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Karnataka Assembly Elections 2018:

A Close Contest on the Cards

The southern Indian State of Karnataka goes to the polls on 12 May 2018. The elections are particularly important for the Congress, since Karnataka, along with Punjab, are the only two major States governed by the party. For the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), too, this is a significant election since it does not have a presence in any of the southern Indian States. However, a third player, the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], could play the role of kingmaker if the election results are close.

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The final phase of campaigning is on in the southern Indian State of Karnataka, where the Assembly elections will be held on 12 May 2018. The elections will see the ruling Congress pitted against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with a regional party, the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], likely to be an important third player. The stakes are particularly high for the Congress since Karnataka, along with Punjab, are the only two major States governed by the party. For the BJP, too, this is a significant election since it does not have a foothold in any of the southern Indian States. Besides, Karnataka is the only southern Indian State where the BJP has previously held power. Moreover, the results in Karnataka will be crucial for both

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the Congress and the BJP in terms of electoral momentum looking ahead to the national elections in 2019.

The Congress' Prospects

Unlike in most other States, the Congress is much better organised and unified in Karnataka. In Chief Minister Siddaramiah, the Congress has a leader who has a state-wide appeal and is seen to have governed reasonably well. During his five-year tenure, the chief minister launched several welfare schemes modelled after other States, most notably Tamil Nadu.² One of the first such schemes was the *Anna Bhagya* scheme, which provided free rice to the State's residents. Another scheme, *Ksheera Bhagya*, supplied free milk to schoolchildren. Some government schemes such as *Runamukta Bhagya*, which handed out loan waivers, were targeted at the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and minorities. The latest such scheme was the setting up of low-cost eateries called Indira Canteens, based on the Amma Canteens from neighbouring Tamil Nadu.

Indeed, some scholars have argued that Siddaramiah has put in place a 'Karnataka model' where the gap between the OBCs, the SCs and the Muslims on the one hand, and the dominant castes on the other, has narrowed considerably, compared to States such as Gujarat or Maharashtra. For instance, the annual per capita mean income of the OBCs represented 89 per cent of that of the dominant castes – Lingayats and Vokkaligas – in Karnataka whereas in Haryana, Gujarat and Maharashtra, it was 49, 50 and 78 per cent respectively.³ The social coalition stitched together by Siddaramiah even has a name, AHINDA, which is a Kannada acronym for the combination of minorities, Dalits and backward castes.

Besides reaching out to various segments of the population, Siddaramiah is also banking on two other things. First, he has tried to carve out a separate regional identity for Karnataka by coming up with ideas such as a State flag for Karnataka. Second, and more importantly, he and the Congress have proposed minority status for the Lingayat community in Karnataka.

² "Will the bhagya welfare schemes tilt fortunes in Siddaramiah's favour?", Nagesh Prabhu, *The Hindu*, 29 April 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/karnataka-2018/will-the-bhagya-welfare-schemes-tilt-fortunes-in-siddaramiahs-favour/article23721033.ece>. Accessed on 3 May 2018.

³ "The Karnataka model: The state offers an alternative trajectory based on growth, and closing of social, religious gaps", Christophe Jaffrelot and Kalaiyaran A, *The Indian Express*, 8 March 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-karnataka-model-5090001/>. Accessed on 4 May 2018.

The Lingayats constitute an estimated 17 per cent of Karnataka's population and have voted for the BJP in the past two decades. It is also the sect to which the former Karnataka chief minister and the BJP's chief ministerial candidate, B S Yeddyurappa, belongs. With the minority status proposal, the Congress hopes to wean away a chunk of the Lingayat vote from the BJP. Indeed, the Congress has given tickets to several Lingayat candidates, particularly in north Karnataka where the Lingayats are dominant.

The Congress is, however, up against electoral history in Karnataka. Since 1985, no incumbent government has been able to win an election in Karnataka. Whether Siddaramiah's considerable organisational skills can buck this 33-year-old trend remains to be seen. Another factor, which works against any incumbent in Karnataka, is the perennial shortage of water for irrigation in parts of the State and the number of drought-affected districts. The anger of the farmers from these districts is often directed at the government of the day during elections.

The BJP's Strategy

Unlike in some other States, where the BJP did not announce a chief ministerial candidate, in Karnataka, the party has named Yeddyurappa. Yeddyurappa was appointed chief minister by the BJP in 2008 but was forced to resign in 2011 when he faced several corruption charges regarding a mining scam in the State. Subsequently, he quit the BJP, and for the 2013 Karnataka Assembly elections, Yeddyurappa floated his own political party, the Karnataka Jana Paksha (KJP). Though the KJP won only six seats and 10 per cent of the vote share, it hurt the BJP in the 2013 elections and indirectly helped the Congress win the polls. In 2013, the Congress won 122 seats in the 224-member Karnataka Assembly, compared to the BJP's 40 seats. In end-2013, Yeddyurappa returned to the BJP and merged his party with the BJP. This had an impact in the 2014 national elections where the BJP won 17 of the 28 seats in Karnataka.

There were some who felt that Yeddyurappa should not have been projected as the BJP's chief ministerial candidate in 2018, given his tainted past as well as his age (he has just turned 75). However, his supporters believe that he remains a popular figure and will be

especially useful in getting the Lingayat vote for the BJP. Besides, Yeddyurappa was not convicted on any of charges that were pressed against him in 2011.

The BJP has not only bet on Yeddyurappa, but also on many of his associates who continue to face charges in the mining scam. The most notable of these are the Reddy brothers who are still under investigation. The most prominent of the Reddy brothers, Janardhan Reddy, a former BJP minister in Karnataka, is out on bail and has not been given a ticket. He has also been barred by the Supreme Court from campaigning in Bellary, the epicenter of the mining scandal.⁴ However, one of his brothers, G Somasekhar Reddy, is contesting on a BJP ticket from Bellary and even shared the stage with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during election campaigning.⁵ Another brother, G Karunakara Reddy, is contesting from Harappanahalli. In fact, one of Janardhan Reddy's close associates, B Sriramulu, is pitted against Siddaramiah in Badami, one of the two constituencies from where the chief minister is contesting the elections.

Though the Congress has been critical of the BJP for fielding tainted candidates, the Congress too has not shied away from giving tickets to candidates who were associated with the Reddy brothers. Two of them, Anand Singh and B Nagendra, are contesting on the Congress tickets.

The Third Player

Though the contest in Karnataka is primarily between the incumbent Congress and the BJP, the JD(S) could possibly play the role of kingmaker. The JD(S) founder and former prime minister, H D Deve Gowda, and his son and party president, H D Kumaraswamy, have both publicly said they are capable of winning a majority on their own.⁶ However, it is likely that

⁴ "Karnataka assembly elections: SC dismisses G Janardhan Reddy's plea to campaign in Bellary", *Times of India*, 4 May 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/karnataka-assembly-polls-sc-dismisses-g-janardhan-reddy-plea-to-campaign-in-bellary/articleshow/64026825.cms>. Accessed on 5 May 2018.

⁵ "Karnataka Assembly Elections 2018: One Reddy by his side, PM Narendra Modi slams those calling Bellary a home of thieves", Johnson T A, *The Indian Express*, 4 May 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/elections/karnataka-assembly-elections-2018-one-reddy-by-his-side-pm-modi-slams-those-calling-bellary-a-home-of-thieves-5162708/>. Accessed on 5 May 2018.

⁶ "Karnataka Polls: "I Will Be King, Not Kingmaker", Says Janata Dal (Secular) Leader HD Kumaraswamy", *NDTV*, 29 April 2018. <https://www.ndtv.com/karnataka-news/karnataka-assembly-election-2018-i-will-be-king-not-kingmaker-says-jd-s-leader-hd-kumaraswamy-1844503>. Accessed on 4 May 2018.

they could play a decisive role if there is a hung Assembly. In 2013, the JD(S) won 40 seats, the same number as the BJP.

The JD(S) has a history of allying with both the Congress and the BJP. After the 2004 Assembly election, the JD(S) formed a coalition government with the Congress. In 2006, Kumaraswamy pulled out of the coalition and allied with the BJP. However, when Kumaraswamy was supposed to vacate the chief minister's chair after 18 months, under the power sharing arrangement, for the BJP's Yeddyurappa, he refused. This necessitated Assembly elections in 2008. Hence, it is conceivable that the JD(S) could ally with either the BJP or Congress depending on the numbers. However, given that the BJP is at the Centre, the chances of the JD(S) allying with the BJP to form the government are much higher. The scenario of smaller parties allying with the BJP, despite the Congress having higher numbers, has occurred in some of the Northeastern States, as well as in Goa. This could occur in Karnataka too in the case of a hung Assembly.

Conclusion

Opinion polls are predicting a tight contest in Karnataka with neither the Congress nor the BJP winning a clear majority.⁷ As in other States, the BJP would be hoping that Modi's election rallies in the last few days of campaigning will give the party a boost.⁸ The prime minister was supposed to address 15 election rallies in Karnataka but increased the number to 21, keeping in mind perhaps the close nature of the contest. The BJP has also employed its other heavyweights, including Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, in the election campaign. However, it could well be that when the results are announced on 15 May 2018, the JD(S) could play a key role in deciding who forms the next government in Karnataka.

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⁷ "Rivals neck and neck in Karnataka poll: Survey", *The Times of India*, 24 April 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/rivals-neck-and-neck-in-karnataka-poll-survey/articleshow/63888651.cms>. Accessed on 5 May 2018.

⁸ "Karnataka Assembly election 2018: BJP banks on Modi push for brute majority, increases PM's rallies from 15 to 21", *Financial Express*, 4 May 2018. <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/karnataka-assembly-election-2018-bjp-banks-on-modi-push-for-brute-majority-increases-pms-rallies-from-15-to-21/1155735/>. Accessed on 5 May 2018.