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for

Politics and Public Policy

A Tough Electoral Battle in Karnataka



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Election publicity material of the three major parties in the Karnataka Assembly election in Bengaluru on March 13, 2018. Photo: Sampath Kumar, G. P.

When Karnataka goes to the polls on May 12, 2018, the three major parties in the State - the Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the Janata Dal (Secular) - have a lot at stake. S. Rajendran, Resident Representative, Karnataka, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, sees how the odds are stacked in what appears to be a closely-fought election with no discernible wave in favour of any single party.

The election to the 15th Karnataka Legislative Assembly to be held on May 12, 2018, are expected to be closely fought, the kind of which has not been seen since 2004 when the first of the coalition Governments in the State was formed owing to a divided verdict. The result of the present round of elections too is expected to be on similar lines - with there being no discernible wave in favour of any political party, the voters disillusioned with corruption and poor administration across all parties apart from other factors which in turn could translate into a post-election political pell-mell.

Even a minor favourable swing in votes could benefit a party to gain an upper hand by a few seats and in the present scenario the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is expected to put in its best effort to gain that advantage. The Congress party has been working hard with the AICC President Rahul Gandhi himself in the forefront of the campaign having covered all the 30 districts of the State, by road. So is the case of the BJP President, Amit Shah, who has covered all parts of the State. For the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD (S)], it is the father and son duo of H.D. Deve Gowda and H.D. Kumaraswamy and given the anticipation that the people are expected to vote based on certain narrow considerations, they are at their best to woo the Vokkaliga vote bank which is largely spread across the Old Mysore region.

The political line up

There are three important political parties to be reckoned with in Karnataka—the Congress, the BJP, and the JD (S). While the first two are national parties with a central leadership to control the state of affairs, the JD (S) founded by former Prime Minister Deve Gowda, has its control in Bengaluru and has a different political ideology largely centred on being flexible to get to the seat of power. The Congress has been ruling the State for most part of the last six decades with the erstwhile Janata Party and the Janata Dal governing it for two terms and the BJP once.

The Congress party is confident that it will not be much of a difficulty for it to retain power since in its view there is no anti-incumbency to its Government under the leadership of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah which has run its full course of five years and that the people are happy with its performance. It is another matter that the Siddaramaiah Government did nothing much to serve the interests of the people for

the first four years although it got into top gear in improving the civic infrastructure over the last year obviously with an eye on the elections. Many of the ministers in the Government had allegedly indulged in corrupt practices although none of them faced any direct action.

The Lokayukta did not have a head for a large part of the last five years and instead an Anti-Corruption Bureau was carved out directly under the control of the Government and is now run as a parallel organisation to the Lokayukta. How then could corruption cases be initiated against the members of the council of minister's or even against senior bureaucrats? Ironically, it was the Lokayukta which was the source of all the cases made out against the former Chief Minister, B.S. Yeddyurappa during the BJP rule in the preceding term of the legislative assembly.

On its part, the Bharatiya Janata Party is of the opinion that it is well set to form the next Government as, in its view, the people at large are disenchanted with the Congress party and in particular Siddaramaiah. The BJP is confident that it will achieve the target of 150 seats set for itself, little realising that there is no wave in favour of the party. Akin to the Congress, the BJP is now exhibiting a semblance of unity thanks to the direct control by the central leadership. A large number of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh activists in addition to the rank and file of the BJP are spread across all regions of the State and it is their field work which is expected to enable the BJP garner a large number of seats.

The JD (S) has entered into an understanding with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) with an eye on the Dalit votes. The BSP in Karnataka has a limited presence and the votes that the party can attract can indeed prove highly beneficial to the JD (S). In the 2004 assembly elections, the JD (S) won 58 seats and in the forthcoming election, if it can win even a half of that number then the JD (S) will have a major role to play for the next five years. True to the information doing the rounds that the election results will throw up a hung assembly, former Chief Minister Kumaraswamy is of the view that the JD (S) will emerge "the king and not a kingmaker" as is being made out to be.

Critical election for all three major parties

Interestingly, it is a do-or-die battle for all the three political parties at the present juncture—the Congress has to win as Karnataka is one of the last bastions of the party and a poor performance would mean it is near whitewash from almost all the States. A victory for the BJP would mean not merely regaining power in a State where it had lost in the last Assembly elections but would enable it to set the trend for the next General elections due next year; and a good performance for the JD(S) would enable the party call the shots in the governance of the State and mark its resurgence in State politics. The JD (S) has been out of reckoning for about a decade and it will be difficult for the party to survive without returning to the seat of power.



The Vidhana Soudha, Bengaluru, during the filming of the 'Karnataka Election Anthem' by noted filmmaker, Yograj Bhat, on March 30, 2018. Karnataka goes to the election on May 12, in what is seen as an electoral contest that is difficult to call. Photo: K. Murali Kumar

It is in this context that all the three parties have fielded candidates based on their capacity to win elections rather than their commitment to work for the welfare of the people or the development of the State. In a way, the choice for the electorate is very limited given the background of the candidates, and voters have to go by the political

parties in preference to the performance and track record of those in the fray. It is now evident that all the major political parties have fielded candidates based on their winnability relegating all other factors to the background—be it their criminal background or even corrupt practices. In other words, the electorate have been left with little choice since most of the candidates in the 224 assembly constituencies are virtually the same people who had contested in earlier elections with several of them facing criminal complaints and charges. The number of new faces in this election is not more than five per cent of the total candidates who are in the fray.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has gained in strength within the Congress party and has emerged as a mass leader leaving even the AICC President in the background. But in the present political scenario, the Chief Minister himself has been reduced to working overtime to win rather than spend time in campaigning for the other candidates of the party and given the uncertainty of a victory from his home district of Mysore he has chosen to contest from Badami in Vijapura which he believes is a safe seat. At Chamundeshwari, Siddaramaiah faces a tough challenge from the veteran JD (S) leader, G.T. Deve Gowda who commands a considerable following. Added to all this, former Chief Minister Kumaraswamy is also in the thick of campaign at Chamundeshwari apparently to ensure the defeat of Siddaramaiah who has not been in good terms with the Deve Gowda family in recent months.

Contesting from two seats is not expected to do any good for Siddaramaiah as it belies his claims on popularity among the masses and for a person of his stature, a victory from any constituency should be without much ado. Siddaramaiah is also compelled to intensively campaign for his son, Yathindra, a political greenhorn from the constituency of Varuna which adjoins Chamundeshwari. Interestingly, the BJP has pulled out B.Y. Vijayendra, son of Yeddyurappa who had expressed keen interest in contesting from Varuna and had even commenced campaigning although the party had not assigned him the seat.

The promise made to the Lingayats and the Veerashaivas for a minority status is also unlikely to pay rich dividends to the Congress party than that was originally expected when the State Government sent across a recommendation to the Union Government. The differences between the Veerashaiva-Lingayats and the Lingayats had come in handy for Siddaramaiah to play in between but their appreciation to the

Government's effort remains unclear. It is another matter that with their political and economic power, the Lingayats control the biggest vote bank in the State but with this new development wherein the State Government itself speaks of two groups within the large community, the Veerashaivas and the Lingayats will stand to be a divided lot in the long run and consequently their clout will stand to be diminished. This aspect is believed to have dawned on the community and given their past record the community may prefer to vote for a community leader and the party to which he belongs than any other.

The last few months of the run-up to the legislative assembly elections has been marked by a string of political strategies evolved by the Congress party and in particular the Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah, who has left no stone unturned in his desire to enable the party retain power. At one stage with confidence running high, the Chief Minister had expressed the opinion that winning around 125 seats of the 224-seat legislative assembly should not be a problem for the Congress.

Distinct regional preferences

Karnataka comprises four revenue divisions—with headquarters at Kalaburagi for the Hyderabad-Karnatak region, Belagavi for the Mumbai-Karnatak region, Mysuru for the Old Mysore region and Bengaluru for the southern parts of the State. Each of these regions vote differently based on caste and other considerations and the Congress is the only party which has a commanding presence in all four regions. The BJP has a commanding presence in the coastal region and the urban pockets of the State while the JD (S) dominates the old Mysore region which is known as the Vokkaliga belt. A party which has a good recognition in the Bangalore region which has 28 seats is expected to do well and interestingly, the Congress and the BJP are near equals here again.

In the final stages of the election campaign, the Congress is just about a neck ahead of the BJP and the final outcome can be anybody's guess. The BJP is much closer to the Congress in the race than was originally anticipated and the infighting within the party has been largely resolved and the party's chief ministerial candidate, Yeddyurappa, is even speaking of the date on which he would like to take charge. The JD (S) is also likely to retain much of its hold and may consequently be a force

to reckon with in the formation of the next Government. Although both the BJP and the JD(S) have denied of any pre-poll understanding, it is widely believed that the two parties will come together should the need arise, irrespective of the fact that they fought bitterly in 2007 when the term of the JD (S) heading the coalition Government drew to a close and the party had to handover charge to the BJP which was its coalition partner. They are now driven by the principle—politics has no permanent friends or foes and only interests.

Irrespective of the fact that political parties speak of secularism, in Karnataka, religion and caste factors are expected to play an important role in elections. Merely enjoying the support of one caste will not suffice and political parties and candidates need the support of at least three major groups particularly in the rural constituencies and here too the Congress stands out as enjoying an advantage in comparison with the BJP or the JD (S). Added to this, the Communist parties have a certain percentage of votes in most constituencies and this is expected to go in favour of the Congress as the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) have fielded very few candidates.

Leave alone obtaining a simple majority in the 224 member assembly, to ward off a coalition Government, the Congress and the BJP have to eye for a minimum of 100 seats and cobbling up a Government thereafter may not be a difficult task. The manner in which the BJP formed the Government in 2008 thanks to the support that it obtained from the independents is a trend setter that may be pursued again.