

The BJP Faces Anti-Incumbency in Karnataka

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Summary

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) faces a crucial test in the Assembly election in Karnataka, the only state in southern India where it is in power. Anti-incumbency and divisions within the BJP have given the main opposition party – the Congress – a boost in the run-up to the election.

The Assembly elections in Karnataka, scheduled for 10 May 2023, is the first major election in India this year. Karnataka, which sends 28 members to Indian Parliament, is the only state in southern India, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in power, is a key contest for several reasons.

First, Karnataka, which elected 25 BJP members of parliament in 2019, is the first and only state in south India where the BJP has been able to form the government. Indeed, the BJP first formed a full-term government in Karnataka as far back as 2008. Second, unlike the northern states, the BJP in Karnataka has factions and regional leaders who do not always bend to the central leadership's will. Third, Karnataka is critical to the fortunes of the Congress since this is the only state in south India, besides Kerala, where it still has a viable organisation and retains the ability to win elections on its own.

While the BJP is currently in power in Karnataka, after the 2018 Assembly elections, a coalition of the Congress and Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)] formed the government, winning a combined 117 of 224 seats in the state Assembly to the BJP's tally of 104 seats. While the BJP won the highest number of seats, the Congress had a higher vote share of 38 per cent, compared to the BJP's 36 per cent. Fourteen months later, the coalition government was brought down after 16 legislators from the ruling combine resigned and the BJP returned to power under former chief minister, B S Yediyurappa.

The tenure of the BJP government has not been entirely smooth with Yediyurappa resigning as chief minister in July 2021 and being replaced by Basavaraj Bommai. While both Yediyurappa and the BJP central leadership were at pains to note that the resignation was an amicable one due to Yediyurappa's advanced age, there were indications that the transition was not completely voluntary. Though Yediyurappa announced his retirement from electoral politics in 2022 and was appointed a member of the BJP's central parliamentary board, he continues to be a key figure in the state's politics.

The divisions within the state's BJP have meant that the party potentially faces an uphill task in winning a majority. At least 10 senior leaders from the BJP, including former chief minister, Jagadish Shettar, and former deputy chief minister, Laxman Savadi, have left the party. Both Shettiar and Savadi are contesting on the Congress' tickets in the coming elections. There are charges of corruption against the incumbent government too. The [NDTV-CSDS](#)

[pre-election survey](#) in Karnataka has revealed that over half the respondents believe that corruption in the state has increased since the last elections were held. According to the survey, the Congress is also more popular among poor voters.

The BJP's support in Karnataka is concentrated in certain parts of the state, compared to the Congress which is more evenly spread – this often enables the BJP to win more seats despite winning a lower vote share than the Congress. In 2018, out of the six regions in the state, the BJP was dominant in Coastal Karnataka, where it won 16 out of 19 seats; in Central Karnataka, where it won 23 out of 28 seats; and to some extent, in Kittur Karnataka where it won 30 out of 50 seats. The Congress led in Kalyana Karnataka; in Bengaluru Urban, the BJP and Congress were evenly matched; and in Old Mysuru, the battle was primarily between the Congress and JD(S).

The caste factor is important in Karnataka as in several other states. The BJP is still quite dependent on the Lingayat community and Yediyurappa, one of the tallest Lingayat leaders. The party has attempted to broaden its base by increasing the Other Backward Classes reservation quota for both the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, numerically dominant communities, at the expense of the Muslims. It has also tried symbolic measures such as installing a statue of the Vokkaliga king – Kempe Gowda I – at the Bengaluru airport as well as spreading an unfounded claim that two Vokkaliga chieftains were responsible for the death in 1799 of Tipu Sultan, whom the BJP consistently vilifies. The latter claim, however, has not found too many takers among the Vokkaligas themselves.

Though the Congress seems well placed to make significant electoral gains, the tussle for leadership in the state between state party president D K Shivakumar and former chief minister Siddaramaiah could prove to be a spoiler. Both Shivakumar, a Vokkaliga, and Siddaramaiah, who belongs to the smaller Kuruba community and is seen as the architect of a coalition of minorities, Dalits and backward classes also known by the acronym 'Ahinda', are popular leaders. However, according to the NDTV-CSDS survey, Siddaramaiah is the [most popular choice for chief minister](#).

Some opinion polls have forecast a victory for the Congress with [one by ABP-CVoter](#) predicting 107-119 seats for the Congress, 74-86 seats for the BJP and 23-35 seats for JD(S), which could play the role of kingmaker. The predicted vote share for the Congress is 40 per cent, compared to 35 per cent for the BJP. Another opinion poll, [conducted by Eedina](#), has predicted 132-140 seats for the Congress and 57-65 seats for the BJP.

To stem the anti-incumbency mood against the BJP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has gone on an election blitz in Karnataka. In recent speeches, Modi has also consistently brought up the Congress' proposal to ban the fringe group, Bajrang Dal. It remains to be seen if he can swing the elections in the BJP's favour.

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