

## Breaking a 40-year Jinx in Kerala: Left Democratic Front Returns to Power

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### Summary

*The recently-concluded Kerala Assembly elections resulted in the Left Democratic Front (LDF) breaking a 40-year jinx of no incumbent government ever returning to power. The Bharatiya Janata Party did not even secure a single seat in the Assembly. The United Democratic Front (UDF) managed only 41 seats as against the 99 seats bagged by the LDF. The LDF victory has been hailed as a reward for its welfare schemes and good disaster management.*

The election to the 140-seat Kerala assembly was held in a single phase on 6 April 2021. While the incumbent Left Democratic Front (LDF) government sought to retain power, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was banking on anti-incumbency of the government to wrest power. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also launched a vigorous campaign to improve its vote share. However, in a major break from the past of the state changing government every five years, the LDF retained power by winning 99 seats. The UDF won 41 seats, but the BJP drew a blank.

Kerala attained statehood in 1956. In the first election to the Legislative Assembly, it created history for bringing into power the only democratically elected [Communist government](#) anywhere in the world in 1957. However, the Communist Party of India (CPI) ministry, led by E M S Nampoodiripad, could not complete its tenure and was dismissed in 1959 by the Union government using Article 356 of the Constitution. The state then witnessed a series of Left party-dominated governments from 1967. The 1960 election witnessed the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, a precursor of the BJP, contest elections for the first time in Kerala. The party contested in subsequent Assembly elections but managed to get only one seat in the 2016 election.

It was in the mid-term election of 1982 that a polarisation of parties took place with the CPI and Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] coalescing into the now existing LDF. There are now two main coalitions – the CPI (M)-led LDF and the Congress-led UDF. These have alternated in forming governments since 1982. This year is the first time that Kerala is seeing a break in this pattern.

Prior to the current election, the [Congress faced factionalism](#), with P C Chacko, one of its senior-most members resigning from the party citing groupism within the party. He claimed two groups led by Oomen Chandy and Ramesh Chennithala were choosing their own candidates. However, the party, which received a drubbing in the local body elections held earlier, recognised the criticality of the assembly election and its managers swiftly put aside their differences and closed ranks. In their campaign, they targetted the Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan, on his Secretary's involvement in the gold smuggling case. They also launched a tirade against the government for its handling of the Sabrimala temple

controversy alleging that it encouraged women activists to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the shrine.

The BJP made a very serious and concerted effort to make inroads into 48 seats where it felt it was capable of bagging more than 30,000 votes. It was assisted in its effort by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). It felt that the fast-changing political dynamics offered the BJP a pretty good opportunity. The RSS offered to bolster the campaign from the polling booth level. Its strategy was to focus on 20 of the identified 48 seats which offered a winning potential. It hoped to double the votes it had polled in the last election. This calculation was predicated on the experience that often in Kerala, the victorious candidate needs to poll over 50,000 votes to gain a victory margin of a few thousand votes. Going by this trend, the BJP calculated that with the charisma of its candidates, it could muster a few thousand more votes in constituencies where it had garnered 30,000 votes. The party's national leadership spared no effort and fielded all its big guns to canvass for votes. It enrolled the 89-year-old, E Sreedharan, hoping to cash in on his credibility as a 'Metro Man'. Sreedharan, however, lost. There were reports that local adjustments among candidates took place. O Rajagopal, the 91-year-old BJP legislator who has been the only Member of Legislative Assembly from that party and did not contest this time due to his advanced age, [spoke of adjustments](#) amongst the Congress, Indian Union Muslim League and BJP (CoLeBi – as the pseudonym goes) in three constituencies.

All allegations against the Chief Minister did not sway popular opinion against the LDF. The government weathered it all riding on the popularity of its welfare schemes and crisis management during natural disasters such as floods and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chief Minister's mass appeal prevailed. The twin factors of factionalism within the Congress and the BJP further eating into the Congress vote bank also helped the LDF. During the 2016 election, in central Kerala, comprising districts such as Idukki, Kotayyam, Ernakulam, Thrissur and Palakkad, the LDF won 31 seats as against 21 by the UDF. In the current year, the LDF wrested 36 seats as against 17 of the UDF. In the southern districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Pathnamthitta and Alapuzha, the LDF increased its tally, winning 35 seats as against four of the UDF. The comparable position was 32 and six in 2016. The remaining districts of north Kerala did not see any change from the results of 2016 with LDF and UDF winning 28 and 20 seats respectively in both elections.

It is widely believed that the Kerala voter has given a 'thumbs up' to good governance of the incumbent government and has not been swayed by communal or divisive politics. Bucking the trend of alternating governments since 1982, the state has opted for a welfare-oriented administration and infrastructure creation.

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