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Sparring between Congress and JD (S) Gives Edge to BJP in Karnataka



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A para-motor flying in Vijayapura city on Monday, May 8, 2019, to encourage people to vote in coming Lok Sabha elections. Photo: Rajendra Singh Hajeri.

For long a pocket borough of the Congress party Karnataka appears headed for a waveless election. The southern State, which goes to the polls in two phases - 14 seats each on April 18 and April 23, will see a direct contest between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is in government in the centre and the Congress-Janata Dal (Secular) combine, which is in power at the State.

S. Rajendran, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, Bengaluru, writes on how each of the main parties to the contest are placed. The two main contestants - the BJP and the Congress-JD (S) coalition, he says, are expected to share the spoils, though the former enjoys an edge.

The 2019 General Election to the Lok Sabha for the 28 seats from Karnataka, to be held in two phases on April 18 and 23 (See Appendix for dates and constituencies¹), is expected to be markedly different from the last elections held in 2014. First, this time round the poll will be a direct challenge between the Congress-Janata Dal (Secular) [JD (S)] combine and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Second, there is no perceptible wave in favour of any political party.

The two formations are, therefore, expected to share the spoils although the BJP enjoys considerable edge because of two factors: differences within the Congress party and the conflict of interests between the grassroots level workers of the Congress and the JD (S).

The elections for the Karnataka seats are expected to serve the interests of the Congress party as much as that of the BJP and the results will add up to the numbers

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of the two parties in a big way at the national level. Karnataka which has always been a pocket borough of the Congress party for several decades has in the last few elections tilted towards the BJP with the party winning 17 of the 28 seats in 2014. It is expected to be a repeat in May 2019, although the ground realities in some of the constituencies show up the BJP enjoying considerable popularity in the ensuing elections despite the coming together of the Congress and the JD (S) in the electoral battle.

The Karnataka unit of the BJP believes that it can win 22 seats while the Congress which enjoys the support of the JD (S) feels that it is on a strong wicket and will score much more than the 11 seats which the two parties won in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The JD (S) which won just two seats in 2014, is aiming to improve on its performance in terms of both seats and vote share in the forthcoming elections,

having struck the seat-sharing arrangement with the Congress. In a way, the elections are expected to serve the interests of the JD (S) better than it does to the stock of the Congress.



The national president of the BJP, Amit Shah, along with the party's State president, B.S. Yeddurappa, its Bengaluru South candidate, Tejasvi Surya, and Tejaswini Ananthkumar, campaign for the 2019-Lok Sabha election at Banashankari in Bengaluru on April 2, 2019. Photo: K. Murali Kumar

It is another matter that the JD (S) believes that it will have an important role to play in Government formation at the Centre and towards this end is focussed on garnering a higher number of seats in its kitty. This was what apparently prompted the party to have the presence of some important national leaders at the swearing-in ceremony when H.D. Kumaraswamy assumed office as Chief Minister of the State.

Among those who attended the programme were the Congress leaders, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, the Chief Ministers of West Bengal, Delhi, and Andhra Pradesh, Mamata Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal, and N. Chandrababu Naidu, the CPI (M) General Secretary, Sitaram Yechury, the Samajwadi Party leader, Akhilesh Singh Yadav, and the Bahujan Samaj Party leader, Mayawati. Unfortunately, some of the

political parties which these leaders head are not part of the alliance with the Congress party although there is every likelihood that they will come together in the event of a fractured mandate calling for an alliance to defeat the BJP.



The president of the Congress party, Rahul Gandhi, the Janata Dal (Secular) supremo, H. D. Deve Gowda, Karnataka Chief Minister H. D. Kumaraswamy, the president of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee, Dinesh Gundu Rao, and the All India Congress Committee general secretary in-charge of Karnataka, K.C. Venugopal, at a Congress rally in Bengaluru, on March 31, 2019. Photo: PTI/Shailendra Bhojak

The JD (S) has, however, drawn flak in the eyes of the people since it is only the family of former Prime Minister, Deve Gowda, which occupies a pivotal place; be it in the party or in the Government.

Moreover, in the seven seats from which the party is contesting in the elections, three contestants are from

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the family— Deve Gowda and his grandchildren, Prajwal Revanna, and Nikhil Gowda. The former Prime Minister has opted for the Tumkuru constituency, instead of Hassan as he had promised his grandson of the ticket a long time ago and consequently decided to stick to his decision. Incidentally, Deve Gowda had said that he would like to retire from electoral and active politics but is now involved in

all the important decisions of the JD (S) and has been working overtime to secure a strong political base for the party.

He now faces G.S. Basavaraju of the BJP, a senior parliamentarian of reckoning. Unlike in Hassan, the Tumkuru constituency comprises an equal number of Lingayat and Vokkaliga voters and it will only be natural that the voters extend support to a candidate of their community. Added to this, the incumbent Lok Sabha member of the constituency is S.P. Mudda Hanume Gowda of the Congress and depriving him of the ticket has obviously pushed him to rebel. This rebellion, in turn, is expected to serve the benefit of the BJP. Mudda Hanume Gowda was initially a camp follower of Deve Gowda and subsequently crossed over to the Congress party after he fell out of the JD (S) family.

While Nikhil Gowda, contesting for the Mandya seat is the son of the Chief Minister, H.D. Kumaraswamy, Prajwal is the son of the Public Works Minister, H.D. Revanna and both of them are bereft of any political experience barring wielding the clout of their parents. Kumaraswamy has defended their candidature by stating that they were contesting “on their own merit”. Should Nikhil Gowda be victorious, then all members of the Kumaraswamy family will be members of legislative bodies.



Sumalatha, actor and wife of late Kannada actor and former Union Minister, M.H. Ambareesh, formally announced her decision to contest from Mandya Lok Sabha constituency as an independent candidate at a media conference on March 18, 2019.
Photo: V Sreenivasa Murthy / The Hindu

It is not going to be easy for the Chief Minister's son in Mandya where he faces the popular actor, Sumalatha, wife of the former Minister and noted film artiste, the late Ambareesh. Despite contesting as independent candidate after she was denied a Congress ticket, she obviously enjoys the support of the BJP and a major section of the local Congress unit which is vehemently opposed to the JD (S). Some of the Congress leaders of Mandya were earlier associated with the JD (S) and had walked out of that party since they were opposed to the rule by the Deve Gowda family and the elections have come in as an opportunity for them to overtly and covertly extend support to Sumalatha. A number of Kannada film artistes are also working for her success at the hustings.

The other seats in which the JD (S) is fielding candidates are -Shivamogga, Udupi-Chikmagalur, Uttara Kannada and Bijapur. All these candidates face formidable opponents in the BJP and consequently it is not going to be any cake-walk for them. Being short of candidates, the JD(S) attempted, in vain, to adopt some of the Congress leaders as its candidates but this proposal was turned down. Thereafter the Bangalore North seat which was earmarked for the JD (S) was reverted to the Congress which in turn has fielded the Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, Krishna Byre Gowda, as he represents the Byatarayanapura assembly constituency in the region.

Interestingly, the AICC President, Rahul Gandhi, kicked off his election campaign in Karnataka at a huge rally held on the outskirts of Bengaluru on March 31, primarily for the benefit of the party candidates in the four constituencies of the Bangalore agglomeration. The programme was jointly organised by the Congress and the JD (S) in a geographical area dominated by the Vokkaliga community, which is dominated by the JD (S), thus leaving no room for the Congress candidates to benefit.

At Kalaburagi, the Congress candidate is the party veteran, M. Mallikarjuna Kharge who holds a record in winning 11 elections continuously—nine of the legislative assembly and two of the Lok Sabha. He, however, faces a very tough challenge this time and this perhaps prompted Rahul Gandhi to hold the first of his public rallies, at Kalaburagi, after the announcement of the election calendar.

The difficulty for Kharge in facing the challenge posed by Umesh Jadhav, a new entrant to the BJP, is from within the Congress party than from the rival camp. Party

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seniors from the region like former Ministers Malikayya Guttedar and Babu Rao Chinchansur who formed the backbone of the Kharge team have quit from the Congress. Added

to this, several other leaders are sore with Kharge on the ground that he has only been interested in the elevation of his son, Priyank Kharge, as a Minister at the cost of the other seniors in the region.

In stark contrast to the situation in the Congress, the BJP has adopted a new strategy wherein the top leadership of the central unit has finalised the candidates although all of them who won in 2014 (15 of the 17) have been given the ticket. Given the nature of their popularity at the constituency level, most of them are expected to emerge victorious. In the past, several State BJP leaders were instrumental in their followers getting the ticket and this had led to groupism within the party. This has now been thwarted with the BJP setting forth a new methodology in the selection of candidates. The BJP President, Amit Shah, and the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, have been closely involved in the selection of candidates although a list of possible candidates was drawn from the Karnataka unit.

The BJP has fielded a political greenhorn in Tejasvi Surya for the Bangalore South seat which was earlier held by Ananth Kumar who passed away some time ago. A weak attempt was made to obtain the ticket for his wife, Tejaswini, but was ruled out by the central command of the party. Bangalore South has for long been a BJP bastion and it should not be difficult for Mr Tejasvi Surya to retain the seat for the party.

Essentially, Karnataka comprises of four regions and each of these is dominated by a political party. While the BJP is quite strong in the Bombay-Karnatak region apart from the constituencies in all the urban and coastal areas of the State, the Congress is well placed in the Hyderabad-Karnatak region, the JD (S) in a few pockets of the Old Mysore region

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and a mix of all political parties prevails in the Bengaluru region which extends up to Chitradurga and Kolar.

Irrespective of their strengths and weakness, it is quite evident that anti-incumbency will prevail in several of the Lok Sabha constituencies in Karnataka and thus some of the candidates elected in 2014 face this threat. Added to this are the serious differences in the rank and file of the Congress workers in some of the constituencies in the old Mysore region where the JD (S) has fielded candidates. All this could have a telling effect on the performance of the Congress-JD (S) combine and in reality the BJP will stand to benefit without much ado.

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Reference:

1. **Lok Sabha Election, 2019.** "[Karnataka Lok Sabha Constituencies and Important Candidates](#)".