

In Keralam, an Election Is Lost but a Process Continues

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Manash Das (India), *Red Ant*, n.d.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental Asia**.

Every five years, the electorate in Keralam goes to the polls to elect a new state government. One of 28 states in India, Keralam has a population of 35 million. It has been governed by the Left Democratic Front (LDF), which is led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), for the past decade. On 4 May, the Election Commission of India announced that the LDF had won only 35 of the 140 seats in the legislature

and that the LDF's long-time adversary, the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Indian National Congress, had **won** the election with 102 seats.

It would have been a historic victory had the LDF prevailed because no front has won three consecutive elections in Keralam – a state with a highly educated and politically divided population. It was miraculous enough when the LDF was **re-elected** in 2021 with 99 seats, increasing its majority by eight seats over the 91 it had taken in 2016. No front had ever achieved that.

The question remains as to whether the recent defeat is merely a return to the back-and-forth routine that the electorate has imposed on the two fronts or a deeper sign of trouble for the left, led by the CPI(M)?



Gopika Babu (India), *Kudumbashree*, 2021.

The Development of Modern Kerala

Over the past year, the LDF government of Kerala announced two major achievements. First, that Kerala has **eliminated** extreme poverty, making it the second place in the world to do so after **China** made its announcement in 2021. Second, that Kerala's **infant mortality rate** has dropped below five per 1,000 live births, lower than that of the United States. For context, Pinarayi Vijayan, the chief minister (2016 to 2026), was born in 1945. Before his birth, his mother had buried eleven children – at the time, Kerala's infant mortality rate was above 100 per 1,000 live births.

These achievements, among many others, came partly because of the advances of modern science and technology, but mostly because of the pro-people policies championed by left governments since the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956. It is undeniable that the Communists played a key role in democratising the state's institutions and shaping modern Kerala's society, despite the repression that the left faced. Between 1957 and 1987, left governments could not finish their terms, either because of central government intervention (as in 1959) or because of weak coalitions. It was the left that initiated agrarian reform, laid the foundation for public education and healthcare, and brought dignity to the lives of workers.

Over all these years, cadres did not fold their flags and give up the struggle whenever the left lost an election. They filled the streets whenever the government attempted to impose anti-people policies, especially during the neoliberal era, and they remained the most powerful social force defending the achievements of Kerala. But they also continued to develop their society in a progressive way: to build cooperatives and public libraries, to open cultural centres, and to organise workers into unions.

Kerala is home to over 16,000 registered cooperative societies. These range from financial cooperatives (which make up roughly a quarter of the total) to labour cooperatives of many kinds of workers, hospitals, educational institutions, hotels, and more. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research has published a **study** which explains the history of, and theoretical insights from, the cooperative movement in Kerala. Kerala is also home to more than 9,500 registered public **libraries**, most of them in rural areas. The history of the public library movement in Kerala goes back to the period of the national freedom movement and anti-landlord struggles. During that era, night classes were organised to teach the masses how to read and write, and to introduce them to world affairs and a new ideology of emancipation.

Amongst the achievements was the literacy campaign that eliminated illiteracy, and the creation of the cooperative **Kudumbashree**, one of the largest women's empowerment programmes in the world, with 4.8 million members. The process of building these programmes led to the democratisation of Kerala's society and to the creation of a highly capable political cadre for the left. It is this twin process – the cooperative movement and literacy programmes – that has strengthened Kerala over the past 69 years.

From lowering the infant mortality rate to increasing life expectancy, from a school system which leaves no one behind to the complete abolition of child labour, from universal vaccination to complete electrification, Kerala has achieved standards of living that are available to the wealthiest capitalist countries in the world. But there is a significant difference in the process. The capitalist countries achieved their wealth by colonising most of the world, the slave trade, and the continuing neocolonial extraction from the Global South. On the other hand, Kerala marched into a new life by restructuring its own society, redistributing wealth, and deepening the participation of the people, making democracy more meaningful. Land reform, the literacy campaign, public education, comparatively higher wages for labourers, people's planning, and the

strengthening of local governments were all steps towards this.



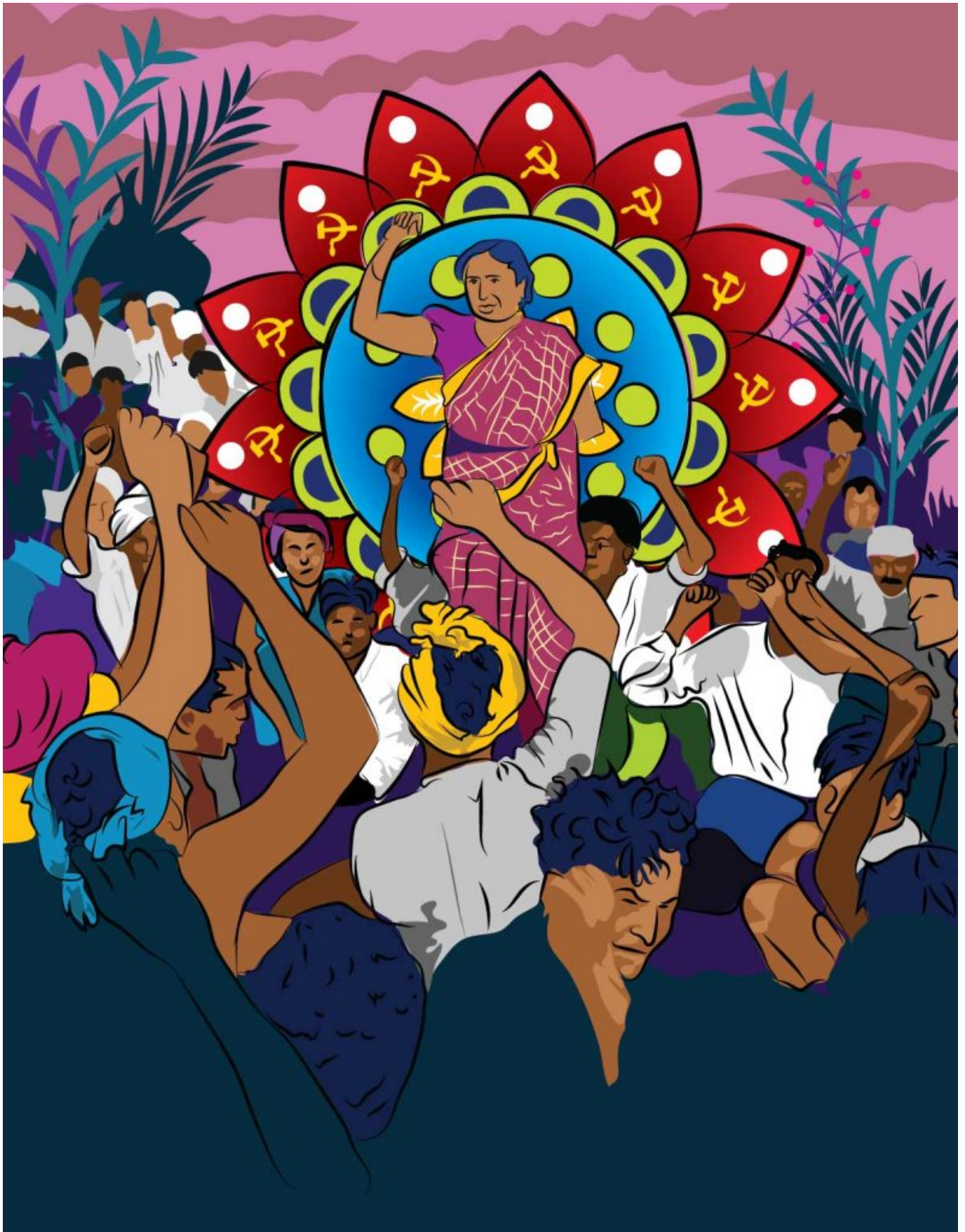
Swathi Kamalakshmyvijay (India), *Untitled*, n.d.

An Election Is Lost

Over the past thirty-eight years, the left has governed Kerala for twenty-four of them. Each time it has completed its five-year term in office, despite attempts at sabotage. Over the past decade, it was the government led by Vijayan, fondly called ‘The Captain’, that focused on welfare, infrastructure, healthcare, and social development. The government strengthened public education and healthcare systems through the modernisation of schools and the **expansion of public hospitals**. It earned praise for its work during the catastrophic floods of 2018 (with smaller floods in later years), the Nipah outbreak of 2018, and the **COVID-19 pandemic of 2020**. Major infrastructural projects, including highways and bridges, transformed connectivity across the state. The government increased welfare pensions, expanded housing schemes, and promoted digital governance, much of this through the creative use of the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board. If elections were fought merely on policy achievements, the LDF would have won a third term.

But that is not how electoral democracy works in a bourgeois system, which shapes and channels a range of popular currents, including anti-incumbency sentiment and public dissatisfaction with the governing style.

These are highly emotive ideas, and they were amplified on social media and in the corporate media to obscure the actual achievements of the government. The abolition of extreme poverty paled in the public conversation against the mass dissemination of anecdotal, but perhaps real, stories of government inaction on various other issues.



Juan Miguel Hernández (Venezuela), *Communist India*, 2021.

A Process Continues

In 1937, on the upper floor of a vegetable shop in Kozhikode, Keralam, five people secretly came together to form a party: the Keralam unit of the Communist Party of India. It was a time when people would have been beaten or even shot dead if discovered. Operating in hiding or in prison, that party unit grew as more and more members joined them. Along the way, some were hanged, some were shot, and others died with their bones shattered. But within just 20 years, in 1957, that party grew to lead the state after winning the first elections to the legislative assembly of Keralam.

An election is lost, but not a process. The left parties have said that they will closely study why their support base has seemingly eroded. Half of the members of the CPI(M) in Keralam joined the party after 2015, which means that most of its cadre have not grown out of the struggles to establish a popular democracy. They came to the party during its decade in government. They will now be tested in the fight to preserve and deepen democracy in Keralam. Genuine development of cadre takes place in the heat of the class struggle, to which the Communists in Keralam will now return.

In 1977, the Left Front won only 29 out of 140 seats, with the Communists winning only 17 seats. Yet within three years, in the 1980 election, the left won 98 seats (the CPI(M) winning 35 by itself). What is important about the period between 1977 and 1980 is that the LDF campaigned ceaselessly on people's issues: the need to overcome socioeconomic distress and the absolute necessity of preventing any religious division in Keralam and in India. These campaigns strengthened both Keralam and the left, which is why they came together in 1980 to elect the government of E. K. Nayanar (who led the government from 1980 to 1981, from 1987 to 1991, and again from 1996 to 2001). From 1980 to 2000, the left established the principles of the people's planning campaign and the role of cooperatives.

During Keralam's first democratic elections, right-wing propaganda claimed that if the Communist Party came to power, religious believers would be jailed, women would be made common property, and violence and anarchy would prevail. It was the same kind of misinformation that had been spread about communists across the world. But over time, as the left came to power, the people of Keralam experienced for themselves what it actually meant to have Communists lead their society. Interestingly, the recent anti-communist campaign was of a different kind – the UDF camp argued that people should not vote for the left because being in power for consecutive terms corrupts a party's *real* communist character.

Though the left has lost, the campaign was not about the insignificance of the left but about its necessity. The Communist movement is an inseparable part of Keralam. If it can recognise this and regain the confidence of the people, the movement will continue to transform Keralam while offering powerful lessons to the world.

Warmly,

Nitheesh Narayanan and Vijay Prashad

Nitheesh and Vijay work at Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. Together they edited 1921 Uprising in Malabar (LeftWord Books, 2022), which has a foreword by Pinarayi Vijayan, former Chief Minister of Kerala.

Editor's note: *Keralam* is the native Malayalam name of Kerala. The state is currently undergoing the process of changing its official name. We at the Tricontinental Asia team have made the decision to use Keralam

instead of Kerala for this and future publications.