of resources, or the expectation of defeat. Nevertheless, where unusually high levels of non-contestation occur alongside reports of intimidation and violence, the phenomenon requires examination as a possible indicator of restricted political competition.

Das (2025) finds evidence that electoral violence can be used to engineer non-contestation in West Bengal's local elections. The finding's importance extends beyond 2018: it supports the proposition that violence can alter the structure of electoral choice before voting takes place.

A formally conducted election does not necessarily constitute meaningful competition if opposition candidates have been deterred from entering the contest. Violence therefore needs to be analysed not only as an event during elections but as a mechanism operating beforehand to determine who is available to voters as an alternative.

The 2018 cycle thus illustrates how violence can produce durable political effects without changing the vote count through direct manipulation of ballots: by altering who is available to voters, it can help reproduce institutional control. Because uncontested seats may also reflect weak organization or strategic withdrawal, this is a pattern consistent with the mechanism rather than proof of it.

2. **Longitudinal Patterns and the 2023 Panchayat Elections**

Placing 2018 within a longer series of panchayat election cycles clarifies how unusual it was, and also reveals a pattern that the engineered non-contestation mechanism alone does not fully explain. Table 2 and Figure 12 report the share of three-tier panchayat seats won uncontested and the number of election-related deaths reported for each panchayat cycle between 2003 and 2023.

Cycle	Governing party	Uncontested (%)	Approximate reported deaths	Source for this row
2003	Left Front	11%	~76	Das (2025); West Bengal SEC records
2008	Left Front	5%	~30	Das (2025); West Bengal SEC records

Cycle	Governing party	Uncontested (%)	Approximate reported deaths	Source for this row
2013	TMC	10.6%	~39	Das (2025); West Bengal SEC records
2018	TMC	34.3%	~29	Supreme Court of India (2018); West Bengal SEC
2023	TMC	~10–12%	~55	The Indian Express (2024a); Deccan Herald (2023) reporting

Table 2. Panchayat elections: uncontested seats and reported election-related deaths, 2003–2023. The 2003, 2008, and 2013 figures are as reported in Das (2025), whose own sourcing traces to West Bengal State Election Commission records; the 2018 figures come directly from the Supreme Court of India's record in the case concerning that election; the 2023 figures are contemporary press reports rather than a single official consolidated source, and the uncontested-seat share is accordingly given as a range. Death tolls for all cycles should be read as approximate, given the definitional and reporting inconsistencies discussed in the Methodology section.

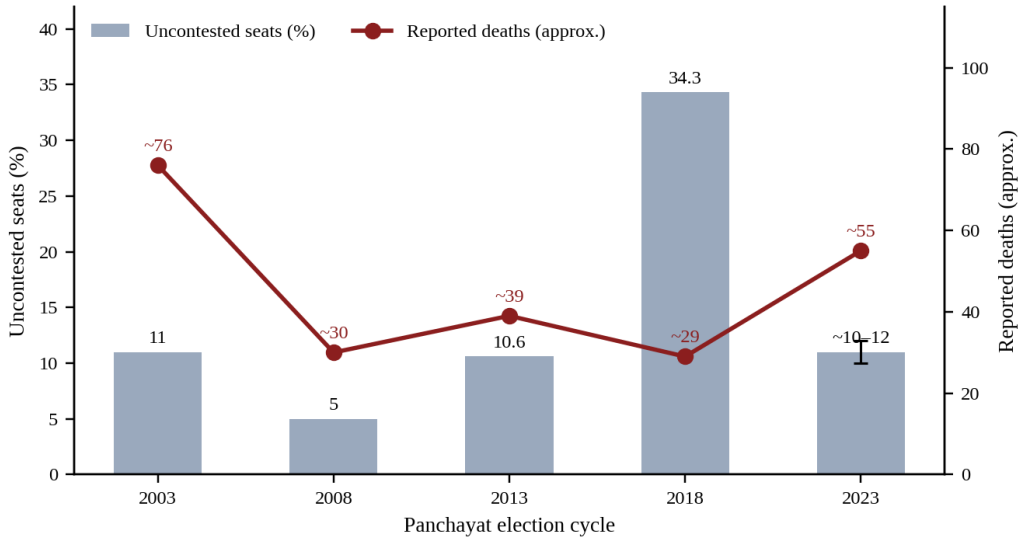


Figure 12. West Bengal panchayat elections: uncontested seats and reported deaths, 2003–2023. Sources and qualifications as reported in Table 2. The 2023 uncontested-seat figure is an approximate range derived from contemporary reporting.

Uncontested seats stood at 11 percent in 2003 and fell to 5 percent in 2008, before rising to 10.6 percent in 2013 and then sharply to 34 percent in 2018 (Das, 2025). The 2023 panchayat elections reversed this trend: the opposition contested roughly 90 percent of seats, and contemporary press estimates place the share of uncontested seats at somewhere between 10 and 12 percent, depending on the report consulted (The Indian Express, 2024a). Yet the number of reported deaths in 2023, at approximately 55, exceeded every earlier cycle except 2003 and was substantially higher than in 2018.

This divergence between contestation and lethality is analytically significant. If electoral violence functioned only to engineer non-contestation, one would expect reduced violence once opposition parties succeeded in fielding candidates across most seats. Instead, the 2023 cycle combined higher contestation with higher mortality, suggesting that violence in this period served additional functions beyond suppressing opposition entry. Two developments plausibly help account for this, though the available sources do not permit a precise apportionment of the 2023 death toll between them. First, the BJP's consolidation as the principal opposition after 2016 transformed West Bengal's competitive landscape into a more genuinely multiparty contest at the local level, so that coercion increasingly had to operate against a better-organized rival rather than a fragmented one (Das & Nielsen, 2024). Second, intra-party competition within the TMC itself intensified as Abhishek Banerjee consolidated organizational control ahead of the 2023 elections, generating disputes over nominations that produced violence between rival TMC factions in addition to violence directed at opposition candidates (Das & Nielsen, 2024). See Figure 13.

The 2023 elections therefore illustrate a limitation of the Local Dominance Cycle as originally specified. It explains how coercion can suppress an external opposition and produce non-contestation, but it requires the supplementation outlined above once a substantial share of observed violence arises from competition within the locally dominant organization. Read together, the 2018 and 2023 cycles suggest that West Bengal's panchayat elections have not followed a single trajectory of rising or falling violence but have shifted between dominant mechanisms of coercion: outward-facing suppression of an under-resourced opposition in 2018, and a more mixed pattern of inter-party and intra-party coercion in 2023.

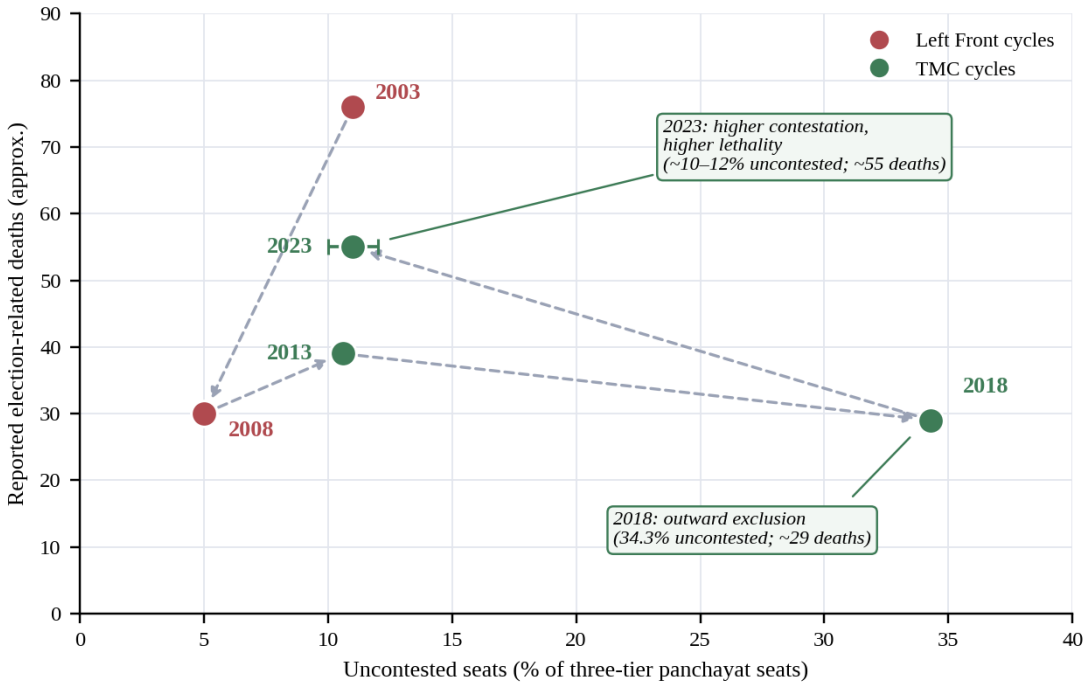


Figure 13. Contestation and lethality across panchayat cycles, 2003–2023: uncontested seats (horizontal axis) against approximate reported deaths (vertical axis). Dashed arrows follow the chronological sequence; the horizontal bar on 2023 marks the approximate 10–12 percent range. Values are indicative; sources and qualifications as in Table 2.

The 2021 Post-Election Violence: From Electoral Contestation to Democratic Afterlife

The post-election violence following the 2021 West Bengal Assembly election provides a further opportunity to examine the longer-term consequences of political coercion. The violence occurred after the declaration of the election results and accordingly cannot be reduced to conventional campaign-period electoral violence. It underscores the importance of treating the electoral cycle as extending beyond polling day. The episode is also the clearest illustration in the period under study of violence organized along the TMC-BJP axis rather than between the TMC and a fragmented Left-Congress opposition, consistent with the reconfiguration of West Bengal's party system discussed above.

The subsequent judicial proceedings generated an unusually extensive institutional record. The Calcutta High Court directed an NHRC-led committee to examine complaints concerning post-election violence, and the NHRC subsequently confirmed the submission of the committee's report to the Court. The judicial record also underscores the importance of distinguishing between allegations, fact-finding observations, and final determinations of criminal responsibility.

The significance of the 2021 episode for this article lies not only in the reported incidents themselves but in the consequences attributed to politically motivated violence: threats to personal security, attacks on political supporters, displacement, damage to property, and disruption of livelihoods. These effects are drawn from the judicial and fact-finding record described above, are treated as reported rather than independently verified, and are consistent with the possibility that violence can continue to shape political behaviour after the formal electoral contest has ended.

The episode therefore illustrates the concept of the democratic afterlife of electoral violence. The political consequences of coercion may extend beyond the immediate incident through three mechanisms.

First, organizational displacement can weaken opposition networks in particular localities.

Second, material insecurity can alter citizens' willingness to remain politically active.

Third, anticipation of future retaliation can affect political behaviour even when no immediate violence occurs.

The third mechanism is particularly important. Political violence does not need to be repeated continuously to have continuing political effects. If previous episodes establish a credible expectation that political defection or opposition activity may produce retaliation, citizens and political workers may alter their behaviour in anticipation of future costs. The result can be a form of anticipatory political compliance in which coercion becomes partly embedded in expectations rather than requiring constant physical enforcement.

This provides the temporal link between one electoral cycle and the next:

past violence → memory and expectation of retaliation → reduced opposition mobilization → weakened competition → continued dominance.

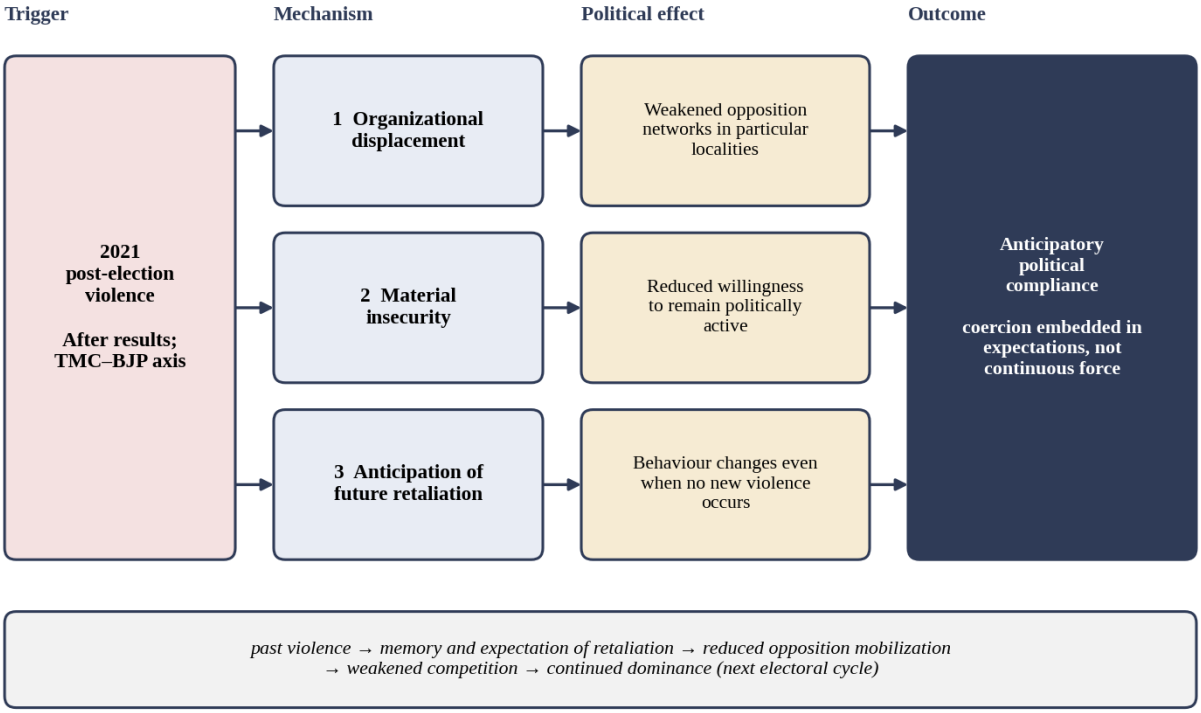


Figure 14. Mechanisms of the democratic afterlife in the 2021 post-election violence. Source: Author's conceptualization.

The 2021 case thus indicates how violence may shape later participation, though these mechanisms are inferred from judicial and press records rather than measured directly, and the available record does not rule out explanations in which post-poll retaliation had no lasting organizational effect. See Figure 14.

An Illustrative Case of Accumulated Local Dominance: Sandeshkhali

Examining the democratic afterlife mechanism at the locality level requires evidence that a specific locality's political competition was altered over multiple years by an accumulation of coercive control, rather than by a single election-period episode. The events that became public in Sandeshkhali, in North 24 Parganas district, in early 2024 provide one such illustrative case. The link between the alleged local coercion and electoral competition remains inferential, and the case is presented as an illustration of a possible mechanism of accumulated local dominance, not as a test of the Local Dominance Cycle.

According to the Enforcement Directorate's subsequently framed charges, a local TMC leader, Sheikh Shahjahan, together with several associates, is alleged to have used intimidation and undue influence to acquire land from local residents over an extended period, accumulating assets that investigators later identified as proceeds of this activity. Local women who eventually organized public protests in February 2024 stated that police had taken no effective action against these practices for years, and that fear of retaliation had discouraged earlier complaints (The Indian Express, 2024b; Deccan Herald, 2024). The protests, prompted initially by an unrelated raid connected to a separate corruption investigation, escalated rapidly once residents judged that the accused leader's position had become vulnerable, at which point women who had previously not filed complaints came forward with allegations of land seizure and sexual coercion extending back several years.

Read through the framework developed in this article, the Sandeshkhali case is consistent with the kind of mechanism the democratic afterlife concept is meant to capture, though the evidence does not test it: a locally dominant network appears to have used accumulated coercive capacity, sustained over a period of years rather than deployed only around specific elections, to suppress complaint and organized opposition to its conduct; visible political contestation of that dominance became possible only once external intervention (the Enforcement Directorate raid) disrupted the local balance of power and offered residents a credible expectation that complaint would no longer be costless. This sequence is consistent with the proposition that anticipatory political compliance, built up over multiple years, can suppress observable opposition activity even in the absence of continuous, visible violence. The case also admits a competing reading, as personal enrichment by an individual local leader rather than electoral coercion as such, and the article does not claim to adjudicate between the two; the connection to electoral competition is inferred from the pattern of suppressed complaint rather than documented in the sources cited. It should be read as a single, well-documented illustration rather than as a representative sample, and as of this writing several of the

legal proceedings against the accused remain ongoing, so the allegations described here should be understood as allegations under judicial process rather than established findings of fact. See Figure 15.

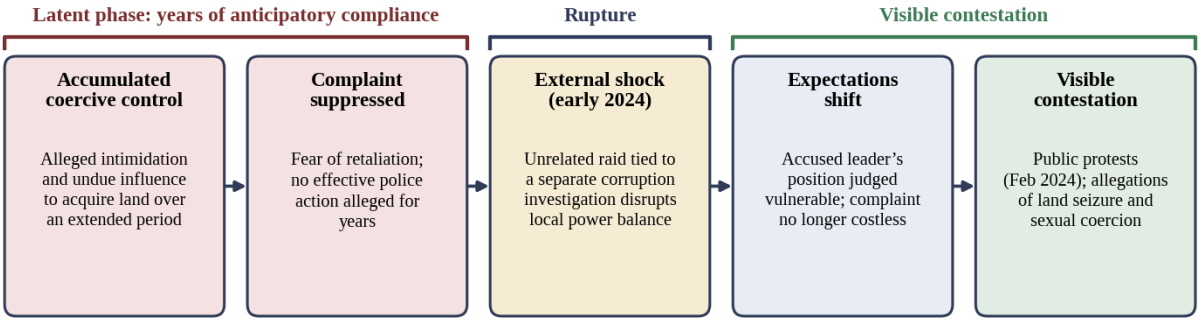


Figure 15. Sandeshkhali as an illustration of accumulated local dominance and delayed contestation. Allegations are as reported in the sources cited in this section, and legal proceedings remain ongoing. Source: Author's conceptualization.

Electoral Culture and Democratic Quality

The persistence of political violence across successive governments raises a broader question concerning the meaning of electoral democracy. West Bengal has maintained regular electoral competition and has experienced significant changes in governing parties. The existence of political violence therefore does not justify describing the state simply as non-democratic. The more precise issue is whether citizens and political organizations possess substantively equal opportunities to participate in political competition.

This distinction requires separating procedural democracy from the quality of political contestation. An election may be procedurally valid while the competitive environment remains unequal because some candidates are intimidated, some political organizations are unable to campaign, and some voters fear the consequences of openly supporting an opposition party.

The concept of electoral culture is useful here, and it is the concept toward which the comparative discussion of subnational democratic quality in the Introduction was building: following Gibson (2012), Levitsky and Way (2010), and Schedler (2013), the question this article asks is not whether West Bengal holds elections, but whether the quality of competition surrounding those elections is uniform across localities and time. Electoral culture refers not merely to turnout or voting preferences but to the informal expectations and behavioural norms surrounding political participation. Where political violence is recurrent, citizens may learn that electoral participation has consequences extending beyond the ballot. Supporting an opposition party may carry perceived risks to employment, welfare access, property, social relationships, or personal security. Conversely, affiliation with the locally dominant organization may provide protection or access to institutional resources.

In this sense, the Local Dominance Cycle describes the institutional production of unequal competition, while electoral culture describes how those repeated conditions become incorporated into the expectations and behaviour of political participants.

This produces a distinction between electoral participation and political freedom. Citizens may continue to vote while simultaneously becoming more cautious about organizing, campaigning, or openly supporting political alternatives.

The democratic consequences of violence correspondingly operate at several levels:

Individual level: fear, intimidation, displacement and economic insecurity.

Organizational level: weakening of opposition party structures and candidate networks.

Electoral level: candidate withdrawal and non-contestation.

Institutional level: continued control over local government.

Long-term level: reproduction of patronage networks and expectations of political compliance.

The Local Dominance Cycle connects these levels: control of resources raises the value of control, organizational capacity makes coercion possible, and coercion that reduces opposition participation facilitates continued institutional control. See Figure 16.

The existence of this cycle does not mean that every election follows the same trajectory. West Bengal has experienced genuine electoral alternation, strong opposition mobilization, judicial intervention, Election Commission intervention, and substantial changes in voter preferences. These developments suggest that political dominance is neither automatic nor irreversible. The theoretical claim is instead that institutional incentives can make coercive strategies politically useful under particular conditions. The cases refine the framework rather than simply confirm it: 2018 supports its outward-facing branch, 2023 requires its in-group branch, and the 2021 episode and Sandeshkhali suggest that the effects of coercion may outlast the immediate episode; none of them tests the full sequence.

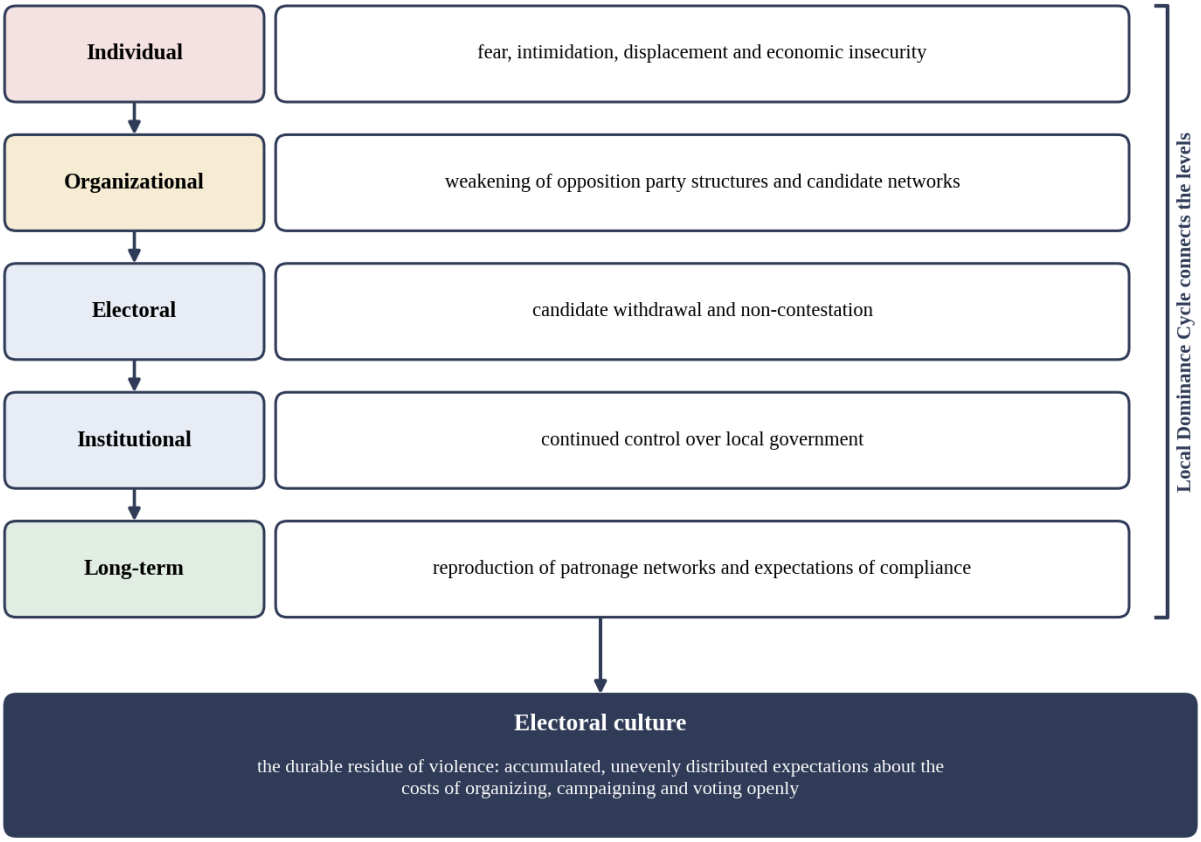


Figure 16. Levels at which the democratic consequences of electoral violence operate. Source: Author's conceptualization.

Reducing electoral violence therefore requires more than securing polling day. If the political economy of local government remains highly dependent on partisan control, violence may shift to the pre-election and post-election phases, or from a struggle against an external opposition to a struggle within the dominant party. The analysis points toward greater institutional neutrality, credible investigation and prosecution, protection of opposition candidates and workers, transparent access to welfare and development programmes, and mechanisms that limit partisan monopolization of local resources, as analytical implications rather than tested remedies. The deeper democratic challenge is not simply to eliminate violent incidents but to prevent violence from becoming a mechanism for determining who is able to compete.

Conclusion

Political violence in West Bengal is best understood not as a series of disconnected electoral disturbances but as part of a broader struggle over political organization, territorial control, local institutions, and access to state-mediated resources. The persistence of coercive competition across the transition from Left Front to TMC rule does not demonstrate that the two political regimes were identical. Rather, it suggests that partisan alternation can occur without complete transformation of the institutional incentives surrounding local political power.

The article's central proposition is that political violence becomes particularly consequential when it moves beyond the immediate act of coercion and alters the structure of subsequent political competition. The Local Dominance Cycle captures this process, and the concept of the democratic afterlife of electoral violence highlights its temporal dimension.

Violence can produce consequences that survive the immediate episode through displacement, weakened opposition organization, candidate withdrawal, non-contestation, and expectations of future retaliation. As the analysis of the 2023 panchayat elections shows, however, this outward-facing account requires supplementation once a rival party achieves organizational parity and once competition within the dominant party becomes a significant source of coercion: the cycle explains a great deal about how local political violence reproduces itself, but it is not a complete theory of that violence.

The comparison between the Left Front and TMC periods consequently produces a more qualified conclusion than the claim that violence was simply "transferred" from one party to another. What appears more durable is the institutional environment in which control over local political institutions carries substantial political and material value. Different parties can therefore generate different forms of political mobilization and coercion while responding to similar incentives associated with local dominance.

The West Bengal case has implications beyond the state. It illustrates why assessments of democratic quality should look beyond whether elections occur and examine whether meaningful alternatives are available to voters. Non-contestation, candidate withdrawal, opposition demobilization, and anticipatory political compliance may represent important democratic consequences of violence even when elections remain formally competitive.

This is what the article means by West Bengal's electoral culture: not the aggregate record of votes cast, but the unevenly distributed expectations about the costs of organizing, campaigning, and voting openly that the Local Dominance Cycle and its democratic afterlife may produce over time. Electoral culture in this sense is a conceptual lens rather than a measured quantity, and the article offers no direct evidence of how far such anticipation and caution persist in any particular locality.

The principal policy implication, which should be read as an implication of the analysis rather than a demonstrated solution, is that electoral violence is unlikely to be addressed by polling-day security alone. The analysis points toward institutions able to impose predictable costs on coercion, protect opposition participation, ensure impartial access to public resources, and reduce the patronage value of local control, together with internal party mechanisms that reduce the value of coercion as a tool of factional management. See Figure 17.

Because the study relies on purposively selected critical junctures and heterogeneous documentary sources rather than a consistent longitudinal dataset, the Local Dominance Cycle should be understood as a mechanism-oriented framework rather than a statistically demonstrated account of every episode of political violence in West Bengal.

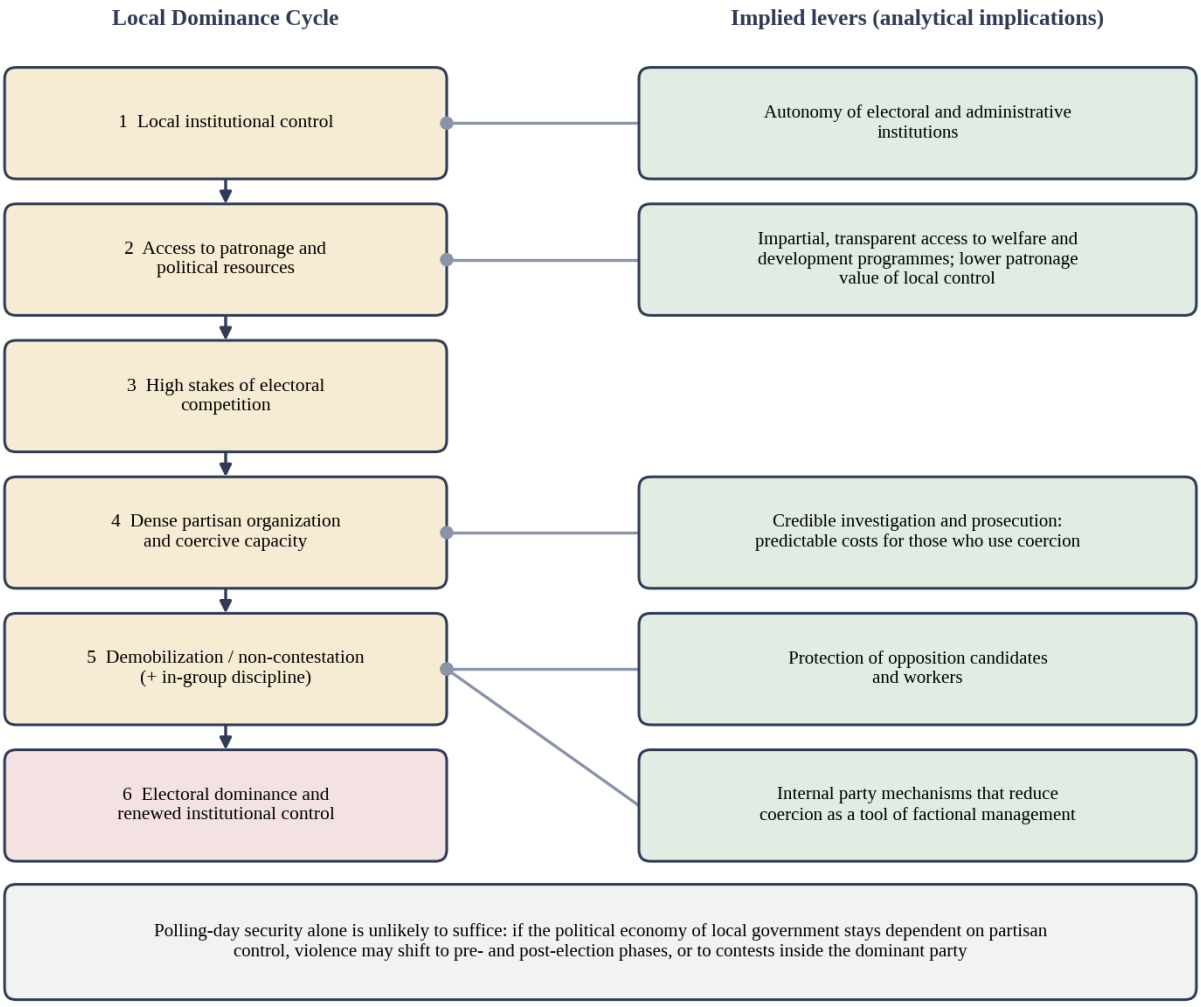


Figure 17. Implied policy levers mapped against the stages of the Local Dominance Cycle. These are analytical implications, not tested interventions. Source: Author's conceptualization.

The central lesson of West Bengal's post-1977 political history is consequently not simply that political violence persists. It is that violence can reshape the conditions of political competition, and its most consequential effects may emerge after the violence itself has ended. Understanding this democratic afterlife is essential to explaining how electoral systems can remain formally competitive while the substantive space for political contestation becomes unequal.

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