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Andhra Pradesh and Telangana: Regional Parties Dominate Poll Space



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Officials with Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) and Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), for Mobile Awareness at Victory Play Ground, Chaderghat in Hyderabad on March 13, 2019, ahead of Parliamentary Elections. Photo: G. Ramakrishna / The Hindu

In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the two Telugu-speaking States in southern India, which together elect 42 MPs, the electoral battle is almost entirely between powerful regional parties. Though united Andhra Pradesh, which sent sufficient MPs to aid the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) form the governments, much has changed since the creation of Telangana in 2014.

Lakshmana Venkat Kuchi, senior journalist, writes on where the political parties – national and regional – stand in this new scenario. Much has changed though not in favour of the Congress which continues to pay the price of creating Telangana by dividing Andhra Pradesh, a State that stood by the party even during its bleakest days after the Emergency.

Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Telangana could be the only States in South India that could come to help the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi get another term, if he falls short of the magic figure. These two States could see non-aligned regional forces – YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) and the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) – emerge powerfully and play a key role in government formation post polls.

It was the united Andhra Pradesh that had helped power the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) 1 as also UPA 2 into office in 2004 and 2009, sending a significant number of Congress MPs to the Lok Sabha. For some inexplicable reason, Congress decided to kill the hen that laid the golden egg/s. After the creation of Telangana, AP sends 25 MPs to the Lok Sabha and Telangana, 17.

If the Congress paid the price for it then, it is even now paying for its political misadventure. And what is adding insult to the injury is that it is its opponent, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that gained immensely from the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh as Congress got decimated in its bastion that stood rock solid with the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, even after the state of emergency in 1977. Barring the lone seat of Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, the Congress won all the other 41 seats then.

A politically costly division for the Congress

But cut to the present, the Congress continues to pay for its decision to divide the Telugu-speaking State into two. Unfortunate, for sure, was the death of the then serving Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, who had the entire

State in his vice-like grip and delivered a sizeable chunk of the seats for the party at the centre. And helped form the two UPA governments under Manmohan Singh.

It was only after the death of Rajasekhara Reddy that agitation for separate Telangana gained momentum and eventually the UPA 2 gave in and divided the State in 2014. Formally, the new State, Telangana, was created on June 2, 2014, but the Bill had received Presidential assent in March 2014 during the UPA 2 itself.

Since then, the Congress has been jettisoned out of existence in both AP and Telangana and is still trying to revive itself. The emergence of strong regional

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players has put a full stop to Congress efforts now, much like what unfolded in neighbouring Tamil Nadu (TN) back in the 1960s. Since then, the Congress

has been forced to play ball with either of the two Dravidian majors, for a few Lok Sabha seats from TN.

One need not be a political pundit to visualise what is about to happen in Telangana and AP in the general elections. It may well be more of the same – greater struggle of the Congress bearing little fruit.

The plight of the Congress in these two States, as also that of its partner-on-stage-but-not-in-an-alliance-on-the-ground, Telugu Desam Party (TDP), is good news for the Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Neither in Telangana nor in AP is the BJP expected to win seats. But it will take away a few votes that would have gone to the Congress and even from TDP, thus helping in the victory of YSRCP. The TDP hopes it is the other way round and it benefits from BJP's presence in the fray in the State.

In Telangana, the political consolidation of K. Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) is complete and all revival efforts of the Congress remain just that. If the united Andhra Pradesh helped UPA to power, the divided AP is more likely to help Modi and the NDA. Even though the voters may not appear to be willing to bet big on Modi, the regional players in these two States – the TRS in Telangana and the YSRCP in Andhra Pradesh – clearly in the lead would eventually bat for NDA at the time of government formation. In the post-poll situation, both the parties will be going with

the NDA. Between these two regional forces, they are expected to get over 30 seats, at the very least, and can somewhat offset losses the BJP is expected to suffer in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere in north India.

The situation may be tight for the BJP in North India, with the biggest State of Uttar Pradesh presenting an uphill task in the face of a mighty Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) combine. This combine is poised to upset the calculations of the Modi-Amit Shah (BJP president) but, in the south, the duo seems to have realized the folly of going all out in AP and Telangana and instead work on defeating the Congress and any of its friendly or potentially friendly party in the polls.

A distant destination for the BJP

For the BJP to be able to win seats and elections on its own in AP and or in Telangana will take many more eons as the party is still perceived as a north Indian party by the man on the street and disliked for reasons that are provided by the local leadership of the BJP in the southern States. The local BJP leaders are, in fact,

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the problem for the BJP, as they display a sort of an arrogance that is distasteful. Although voters in AP and Telangana do not exhibit the same degree of anger against the 'forcing' of Hindi and associated issues, there is a general disappointment over the decreasing opportunities for the youth "because of perceived discrimination of some sort at play."

Now, this is just a perception and may not be a reality, but is hitting the prospects of the BJP. Unless the BJP addresses this key issue and figures out a way to appease both the south and the north and truly emerge as a pan-India party, it will continue to face a mounting challenge in the south of the Vindhyas.

For the 2019 general elections, the BJP can only hope to gain indirectly from south India and that too from AP and Telangana that together send a 42-strong Telugu speaking contingent to the Lok Sabha. Even in the polls after the emergency in 1977, it was AP that had supported Indira Gandhi by gifting her 41 out of the 42 seats in the Lok Sabha general elections. It was also the contribution of 30-plus seats in both

2004 and 2009 general elections that helped the Congress to power through the UPA coalition.

Perhaps misled or in a politically foolish misadventure, the Congress went ahead with division of State and gave in to the demands of KCR, then on a fast-unto-death. The Congress has hoped KCR would give a return gift of Lok Sabha seats for it to get to the magic number in 2014 general elections. But KCR had no such plans. He declared 'independence' and drove the Congress away from the State.

For the record, though, he thanked "Sonia amma' for the creation of Telangana but when it came to real politics, he smashed the Congress to an extent that the process is still on. Most of the MLAs who won on Congress ticket in 2018 Assembly elections have either crossed over to the TRS or are in the process of doing so, causing much embarrassment to the grand old party on the eve of general elections. Voters then threw out the Congress, rejecting its eleventh-hour electoral alliance with its enemy number one- the TDP. Its chief and AP Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, was against the partition of the State and was vociferous in his public stance. For this, he was seen as the enemy and perhaps in hindsight, the Congress alliance with TDP, though strong on paper, wilted in the electoral battle.

And now, the stranglehold of KCR over Telangana is complete.

This being the background, let us see how the tale of two Telugu-speaking States pans out for the April 11 general elections. Both States will be voting on April 11 and in the case of AP, it will also be voting for a new Legislative Assembly.

Fighting with his back against the wall, Naidu has dropped all his expansionist plans of last year and now has confined himself to contesting only in the 25 Lok Sabha

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seats in AP, instead of also going across to Telangana. Now, this has led to some resentment among the cadres and leaders of TDP in Telangana, who are looking out for greener pastures. The ground situation in AP, at present, is looking grim for Naidu as he was seen as a person high on talk and low on delivery. Known for his political sagacity and ability to accurately guess which way the wind was blowing, Naidu ejected out of the Modi cabinet and government on an issue that he thought

will become a highly emotive one, strong enough to power his return and overcome anti-incumbency.

Though there is a general feeling that Centre and Modi have failed AP and denied it the special category status among the people, there is also a narrative gaining ground that Naidu did precious little or was ineffective to do anything for the State despite the four-year presence in the Union Council of Ministers and the Union Government. He also failed to achieve much headway in creating the new capital – the promised most advanced city in India, Amaravati.

Naidu smartly is trying to turn his failures into an advantage by laying the blame entirely on the central government and Prime Minister Modi. Other than the die-hard TDP supporters and voters, he sure faces an electorate that is asking him questions on his performance, or lack of it. But what can be a silver lining for Naidu is that the anti-incumbency vote and vote against the TDP in general, garnered by the YSRC of Jaganmohan Reddy, would be split in two directions. As the BJP and Modi is likely to take away few votes, in a closely fought Assembly elections for 175 seats, the triangular and multi-cornered fights could throw up surprise results.

Stage set for a close fight in AP

How close could the fight be can be gleaned from the wafer-thin margin of victory of Naidu in the 2014 Assembly elections, the vote share difference was less than one percentage point – 0.3 to be precise. The TDP secured 44.9 per cent votes, compared with YSRCP's 44.6 per cent votes in Andhra Pradesh. It was actor-politician, Pawan Kalyan, who sided with Naidu and brought in new voters to Naidu fold. But this time around, Kalyan has floated his own party – Jana Sena – and is fighting on his own in the Assembly and Lok Sabha. He may not be able to win seats, but he can defeat someone. Naidu hopes that Kalyan would inflict damage on Jaganmohan Reddy.

So, all is not yet lost for Naidu, an astute politician considered by many as the most reliable political barometer in the country.

On the ground, he is running a campaign on development and welfare measures even while lashing out at the central government for its 'step-motherly' treatment towards AP. Naidu does not tire to repeat his charge sheet against the Modi government in the hope of igniting the emotions of the people. For good measure, as AP is also

electing its new Assembly and voting for a new government, Naidu is targeting the corruption of Jaganmohan Reddy and lists out all the cases that he was involved in. Come every Friday, Jaganmohan Reddy has to rush to Hyderabad for his court appearances in different cases.

But, corruption as an issue perhaps has lost out its utility electorally in Andhra Pradesh as the general perception is that all the political leaders are corrupt and some are more corrupt than the others.

But still a few of the charges from the opposition: read the BJP and Jaganmohan Reddy as also film star turned politician Power Star, Pawan Kalyan about the huge corruption in the Amaravati Land Scandal

in which the Chief Minister and his family members are alleged to have benefitted immensely, as do his other senior party

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leaders. In fact, it is in this context that the caste card becomes visible. It is largely the people belonging to the Kamma caste, to which Naidu belongs to, are seen as the biggest beneficiaries of land deals as also are said to have been favoured when it came to government largesse in the forms of grants of contracts and projects.

Another very important aspect that Naidu can hardly ignore is the anger of the farming community. In addition to the overall agrarian crisis which is also affecting the farmers of Andhra Pradesh, Naidu has also forcibly acquired 35,000 acres of fertile lands for construction of a new State capital, Amaravati.

Save for grandiose announcements and power point presentations and tall claims, on the ground, there is nothing concrete to show. Though Naidu is trying to pass on the blame to centre, it remains to be seen as to how much the people are buying into his claims. A section of Kamma leadership is also unhappy with the son-rise in TDP and peeved at the induction of Naidu's son, Lokesh Naidu, as his political heir-apparent.

There is a huge section of the youth that is terribly disappointed and even angry with Naidu for his failure to create jobs. Of course, he was with BJP at Centre and how has it helped us is the refrain one hears, to highlight Naidu's failure to benefit the State and its people.

In contrast, Jaganmohan Reddy, who has been virtually on the road in campaign mode ever since his father's tragic death in a chopper accident in September 2009, has maintained his standing among people and has won over the disgruntled people. In last Assembly elections, he had lost narrowly to Naidu with a vote difference of less than one percentage point.

For Naidu, facing the toughest political battle of his life seems banking on Kalyan to bail him out this time by weaning away the anti-establishment vote (that is a vote against Naidu) so that Jaganmohan Reddy is that much hard-pressed for votes. In fact, this strategy is somewhat similar to the one deployed by Jaganmohan Reddy's father, who at that time became the beneficiary of the presence of charismatic Kapu leader in Megastar Chiranjeevi, elder brother of Pawan Kalyan, who won only 18 of the 294 Assembly seats in May 2009 but ensured that the TDP was defeated, leaving Naidu wondering what he had done to lose a winning election. It is perhaps the same strategy that is now being adopted by Naidu to ensure that Kalyan floated his own party and appeared poised to wean away the youth and Kapus, which is an important caste formation that can influence the outcome in two to three districts comprising some 50 seats. As luck would have it for the TDP, the BJP too is fighting the polls alone without any tie-up with Jaganmohan Reddy or Kalyan.

In fact, Jaganmohan Reddy can hardly afford to have a poll pact with the BJP given his strong support base among the Christians and Muslims, who view the BJP with some suspicion. For this reason, there cannot be an open alliance, but there is some tacit understanding between the two parties – to support each other secretly wherever possible. For the record both the real contenders sound confident – Naidu as well as Jaganmohan Reddy – and trade charges on a host of issues, each blaming the other for not doing anything.

While Jaganmohan Reddy is convinced that corruption was rampant in Naidu's regime with the latter and his family members themselves seeped in it, the AP Chief Minister returns the compliment with equal force. 'Has Jagan spent 18 months jail for freedom struggle' is Naidu's sarcastic barb to question his opponent's stint in jail for a string of corruption cases and how he had to fall at the feet of Modi and KCR, just to stay out of jail.

The voters find the low level of political discourse as the new normal. They do appear to be in a mood to set this aside and take a view whether which of the two

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As things stand today unless Jaganmohan Reddy does anything very stupid between now and the polling date he could well be the new Chief Minister of AP.

In summation, the AP situation could be put like this: chances of the state getting a new Chief Minister appear bright but Naidu could conjure up a victory from the jaws of defeat.

What is shocking in the whole scenario is that the grand old party, the Congress, seems to be missing in action. But if this is any comfort, so does the BJP. Both the national parties will have to rest content with the victories of their respective team players from the regional forces.

Advantage TRS in Telangana

In neighbouring new State of Telangana, there appears only one outcome – a repeat performance of KCR and his party TRS, which is witnessing the joining of this or the other Congress and TDP leaders. Such is the plight of the TDP that it officially declared that it will not contest any seats in Telangana after a spate of its leaders joined the TRS recently. And this process is on, indicating the extent to which KCR has consolidated his hold over the State. But, the TDP will be supporting the Congress candidates in all the 17 seats. The Congress can only hope that the vote percentage arithmetic works, unlike in the Assembly polls where the coalition of Congress, TDP was strong on paper but fizzled out in the field as chemistry did not work at all on the ground.

A slew of people's welfare programmes only strengthened the position of KCR in terms of his vote gain in the 2018 assembly elections that he swept winning 90 per cent of the seats, decimating the opposition. And whatever is left of the opposition, he is chipping away successfully.

Telangana Assembly 2014 – and Lok Sabha from Telangana strength

Party	Assembly Seats (Vote % in brackets)	Lok Sabha Seat/s (Vote % in brackets)
TRS	63 (34.3)	11 (34.9)
INC	21 (25.2)	2 (24.7)
TDP	15 (14.7)	1 (12.3)
AIMIM	7 (3.8)	1 (13.1)
BJP	0	1 (10.5)
YSRCP	0	1 (4.5)
	119	

AIMIM: All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen

Source: <http://www.indiavotes.com>

Andhra Pradesh Assembly and Lok Sabha strength 2014

Party	Assembly Seats (Vote % in brackets)	Lok Sabha Seat/s (Vote % in brackets)
TDP	102 (44.9)	15 (40.8)
YSRCP	67 (44.6)	8 (45.7)
INC	0	0
BJP	4 (2.2)	2 (7.2)
NPT (others)	1 (0.2)	--
Ind	1 (1.8)	0

Source: <http://www.indiavotes.com>

This article was updated on March 29, 2019, to correct the year of Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's helicopter crash and a typographic error regarding the year of the Emergency in 1977. The errors are regretted.

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