

# ISAS Brief

No. 70 – Date: 10 June 2008

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



## **Karnataka State Assembly Elections: Implications for the UPA Government**

E. Sridharan\*

The Karnataka state assembly elections were held in May 2008. The principal opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which led the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) (the national coalition government) from 1999 to 2004, won to form its first government in a southern state. The result is important because it has broad implications for the political prospects of the ruling Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government in the general elections due by May 2009. In this brief, the Karnataka elections will be analysed at two levels: first, the elections themselves at the state level and, second, their possible implications for the UPA at the national elections.

Karnataka, an economically booming state in south India, with India's information technology capital, Bangalore, as its capital, has had three principal parties since the 1980s. These were the Congress Party, which ruled the state since independence except for a term each in the 1980s and 1990s; the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], a regional offshoot of the original Janata Dal, itself a descendant of the Janata Party that ruled the state for a term in the 1980s, led by former Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda (1996-97); and the BJP, which rose to a vote share of 28 percent in the state in the 1991 general elections. It has, since then, steadily expanded and consolidated its base to become one of the two leading parties in the state by vote share for both parliamentary and state assembly elections since the late 1990s.

In 2004, the BJP won the majority of parliamentary seats in the state in the general elections, as well as the single largest number of seats (79) of the state assembly's 224 seats, ahead of the Congress Party (65 seats) and the JD(S) (58 seat).<sup>1</sup> However, the Congress Party and the JD(S) came together and formed a post-elections coalition government, which collapsed in 2006. Thereafter, the JD(S) formed an alternative coalition with the BJP in which the JD(S) agreed to share the chief ministership with the BJP for 20 months each, out of the 40 months left of the assembly's five-year term, and took its turn first. However, when it came to handing over the chief ministership to the BJP, the JD(S) Chief Minister, H. D. Kumaraswamy, reneged and early elections were precipitated in May 2008.

The BJP won the elections, acquiring a near-majority of 110 out of 224 seats, and joined with five independent candidates to form a government. There are several salient points about the

---

\* Dr E. Sridharan is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [isases@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isases@nus.edu.sg).

<sup>1</sup> Indian election statistics are available at the Election Commission of India's website: [www.eci.gov.in](http://www.eci.gov.in).

elections results. Compared to 2004, the BJP experienced a substantial 5.4 percent swing of votes in its favour, rising to 33.9 percent from 28.5 percent in 2004. This gave it a 31 seat jump from 79 to 110. The Congress Party also saw an increase of seats from 65 to 80 and received 34.6 percent of votes, compared to 35.3 percent in 2004, a loss of only 0.7 percent. In fact, it remained the largest single party in vote share, being 0.7 percent ahead despite the small loss of vote share and the more than five percent swing in favour of the BJP. The JD(S)'s vote share declined by only 1.5 percent from 20.6 percent in 2004 to 19.1 percent in 2008. However, it only won 28 seats, compared to 58 in the last elections. The BJP's 5.4 percent increase in vote share came largely at the expense of the "Independents" and "Others".

The BJP's winning 30 more seats is due to the vagaries of the first-past-the-post system, due to the relative concentration of its votes in some parts of the state, while the Congress Party's votes were more evenly spread. Viewed in terms of Karnataka's five regions, the BJP and the Congress Party were neck-to-neck in vote share in the northern region, the BJP's traditional stronghold, and the BJP was a distant third behind the Congress Party and the JD(S) in the southern (old Mysore) region, the JD(S)'s only stronghold, excluding the Bangalore urban region. It was in the Bangalore urban, coastal and central regions that the BJP notched a five percent lead over the Congress Party. While losing to the BJP in these three regions, the Congress Party also faced stiff competition from the JD(S) in the southern region. Inflation and the "sympathy factor" for the BJP, as it was perceived to have been cheated out of its share of power by a duplicitous JD(S), were also probably factors that contributed to the BJP's victory. It should be noted that the JD(S), with 19 percent of the vote, cannot be counted out of the equation altogether. A possible Congress Party-JD(S) pre-elections coalition in 2009 remains a formidable combination, arithmetically speaking. After all, they were general elections allies in 2004.

In the larger national context, it needs to be added that the Scheduled Caste (SC)-based Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), despite running candidates in the state, did not make a dent, failing to win any seats and managing runner-up status in only two constituencies. However, there were 15 constituencies in which the Congress Party was the runner-up, 14 constituencies in which the BJP was the runner-up and eight constituencies in which the JD(S) was the runner-up. In these instances, the BSP's votes exceeded the victory margin, thereby making it a potential spoiler not only for the Congress Party, but also for the JD(S) and the BJP, since it cannot be assumed that all SC votes went only to the Congress Party, despite the latter being the traditionally preferred party of the SCs.

What do the elections mean for the prospects of the Congress Party-led UPA government and for the BJP-led NDA coalition in the national elections due by May 2009 at the latest?

First, it is a psychological blow for the Congress Party and the UPA and a morale booster for the BJP and the NDA. This will be the first BJP government in the south, a breakthrough for the BJP, and equivalent to its forming state governments on its own for the first time in 1990, if we ignore the Jana Sangh (later renamed BJP)-dominated Janata Party governments in some Hindi-belt states in 1977-80.

Second, the Karnataka elections blow to the Congress Party followed several others in a row in 2007 and 2008. The Congress Party's performance in the state assembly elections since the 2004 general elections has been rather poor.

In 2004, in the four states that had assembly elections simultaneously with parliamentary elections, the Congress Party lost Orissa to the Biju Janata Dal (BJD)-BJP coalition, lost Sikkim to the regional Sikkim Democratic Front, won Andhra Pradesh decisively from the Telugu Desam and formed a post-elections coalition government with the JD(S) in Karnataka. Later in 2004, it won Maharashtra and formed a coalition government with its Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) ally, and won Arunachal Pradesh. The Congress Party and the UPA seemed to be consolidating their parliamentary victory by bagging major states such as Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka.

In 2005, it won Haryana but lost Bihar and Jharkhand, the latter essentially because it failed to maintain its winning coalition of 2004.

In 2006, it won Assam and Pondicherry (a Union Territory), lost Kerala to its ally at the Centre, the Left Front, while the latter retained power in West Bengal. A Congress Party ally, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, along with its minor local allies, won Tamil Nadu.

In 2007, the tide seemed to turn against the Congress Party and the UPA. It won only tiny Manipur and Goa, losing Punjab to the Akali Dal-BJP alliance, and losing Uttarakhand, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh to the BJP, all decisively, while making no gains in Uttar Pradesh, which was won decisively by the BSP, a potential threat to the Congress Party's SC vote base nationally.

In 2008, the Left retained power in Tripura while the Congress Party lost in Meghalaya and Nagaland, all small northeastern states. The Congress Party also lost in Karnataka to the BJP.

Thus, in the eleven state assembly elections in 2007 and 2008 to-date, the Congress Party lost nine, winning only tiny Manipur and Goa. Apart from losing Uttar Pradesh to the BSP, the Congress Party lost all the major states to the BJP or its NDA allies. Four major Hindi-belt states, namely, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, all ruled by the BJP, and Delhi (technically a Union Territory), ruled by the Congress Party, are scheduled to have state assembly elections by November 2008, as are Jammu and Kashmir, and Mizoram, with the possibility of early elections being called in Orissa by a confident BJD-BJP alliance. This will be the critical round of state assembly elections before the general elections.

How does the Congress Party stand in these elections and in the general elections in 2009 following the Karnataka elections? The BJP cannot win in Jammu and Kashmir, and Mizoram but the Congress Party and its allies may also lose to local parties, and these are small states. In Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the anti-incumbency factor should, in theory, help the Congress Party but a lot depends on whom the electorate blames for rising inflation, the ruling party at the centre or the state? Inflation, crucially, food prices, and, more generally, the economic situation, in the immediate run-up to the elections, will be critical. In this context, the decision to raise petrol and diesel prices in early June 2008 rather than closer to the elections is an electorally-shrewd move. Also critical is whether the BSP runs candidates in all these states and how much they do or do not cut into the SC votes of the Congress Party. Wild card events like terrorist strikes that are plausibly attributable to Islamist groups might also help the BJP attack the Congress Party on security and, in a coded way, appeal to latent Hindu communal/anti-Muslim sentiment in sections of the electorate.

Third, a critical issue for 2009 would be the forging of pre-elections alliances. It needs to be remembered that, in November 2003, the Congress Party lost Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and

Chhattisgarh, but became “coalitionable” in a swathe of states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir, and Himachal Pradesh, and, hence, nationally, and won the 2004 elections.<sup>2</sup>

In a national political context, in which even the most optimistic scenarios for each of the two major parties gives them no chance of achieving a majority on their own, the key to forming a national government is the pre-elections coalition they manage to tie up. For each, it means both retaining major allies and adding more without giving up too many seats in their stronghold states. Viewed this way, what is the scenario at the present moment? The Congress Party alliance has been fraying, with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) in Andhra Pradesh exiting the UPA (though in recent by-elections to the both assembly and parliamentary seats, it performed very poorly), the Peoples Democratic Party in Jammu and Kashmir, and the NCP in Maharashtra having somewhat strained relations with the Congress Party. However, the Congress Party has reabsorbed the defecting splinter group in Kerala. Although Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamul Congress left the NDA, it has not rejoined or allied with the Congress Party. Crucially, there appears to be an incipient coalition of the Samajwadi Party and the Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh. Even in Karnataka, the Congress Party will be formidable if it coalesces with the JD(S), arithmetically speaking. And it has to put together the 2004 coalition in Bihar and Jharkhand (UPA Minister Ram Vilas Paswan’s party contested independently in the 2005 Bihar assembly elections and helped the NDA win). If it can keep/add the coalition allies mentioned, especially in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, and exploit anti-incumbency in at least one or two major BJP-ruled Hindi-belt states, the UPA will remain a serious contender in 2009.

Conversely, for the BJP and the NDA, the need to keep/add allies includes forming an alliance in Tamil Nadu with the principal opposition party there, Jayalalitha’s All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, with the Telugu Desam (which has left the NDA) and/or the TRS in Andhra Pradesh, preventing a Congress Party-JD(S) alliance in Karnataka, sabotaging the continuation of the Congress Party-NCP alliance in Maharashtra while preserving the alliance with the Shiv Sena, preserving alliances with the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar, Jharkhand and Karnataka, and with the BJD in Orissa, with the Akali Dal in Punjab, and bringing the Trinamul Congress back into the NDA in West Bengal. Whether a BJP-BSP alliance is forged in Uttar Pradesh, and on what terms, in response to a possible Samajwadi Party-Congress Party alliance, is crucial.

All in all, the field remains wide open and it is far too early to write the political obituary of the Congress Party and the UPA after Karnataka.

OooOOOooo

---

<sup>2</sup> For how the Congress became “coalitionable” in 2004 and won, see E. Sridharan, “Electoral Coalitions in the 2004 General Elections: Theory and Evidence”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 51, December 18-24, 2004, 5418-5425. For the BJP’s expansion using coalitions as a strategy, see E. Sridharan, “Coalition Strategies and the BJP’s Expansion, 1989-2004”, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2, July 2005, pp. 194-221. For regional party strategies, see E. Sridharan, “Coalitions and Party Strategies in India’s Parliamentary Federation”, *Publius*, Volume 33, No. 4, Fall 2003, 135-152.