

# ISAS Brief

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469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## Mixed Fortunes for the Congress

Ronojoy Sen<sup>1</sup>

The headlines in a national Indian daily on 9 May 2013 — ‘Ecstasy in Karnataka, Agony in SC’ — summed up the Congress party’s plight quite accurately. The good news for the Congress was a convincing electoral victory in the Assembly elections in the southern state of Karnataka; the bad news, however, was the Supreme Court’s scathing criticism of the Congress-led federal government for interfering in the enquiry by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India’s federal investigating agency, into a coal scam which surfaced in 2012.

The two contradictory events say something about the current state of Indian politics and also provide pointers to the clutch of state elections due later in 2013 as well as the general elections in 2014. The Congress was able to fashion its victory in Karnataka due to voter disgust with the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government which was awash in corruption scandals and had also suffered a split. Ironically, the voters in Karnataka decided to give the Congress the mandate to govern the state for five years despite the same party being battered by corruption scandals at the national level.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Ronojoy Sen is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [isasrs@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasrs@nus.edu.sg). The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

## The Karnataka Verdict

This seemingly puzzling voter behaviour validates a claim by some political scientists that people not only vote on local issues in state elections, but also tend to vote for parties who they believe are likely to provide a stable government. This was earlier shown in Uttar Pradesh in the 2012 elections where voters rejected the national parties, which are relative lightweights in the state, to give an overwhelming mandate to a regional outfit, the Samajwadi Party, in the hope of a stable government. In the case of Karnataka the only real regional alternative was the Janata Dal (Secular), led by the father and son duo of former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda and H D Kumaraswamy, which was identified with instability having had a history of bringing down coalition governments.

Of course, there were other local factors that helped the Congress win 121 out of 224 seats in Karnataka. The governing BJP, which ended with 40 seats — down 70 seats from the 2008 elections — was significantly hurt by a breakaway party, the Karnataka Janata Paksha (KJP), floated by former Karnataka Chief Minister B S Yeddyurappa in end-2012. Though the KJP won only six seats it garnered nearly 10 per cent of the votes cutting heavily into the BJP's support base. No election in India is complete without caste arithmetic. In Karnataka's case, Yeddyurappa, who belongs to the Lingayat community (roughly 15 per cent of the state's population and the largest community in 73 constituencies), drew his caste brethren away from the BJP. Yet another small breakaway party, the Badavara Shramikara Raitara (BSR) Congress, led by a former BJP minister B Sriramulu, won 2.7 per cent of the votes and hurt the BJP in the part of the state that borders Andhra Pradesh. The JD(S) might not have done as well as expected but it still managed to win marginally more votes than the 2008 elections and ended up with 40 seats, 12 more than in 2008. The nature of the Karnataka verdict, however, means that the Congress cannot take it for granted that it will repeat its performance in the state in the general elections.

A minor sideshow was the Rahul Gandhi versus Narendra Modi contest in Karnataka since both campaigned in the state. While Rahul campaigned in eight districts and Modi in five, neither can be said to have really influenced the results. But where Rahul might have played a role is the unusually smooth election of Siddaramaiah as Karnataka Chief Minister after the election verdict. Unlike the usual protracted struggle over choosing between a strong regional leader and someone backed by the Congress high command, in this instance, the Chief Minister was chosen by the newly-elected party legislators through secret ballot. In the process, another front-runner, Union Labour Minister and Gandhi family loyalist Mallikarjun Kharge, was passed over. Coming after the appointment of another strong Congress regional leader, Virbhadr Singh, in 2012 as the Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh, it might mark the return in the party to a policy of backing *satraps* with a mass base.

## Resignations in Delhi

If the anti-corruption sentiments in Karnataka played out well for the Congress, corruption and impropriety cast its long shadow in Delhi. Two days after the Karnataka verdict and the rap in the knuckles from the Supreme Court, the Congress on 10 May belatedly asked the federal Law Minister, Ashwani Kumar, who was under the scanner for his purported role in changing the CBI status report on the coal scam, to resign. Gone too was Railway Minister, Pawan Kumar Bansal, whose nephew has been arrested for allegedly taking a bribe for an appointment in the rail ministry.

However, the delay in the Congress' decision and the feeling that it came only when the party was forced to has further dented its image. The Parliament's Budget session was a casualty of the Congress' inability to respond effectively. Both Houses of Parliament were repeatedly disrupted over the above-mentioned issues and was eventually adjourned *sine die* on 8 May, resulting in several important legislations not getting passed. Moreover, the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in particular has come off poorly from the episode. There are many who believe that the PM should have taken a decisive stand on asking the two tainted ministers to step down as soon as the scandals broke out. There is also a perception that the decision to ask the two ministers to quit was taken after significant pressure from members of the federal Cabinet and Congress president Sonia Gandhi herself. Singh has usually been seen as an honest Prime Minister who is saddled with corrupt colleagues. But this image has taken a beating because of his indecisiveness and inability to rein in corruption. Besides, Singh himself was Coal Minister between 2006 and 2009, a period which is being investigated by the CBI.

The Congress was able to overcome these handicaps in Karnataka because of strong anti-incumbent sentiments against the BJP. It will, however, find it much harder going in the elections coming up later in the year in several states, including Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The same holds true for the general elections due in 2014 where, if the Karnataka elections are any indication, corruption and governance will weigh heavily on the voter's mind.

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