Karnataka Assembly Elections 2018:
An Unlikely Alliance forms the Government

Almost 10 days after a hung verdict in the Karnataka Assembly elections in India, a Congress-Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)] coalition won a vote of confidence on the floor of the House on 25 May 2018. In the elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 104 seats, but fell short of a majority by eight seats in the 224-member Karnataka Assembly. Both the BJP and the second-placed Congress, which teamed up with JD(S), a regional party, staked a claim to form the government. This was followed by a dramatic sequence of events which included the swearing in of the BJP's leader, B S Yeddyurappa, as chief minister, the Supreme Court's intervention in bringing forward the date of the trust vote, Yeddyurappa's resignation and the eventual appointment of JD(S) president, H D Kumaraswamy, as chief minister.

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As many analysts had predicted, the southern Indian state of Karnataka threw up a hung verdict in the Assembly elections on 12 May 2018. Contrary to many pre-poll surveys, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won more seats than anticipated. It gained 104 seats in the 224-member Karnataka Assembly – this was more than double its tally in the 2013 Assembly

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elections. The ruling Congress won 78 seats while the regional party, Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)] had 37 seats. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which had allied with the JD(S), won one seat.[2] Despite its impressive numbers, the BJP fell short of a majority by only eight seats.

Immediately after the results were declared on 15 May 2018, the Congress announced that it was extending support to the JD(S) to form the government with the coalition commanding a simple majority of 116 seats. The Congress also offered the chief minister's position to JD(S) president, H D Kumaraswamy. However, Karnataka's governor, the constitutional authority empowered to appoint a state chief minister, took the decision to first invite the BJP to form the government.

Accordingly, BJP leader, B S Yeddyurappa, was sworn in as chief minister on 17 May 2018 and was given 15 days to prove his party's majority on the floor of the House. The governor's decision sparked protests by the Congress and the JD(S), and allegations that the BJP would try to wean away elected members from its rival parties by offering inducements, including money.[3] Acting on a petition by the Congress-JD(S) alliance, the Supreme Court refused to stay Yeddyurappa's swearing-in. However, the court, subsequently, ruled that the floor test must take place on 19 May 2018 when Yeddyurappa chose to resign rather than face a trust vote. Kumaraswamy, in turn, was sworn in as chief minister on 23 May 2018 and Karnataka Congress chief, G Parameshwara, was appointed his deputy. The Congress-JD(S) coalition faced its own floor test on 25 May 2018, where it won the trust vote after the BJP legislators staged a walkout.

Kumaraswamy's swearing-in ceremony became an occasion to showcase opposition unity against the BJP, with several regional leaders, including Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, BSP chief Mayawati and Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav, being present.[4] Whether this unity can last till the 2019 national elections and pose a serious challenge to the BJP remains to be seen.

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[2]   Election Commission of India: General Election to Vidhan Sabha Trends & Result 2018. http://eciresults.nic.in. Accessed on 25 May 2018.

[3]   "BJP offered JD(S) MLAs Rs 100 crore, alleges Kumaraswamy", *The Times of India*, 16 May 2018. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bjp-offered-jds-mlas-rs-100-crore-alleges-kumaraswamy/articleshow/64187520.cms. Accessed on 25 May 2018.

[4]   "Kumaraswamy Takes Oath Amid Opposition Show Of Unity In Karnataka" *NDTV*, 24 May 2018. https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/jds-hd-kumaraswamy-takes-oath-as-karnataka-chief-minister-1856432. Accessed on 26 May 2018.

Analysis of the Election Results

Although the BJP won 26 seats more than the Congress, the election verdict was much closer than it appeared. In fact, the Congress won 38 per cent of the vote share, marginally more than the BJP's vote share of 36 per cent, but this failed to translate into a greater share of seats. This was due to the support for the Congress being much more dispersed than that for the BJP. For instance, in coastal Karnataka, which has 19 constituencies and is a hotbed of Hindutva politics, the BJP won 16 seats. The return of Yeddyurappa, who had floated his own party during the 2013 Assembly elections, to the BJP also meant that the Lingayats, the community to which Yeddyurappa belongs, voted heavily for the BJP. This resulted in the BJP's vote share jumping by 16 per cent, compared to that in 2013. Indeed, the move by the Congress to grant minority status to the Lingayat community, which constitutes around 17 per cent of Karnataka's population, seemed to have backfired. In the Bombay-Karnataka region, which is a Lingayat stronghold and accounts for 50 constituencies, the BJP won 26 seats, as compared to 13 for the Congress. Overall, in the 70 constituencies with a Lingayat population of over 15 per cent, the BJP won 38 seats as against the Congress' 21 seats.

Many keen observers of Karnataka politics noted that there was no strong anti-incumbency wave against the outgoing Chief Minister Siddaramiah. However, despite the absence of anti-incumbency, the Congress fell way short of a majority. One reason for that was Siddaramiah's over-reliance on welfare programmes targetted at the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities and Other Backward Classes. Unfortunately, the social coalition stitched together by Siddaramiah called AHINDA, a Kannada acronym for minorities, Dalits and backward castes, failed to deliver for the Congress. Second, the AHINDA also served to alienate the dominant Lingayat and Vokkaliga castes. While the BJP won a majority of the Lingayat-dominated constituencies, the Vokkaligas largely preferred the JD(S) to the Congress. In the Old Mysuru region, which has 66 constituencies, the JD(S) edged out the Congress, winning 25 seats as compared to 20 seats for the Congress. In fact, Siddaramiah himself lost from Chamundeshwari, one of the two seats that he contested, in the Old Mysuru region. Finally, the Narendra Modi factor could have tipped the balance in favour of the BJP. As in Gujarat, where the prime minister played a decisive role in bringing the BJP back to power, Modi's hectic campaigning in Karnataka in the final days of electioneering possibly had a decisive impact.

The Unlikely Alliance

The Congress-JD(S) alliance would have been unlikely before the elections since both parties had campaigned bitterly against each other. Indeed, the Congress president, Rahul Gandhi, had even called the JD(S) the "B team of the BJP".[5] In normal circumstances, it might have made more sense for the JD(S) to tie up with the BJP since the latter is governing at the Centre and has enormous resources at its disposal. However, given the nature of the verdict and the Congress' willingness to give Kumaraswamy the chief ministership, the incentive for the JD(S) to ally with the Congress was greater.

Faced with this unlikely coalition, the BJP had no option but to get members of the Congress and JD(S) to defect from their parties. Under India's anti-defection law, an elected member can be disqualified if he votes or abstains from voting in the House contrary to his party's whip or directive. The BJP's game plan would have been to convince some legislators from the rival parties to abstain from or be absent during voting so as to enable the BJP to win the trust vote. While this would have meant disqualification for the members who defied the party's whip, they could have later contested elections again on a BJP ticket. However, the Supreme Court's order of bringing forward the date of the floor test disrupted the BJP's plans.

The Karnataka verdict put on display the unsavoury side of Indian politics. There were allegations against the BJP of attempting to poach legislators from rival parties to prove its majority. The BJP, on its part, accused the Congress-JD(S) of an opportunistic alliance. The Karnataka result also threw the spotlight on the institution of state governors and whether they play a partisan role. It has become customary in India for governing parties at the Centre to appoint loyalists as state governors. Karnataka's Governor, Vajubhai Vala, is no exception. He is a long-time BJP member and served as finance minister in Gujarat for over 12 years, nine of which were under Modi when the latter was the state's chief minister.[6] Hence, in situations such as a hung House, the governors tend not to take an impartial position.

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[5] "Karnataka elections: Rahul Gandhi calls JDS B-team of BJP", Sharan Poovanna, *Livemint*, 22 March 2018. https://www.livemint.com/Politics/YrCpcF8Kt2BpLBGJfzEGRJ/Karnataka-elections-Rahul-Gandhi-calls-JDS-Bteam-of-BJP.html. Accessed on 24 May 2018.

[6] "Meet Vajubhai Vala, the Man Who Currently Holds the Strings in Karnataka", Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta, *The Wire*, 16 May 2018. https://thewire.in/politics/vajubhai-vala-profile-bjp-karnataka-governor. Accessed on 25 May 2018.

Conclusion

While the Karnataka verdict gave some succour to the Congress in the face of successive reverses in Assembly elections, whether the Congress-JD(S) coalition can provide a stable government is a moot question. The last time the two parties formed the government in Karnataka after the 2004 Assembly elections, the experiment did not work well. In 2006, Kumaraswamy pulled out of the coalition and allied with the BJP. The Congress and the JD(S), despite being on opposite sides during the election campaign, have come together in a marriage of convenience. The Congress has not only gotten the deputy chief minister's position, but it is also expected to get two-thirds of the ministerial berths. However, it will require skillful management and plenty of compromises from both parties for the coalition to last its full term and paper over its inherent contradictions.

For the BJP, the Karnataka verdict halts consecutive wins in state elections. It also appears to be an embarrassment for the BJP's central leadership, particularly party president Amit Shah, who had announced immediately after the Karnataka result that the BJP would be forming the government in the state. In earlier elections, in the three states of Goa, Manipur and Meghalaya, the BJP had outmanoeuvred the Congress, despite the latter being the single largest party, to form the government. In Karnataka, the Congress turned the tables on the BJP.

As for the 2019 national elections, the Karnataka polls have different lessons for the Congress and the BJP. For the Congress, the message is that has to be smarter at tying up pre-poll alliances for 2019 if it is to remain relevant. Indeed, a pooling of the votes obtained by Congress and the JD(S) in the just-held election suggests that they would have won 156 seats in the Karnataka Assembly if they had contested as an alliance. The same numbers projected for the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) constituencies would mean the Congress-JD(S) combine winning 22 out of 28 seats in Karnataka.

For the BJP, the party's strong performance in Karnataka would make it hopeful of repeating or bettering its performance in the state in 2019 as compared to the 2014 national elections, when it won 17 seats. For that to happen though, the Congress-JD(S) coalition would have to fall apart by 2019. The BJP also still seems to be too dependent on Modi's popularity and

charisma in winning elections, something which could prove to be an advantage as well as a weakness in 2019.

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