

VERDICT 2019: Interview

"BJP's prospects are bleak in the whole country": Siddaramaiah



S. RAJENDRAN



Siddaramaiah. File photo: K. Bhagya Prakash.

The former Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah emerged as an all important leader for the Congress party in Karnataka when he led the party to a major victory in the Legislative Assembly elections in 2013 that catapulted him to the top post and completing a full term in office. He is now in the forefront of the Congress' campaign for the ensuing elections to the Lok Sabha and is confident that the party in association with the Janata Dal (Secular) will win a majority of the 28 seats in Karnataka.

Seventy-two year old Siddaramaiah is presently the leader of the Congress Legislature Party in the Legislative Assembly and is also the Chairman of the Congress-JD (S) Coordination

Committee. His programmes and policies during his tenure as Chief Minister is popularly known as the “Karnataka Model of Development” with a focus on social inclusion and equitable distribution. Given his present stature in Karnataka politics, Siddaramaiah is regarded as a Super CM of the State.

In this interview with S. Rajendran, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, Bengaluru, Siddaramaiah dwells at length on the future of the Congress in Karnataka and the plan to expose what he calls the misdeeds of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Excerpts:

Karnataka is one of the few States where the Congress is in power. There is adequate scope for the Congress to bring about a resurgence in its political fortunes by ensuring a good performance in the general elections of 2019. Do you agree?

Yes, of course, there is a good chance for the Congress to make a comeback. All we have to do is to expose the BJP of its corruption and its unconstitutional, undemocratic approach to control our nation’s important institutions.

Also, the BJP and the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, have failed miserably to fulfill their promises made ahead of the 2014 elections. There is not even one social or

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economic policy that has proved to be beneficial for the country. People are still waiting for *Acche Din* that was promised but instead had to bear the brunt of shortsighted, demonetisation, GST, and many other policies. There is no doubt that BJP will not come back to power but how we can convince people is what can make the difference.

BJP is trying to dictate people’s preferences, culture, way of living and basically everything but Congress on the other hand believes in ‘Unity in Diversity’ for inclusive development and Karnataka itself is a testimony for its approach. Though it is an oldest national party with rich legacy, it never meddles with the sentiments of Kannadigas or our culture when in power. This very approach of respecting everyone is what is making people yearn for the Congress.

Before the recent Assembly elections, we were in power only in 3 States but now we are in 3 more States that were previously held by BJP. This is a sign of the decreasing popularity of the BJP mainly because of their misdeeds and at the same time people realising that Congress can genuinely stand with the people during crises and can take all sections of the people along with them.

What are your views on the Congress party's alliance with the Janata Dal (Secular) in forming a Government in Karnataka? Will this alliance hold good for the full five year term of the Legislative Assembly or will it snap after the elections to the Lok Sabha?

One thing was clear that we did not have the numbers to form the government and neither did the BJP have the numbers. There were only two options before us: one, either sit in the opposition and let the

BJP indulge in "Operation Kamala" (an euphemism to obtain majority) to form the government or form a post-poll alliance with JD(S) and

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keep the communal BJP out of power. We had seen the BJP's performance in our State between 2008-13 that mostly made headlines for their resort politics, corruption, unstable government, jail visits, etc. Also, in the last five years we are seeing how BJP at the centre is controlling constitutionally backed institutions in an authoritative way to curtail criticism, voices of dissent and opinions of the weak. We did not want Karnataka to face similar situation again and it was the need of the hour to form a coalition government by joining hands with JD(S).

About the stability of this coalition government, there is no doubt that this government will complete its full five year term. When Congress comes back to power at the centre, we shall use the opportunity to improve centre-State relationship and bring in more developmental projects for the State but unfortunately this did not happen in last five years because of the step-motherly treatment by the BJP towards opposition constituencies. But on the other hand BJP is trying to create confusions in the minds of people to tarnish the image of the government but the attempts of the BJP will not stop our coalition government from working for the people.

A large number of senior Congress leaders in the State feel let down by the understanding with the JD (S) in forming a Government under the leadership of H.D.Kumaraswamy. Given the animosity between the two parties at all levels what are the plans to face the crucial elections to the Lok Sabha?

There is no in-principle opposition by any of our party leaders for forming a coalition government because even they are aware of the reality. All are committed to the ideology and the decision of our party leadership. There is no question of letting down our legislators because now we have a greater say in the decision making process compared to what it would have been if the BJP was in power. True that the Congress and the JD(S) fought the elections against each other at all levels but they are also mature to understand what is good for the state. Inclusive development and peaceful co-existence is more important than politics fueled by selfish reasons and our party workers prefer the former. We have proved our commitment of our alliance during the recent Lok Sabha bye-election and that turned out to be a great success.

These sorts of rumours are created by BJP to create rifts and to make it easy for their “Operation Kamala” but now that they have failed in their attempt, it is clear that it is not easy to break the Congress party that is bonded by strong constitutional values.

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In this context, there is no need for any extra effort to guide the leaders or party workers to face the elections collectively. There shall be mutual support during the whole campaign and election process that will help us reach out to the electorate on a massive scale. The collective might will prove detrimental to the BJP and they will bite the dust when the results are announced.

The Congress party requires a proper understanding with the JD (S) to finalise sharing of seats to contest the Lok Sabha elections together. Being the chairman of the coordination committee of the two parties will you be successful in evolving a lasting understanding and will the two parties have a joint campaign irrespective of the differences at the local level?

Any alliance needs proper understanding between the parties for it to yield results. Once we are sure that both are on the same page then we will finalise seat-sharing

arrangements. In our case as we have already formed a coalition government, we just have to get onto seat-sharing which will be based on the winnability of the candidates in each constituency along with the popularity of the parties. There shall definitely be many aspiring candidates from both the parties and it will be challenging not just as an alliance but also for each party to pacify our aspirants. I will call for a coordination committee meeting to take it further. As I have already told, “our party workers are committed to any decision of the leadership because they have faith in us. This was manifested in the recent Lok Sabha bye-election”.

Having been a Chief Minister of Karnataka for a full five-year term, it is obvious that you have emerged as a popular and mass leader. Will you be able to deliver an adequate number of seats for the party although you yourself lost one of the two seats that you contested in the elections to the Legislative Assembly held last year.

Yes, we delivered as promised during our government and with all our programs aimed at inclusive development and social justice, our term garnered quite a good appreciation and was branded as Karnataka model of development. It was my firsthand experience of getting discriminated and then my fight against the same discrimination motivated me for formulating pro poor policies. This definitely garnered greater support from all the sections of people and we were sure of winning assembly elections. But as everyone knows, elections are not just fought on developmental issues but also on many identities that people want to associate themselves with. The BJP almost managed to succeed by polarising people on caste and religious lines by spreading fake news.

It is unfortunate that even after 70 years of independence, we are still slaves of prejudices, social structures and unjustified entitlements. But nothing will deter me from working towards creating an equitable society.2018 election inputs. Though I will campaign aggressively throughout the election season, it will be the collective participation of all the party leaders and workers that will script victory in the coming election. Congress has always fought elections under collective leadership. It was the same in 2013, in 2014 and in 2018 and will be the same in 2019 also.

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What is your view on the prospects for the BJP in the forthcoming general elections in southern India, and specifically in Karnataka?

Not just in South India, their prospects are bleak in the whole country. Demonetisation and GST were the “biggest Jumlas” in the history of Independent India. These two policies undid what Congress achieved since Independence. In the last five years, the BJP has destroyed farmers, MSMEs, jobs, investments, businesses, start-ups, etc. They have not fulfilled any promises made during previous election rallies. They will lose miserably even in the Hindi heartland and will not even get 50% of the seats compared to 2014.



DMK President M.K. Stalin, AICC General Secretary Mukul Wasnik, Congress general secretary (organisation) and Kerala MP K.C. Venugopal and TNCC president K.S. Alagiri after signing the seat-sharing agreement at Anna Arivalayam, DMK party headquarters, for the upcoming Lok Sabha election, in Chennai on February 21, 2019. Photo: B. Jothi Ramalingam

In Tamil Nadu they have signed an alliance with AIADMK party which is already facing charges of corruption, internal rebellion and strong anti-incumbency. This will actually become negative for BJP. DMK is emerging stronger in Tamil Nadu, people have realised that previous DMK governance was much better than that of AIADMK. When it comes to Kerala, they tried to break through by politicising and

communalising the Sabarimala issue but Keralites are far more intelligent to fall into the BJP's trap. People are aware that the Sabarimala issue was because of court intervention and not motivated by any party and this makes it harder for BJP. In Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, people are aware of how BJP betrayed them by not granting special economic status as promised during previous election. Both TRS and TDP which were allies with BJP are now anti-BJP and as it is BJP has negligible presence in those States.

In Karnataka, BJP has reminded people of their worst governance between 2008-13 by attempting Operation Kamala in which they failed. People have also heard what the former Chief Minister, B.S.Yeddyurappa has spoken about how Modi and Amit Shah are manipulating our institutions and how much they are willing to bribe MLAs to switch sides. People are fed up of BJP for not letting the government to function, even when they are in opposition. With the possibility of the alliance with JD(S), BJP will be routed out of Karnataka in the coming election.

Statements blaming the BJP for attempting to woo Congress legislators to form a Government look out of place since your party legislators themselves are talking to the BJP only with an eye on position and power. Is that right?

Our party has taken cognizance of the recent events surrounding the failed attempt for Operation Kamala. We have submitted our petition to disqualify four of our

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MLAs according to anti-defection law based on the *prima-facie* evidence of them falling to the trap of BJP's Operation Kamala. Be it position or power, we at Congress don't tolerate such betrayal by the elected representatives. They are democratically elected by the people and shall be completely responsible for any of their deviations from constitutional practices. MLAs should understand that only 34 of them can become ministers and able and experienced MLAs will get priority.

This does not discount the fact that BJP is more responsible for all these confusions and drama. It is one man's selfish ulterior motive is what is disturbing the governance of the State. Yes, it is B.S. Yeddyurappa's thirst for the CM's chair. Their whole plan is now in the public domain in the form of audio clips and there is nothing left

to say further. It is quite astonishing and devastating to understand how BJP can source so much of money to fund Operation Kamala. This is nothing new about BJP as we had all witnessed similar stupidity during 2008-13. Funny part is that in 2008, BJP MLAs were operating on their own MLAs. Sure thing is that people are watching all this drama directed by BJP.

How many Congress legislators will be fielded in the elections to the Lok Sabha. Have you been talking to the legislators concerned on this matter?

Fielding incumbent legislators depends on the chances of winnability in the elections to the Lok Sabha. The geographical area of a legislative assembly constituency is much smaller than that of a Lok Sabha constituency. All these aspects will be considered when we get down to finalising the party candidates.

You have often stated that you would like to retire from politics and yet you contested the last elections. What are the compulsions in continuing in politics?

I have never said that I will retire from politics but what I had told was that I would retire from electoral politics. Once a politician always a politician. There is no retirement in politics as we would have

There is no retirement in politics as we would have invested ourselves fully to serve our people.

invested ourselves fully to serve our people. For me, my entry into politics was not backed by any money or muscle power, it was through persistent fight against inequality, discrimination and injustices. I dreamt of creating an equitable society that has respect for women, Dalits, minorities, poor people, etc. In fact, I do not want any sort of distinction in the society. I understand that these are fundamental issues that are ingrained in our daily lives as product of practice since ages. These issues cannot be solved by one person or few people in a time span of 50 years. This is a continuous and incremental process till we evolve to become a utopian society. We come across incidents of racism and class struggle even in USA even after 250 years of American revolution and other waves of neo-liberalism and globalisation. The reason for giving USA as example is because many assume it to be an idealistic world but not so and even they are evolving.

So for a politician like me, it is very difficult to sit idle and watch these practices instead of actively participating to contribute in the realisation of an ideal society.

Hence it is impossible for me to retire from politics. Even as CM of Karnataka, my work ensured to provide at least an incremental relief to all sections of our society. This will continue till my last day.

With respect to electoral politics, I realised that it would be like running away from taking the responsibility after being Chief Minister for five years. So it was necessary for me to contest again in the 2018 elections.

The development of Karnataka has suffered a lot over the past two decades since the party which rules in the State has been different from the one at the Centre. Do you expect this to change in the ensuing elections?

It is partially true and partially false. Development of any State depends on both Union and State governments. Unfortunately, since 2006 till 2013, Karnataka witnessed political turmoil marked by corruption, Operation Kamala, resort politics, fight for position, infighting in the ruling party, etc. In all those years, the ruling party representatives took development for a ride and focused only on selfish political gains even if it was compromising on delivering basic needs to citizens. People wanted developmental politics and then we came to power in 2013. By the time we corrected all the administrative deficiencies of the previous five years, we saw a change in the regime at the national level.

Everybody is aware of how the BJP started treating Dalits, farmers, marginalised people, poor people, activists, minorities, etc once they came to power. They started meddling with democratic and constitutional institutions to protect their leaders and also unleash their political vendetta. They also started ignoring non-NDA ruled States and later started reducing allocation for developmental projects along with preventing them from performing. We have seen that in Delhi, West Bengal, Puducherry, and Karnataka is no different. I shall not get into the details but our State's interests were not protected by the Centre whether it was Mahadayi issue, Cauvery issue, Karnataka flag issue or even with the allocation of drought relief funds and I can go on. It shows that State government may be responsible but at the same time the Union government should reciprocate to the State's needs. If Congress led UPA comes to power at the centre, I am very sure that with a proactive coalition

Government here and that at the Centre, Karnataka will progress by leaps and bounds.

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In a journalistic career of nearly 40 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. He can be contacted at srajendran.thehindu@gmail.com].