



THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy



Interview

Mood in Karnataka Congress Upbeat

S. Rajendran

Jan 1, 2018



File Photo: An illuminated Vidhana Soudha, the seat of the Karnataka Government, to mark the 60th anniversary celebration, in Bengaluru, on October 25, 2017. The term of the current Legislative Assembly ends this May.
Photo: K. Murali Kumar

*The Karnataka unit of the Congress party is upbeat that it will be successful in the elections to the State Legislative Assembly due in another few months. And, leading the Congress party at the State now is **G. Parameshwara**, **President of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC)**, a politician with an academic background. If the former Prime Minister, the late Rajiv Gandhi, brought him into active politics, Sonia Gandhi, who was till recently the all-India president of the Congress party, gave him a string of responsibilities over the past two decades and he has been the head of the KPCC for long.*

*In this interview to **S. Rajendran**, **Karnataka Representative of The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy**, Parameshwara speaks on a range of issues confronting the Congress party in Karnataka and is confident that the party will retain power in the ensuing elections to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly. Incidentally, Parameshwara had steered the party in the elections held in May 2013, and this is the second time that he will be holding the same post.*

The Congress party in Karnataka has ruled the State for nearly 55 of the 70 years since Independence. Your quick thoughts.

If Karnataka has emerged as one of the well developed and better managed States in the country and has become a hot investment destination, it is because of the political leadership, vision, far-sightedness and good governance provided by all the past Congress governments, in addition to the incumbent Government headed by Mr. Siddaramaiah. I do not wish to talk of misrule, squabbling and various scandals when the State was ruled by all the non-Congress parties.

What are the prospects for the party in the ensuing round of elections to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly given the anti-incumbency factor that is likely to play up?

I have said it before and will repeat it again. We will return to power and secure a comfortable majority. I am saying this with full confidence because the people will reward us for our performance and for fulfilling almost all the electoral promises that we made during the last elections. We are proud of the fact that ours is a government that has delivered on its promises. So there is no question of any anti-incumbency factor. On the contrary, we are seeking a positive and resounding mandate based on our performance.

What will be the main campaign plank of the Congress party in the Assembly elections in Karnataka? Will it be on the basis of its governance of the State so far, or with promises and assurances for the development of the State and better living conditions for the people? [The term of the current Karnataka Legislative Assembly ends in May, 2018.]

Development and equitable growth with social justice are and will always remain our main planks. I don't want to talk about the "Vikas" or other types of models or tall promises that were made during the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, which have remained unfulfilled even after 40 months.

The various pro-people programmes to benefit all cross-sections of society, especially the poor, farmers and other disadvantaged sections, empowerment of women and weaker sections have already been implemented. A hunger-free Karnataka, education, housing, drinking water, better roads and connectivity will continue to be the focus. All round development, protecting the interests of the State in



Dr. Parameshwara

border issues or water sharing, espousing the identity and promotion of Kannada language and culture and improving the lot of people shall be the priorities.

The past five years of Congress rule in the State as compared to what happened when the different Janata parties or BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] were in power should be sufficient pointers. People are intelligent to decide for themselves and cannot be swayed by attempts to polarise communities based on caste, religion or communal divides.

You have been the President of the KPCC for a long time and will be heading the party for the second consecutive time during elections. How is the party gearing up for the elections?

Yes, I have been fortunate for having been given the rare honour of leading the KPCC for the second consecutive term and for having been continued as State party president continuously since 2010. We are planning our electoral strategy in a systematic manner. While Chief Minister Siddaramaiah will be undertaking a tour of 124 Assembly constituencies where the party won in 2014 and also in some key constituencies in which opposition parties were victorious, I will be leading a separate tour with key party leaders in all the 100 constituencies where we lost. These pre-election tours will commence by the end of the year. Soon after the election dates are announced, we will step up the campaign. An elaborate plan has been prepared and will be implemented in due course.

The party does not have a highly popular leader to counter Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is expected to play a major role in the campaign of the BJP to woo the electorate...

...We have our own leaders and our new party all-India president Mr. Rahul Gandhi will be leading from the front. Ms. Sonia Gandhi will surely bless us. But we don't entirely depend on outside leaders and are confident of facing the elections on our own.

For the BJP, except for the Prime Minister, there's no other leader to fall back upon. The Modi magic failed in Delhi, Bihar and Punjab and even in Goa. The results of Gujarat show how BJP with the shrill campaign and abuses by Modi has fared. So we are not worried and are confident of facing the people.

The Congress party has a new president at the national level in Mr. Rahul Gandhi. Will it have any impact on the Karnataka electoral scene, more so, with Karnataka being the only major State in which the Congress party is in power, at present?

We are aware of the situation and know what Mr. Rahul Gandhi is capable of. He may not be a glib talker or demagogue like Modi. But he speaks from the heart and knows the problems of the people. Given the fact that India is a country with a large young population with over 65 per cent of the 1.30 crore population below 35 years and half the population being below 25 years of age, it is obvious that they will respond and vibe well with a younger leader like Mr. Rahul Gandhi, who has impressed audiences not only in India but even abroad with his honest and direct from-the-heart type of talk.

I am sure the people will respond to him positively and that is a big plus for us. The results of Gujarat elections prove what he is capable of. So by the time Karnataka goes to polls in April-May this year, I am very confident that we will do much better than what we did in 2014.

You are a qualified agricultural scientist turned politician. What is your roadmap for the agrarian economy in the State and the country? The ruling Governments at the centre and in the State have compelled the farmers to be dependent on subsidies. Is it the appropriate way out for the agriculture sector?

Farmers need good irrigation facilities, good and timely availability of seeds, fertilisers at reasonable rates, agricultural credit at low interest rates and remunerative prices for their produce. Though our Government has taken several initiatives, including providing crop loans at zero per cent rate of interest from cooperative institutions, huge expenditure on irrigation and impetus to organic farming and various other facilities to benefit the ryots, you

should know that States cannot do everything with their limited resources. Most of the needs of farmers and agriculture sector can and should be met only by the Union Government, including nil or low interest rates for crop loans for the farm sector through the nationalised and commercial banks.

With the vagaries of monsoon and large parts of Karnataka and in many States facing recurring droughts and devastating floods, it is the centre which must step in instead of merely offering lip sympathy. When the needs of the farm sector are taken care of, farmers will not need subsidies. Incidentally, farmers in even advanced countries like the U.S., get various kinds of subsidies and, therefore, it is wrong to term subsidies per se as obnoxious.

In the last elections to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly, the Congress party won by a thumping majority and yet you missed out being a Chief Minister of the State. What are your hopes and aspirations after the ensuing elections?

I am pretty confident of victory this time. I know I took things for granted and concentrated on campaigning for the party all over the State and did not pay adequate attention to my constituency. I have learnt my lesson. I don't want to blame anybody for my defeat in the last election. I can only say that I should have devoted more time and attention to the needs and demands of people in my constituency.

On the question of next Chief Minister, I have already made it very clear several times that the elected members of our party will decide, which will be endorsed by the party high command. We have to abide by the decision. Our first priority is to ensure that Congress party is returned to power with a thumping majority. Who becomes Chief Minister or Minister is secondary. As for me, I will accept the party decision.

What are your achievements as a President of the KPCC having completed several terms in office since 2010?

Though I am instrumental as KPCC President for leading the party and taking important decisions, all the decisions are taken collectively and it is the united efforts of the rank and file at all levels. However, if the Congress party has won series of by-elections for the Assembly and came to power in 2013, I must say that I have contributed a lot. I have ensured that the party did exceedingly well in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls when a Modi wave was sweeping the country.

The subsequent elections to the Panchayat Raj bodies as well as urban local bodies, including the Municipal Corporations, were all held under my leadership and nobody can deny my contribution. The very fact that the party high command allowed me to continue in office for another term, which is a rare honour, speaks for itself. I don't want to brag about my achievements.

The Congress party in Karnataka is considered a party of outsiders with people who joined the party in recent years having been provided with important positions compared to the party veterans. Is this right?

I agree that a section of party workers feel resentment at people who joined the party from other parties. But in a growing organisation like the Congress, more and more capable persons committed to the party ideology are needed. Once somebody joins the party accepting its policies and ideology, they become Congressmen and it is not correct to term them as outsiders. We will, however, try our best to accommodate as many party workers as possible subject to factors like loyalty, winnability and representation to different regions and communities.

In 2004, the Congress formed the first ever coalition Government in Karnataka with the support of the Janata Dal (Secular) and thereafter faced a bitter experience when the JD(S) walked out of the alliance to form a Government with the BJP. Will the Congress party in Karnataka look for an alliance with any likeminded party either during the run up to elections or a post-poll alliance to form a Government?

What happened in 2004 was a nightmare as the voters gave a fractured mandate. It is evident that opportunistic politics played a major role, which is inevitable when no political party is able to form a Government on its own. What happened in the 2009 Assembly elections and the series of scandals, scams and internal squabbling leading to three Chief Ministers in five years of BJP rule was a disaster. It helped the Congress party to come back to power with a thumping majority in 2014.

Therefore, in the light of the experiences in 2004 and 2009, and based on our performance since 2014, we are confident of coming to power with a massive mandate and form the Government on our own. Therefore, there is no need for a pre-poll or a post-poll alliance. We are confident that the voters will reward us with a massive mandate to do even better than what we did after the last elections.

(S. Rajendran is Resident Representative, Karnataka, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, based in Bengaluru. He was formerly Resident Editor/ Associate Editor, The Hindu, Karnataka.

In a journalistic career of over 35 years with The Hindu in Karnataka, he has extensively reported on and analysed various facets of life in the State. He holds a Master's degree from the Bangalore University. The Government of Karnataka, in recognition of his services, presented him the Rajyotsava Award — the highest honour in the State — in 2010.)

E-mail: srajendran2009@gmail.com