



THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy

Congress Pushes JD (S) to the Fore in Karnataka as BJP Falls Short



S. RAJENDRAN



A view of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly during the oath-taking ceremony for the newly elected MLAs at the Vidhana Soudha, in Bengaluru, on May 19, 2018. Photo: PTI - Photo: PTI

Despite a high-voltage election campaign led by national leaders, neither the Bharatiya Janata Party nor Indian National Congress won the electoral mandate to form a government on their own strength in Karnataka. The BJP emerged as the single largest party but fell short of a majority to form a government, and the incumbent Congress was relegated to second position.

The gainer is the Janata Dal (S), which came third, but finds its way to the driver's seat thanks to the support extended by the Congress. S. Rajendran, Resident Representative, Karnataka, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, writes on the post-election dynamics in the southern State.

Karnataka has been in national focus for over a week and may remain so for more time with the alliance between the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD (S)] expected to set the trend for a major polarisation of political forces ahead of the general elections, scheduled in 2019. The unfolding dynamics appears to be all about bringing together the regional parties which have a commanding strength in their respective States although there is no clarity, as yet, whether the Congress will be part of such a formation being a pan-India party.

The JD (S) and the Congress struck a post-poll alliance in the wake of the hotly contested elections to the Karnataka Legislative Assembly to run a coalition Government in the State, with the larger aim of keeping the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) out of power. The future of the JD(S)-Congress alliance depends on the formation of a federal front and for the present it will hold good as the BJP has emerged as the common enemy of both the parties. This is one of the primary reasons for the quick political understanding although the future of this coalition Government can be anybody's guess given the fact that it has been forged owing to the immediate political exigencies and the need to be in power at this juncture which is all the more important for both the political parties as general elections are due in less than a year.

The rumours during the run-up to the legislative assembly elections that the JD (S) was indeed a "B" team of the BJP, particularly in the old Mysore region where, among others, the former Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah was routed by the JD (S), have in a way been scotched following the understanding, although the present coalition arrangement is also being looked at as a marriage of convenience. While the leadership of the two parties may be clearcut in their understanding, it will be a difficult task for the legislators at the ground level since the people are bound to question them given the fact that the JD (S) leader, H.D. Kumaraswamy, had time and again during the election campaign stated that should there be a hung verdict, then the party would not have a truck with any political party and would prefer to sit in the opposition.

The biggest gainer

The JD (S) can be rated as the biggest beneficiary of the present coalition arrangement since the Congress party came calling to extend support resulting in Kumaraswamy being catapulted to the post of the Chief Minister although his party had won a meagre 38 seats—just over 15 per cent of the 224 seats in the legislative assembly and about a half of the seats won by the Congress party . Added to all this, the JD (S) will also enjoy certain plum positions as it will have under its control some of the major departments of the Government irrespective of the fact that many of the newly elected legislators are not appropriately qualified to hold such positions nor have adequate experience, which is also the case with some of the Congress legislators.



H.D. Kumaraswamy. Photo: PTI

The all important post of the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly has, however, been taken by the Congress and K.R. Ramesh Kumar will occupy the Chair and he has the vast experience of being a Speaker earlier. The President of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee, G. Parameshwara, will be the Deputy Chief Minister in the coalition Government although such a post does not have a constitutional recognition (Article 164).

What is more important for the leadership of the Congress and the JD (S) is in finalising a lasting understanding and an appropriate methodology in ensuring a proper

coordination between the two coalition partners and it is for the Chief Minister, H.D. Kumaraswamy, to administer the State in an exemplary manner which will do good for both the coalition partners. It is

another matter that a section of the Congress leaders, including some of the newly elected legislators, are crestfallen by the new alliance as they had fought against the JD (S) in a large number of the 224 assembly constituencies in the State.

The BJP came too close to forming a Government having bagged 104 seats and fell short of a simple majority by a mere seven seats . It was however clearly outsmarted by the Congress which won a low 78 seats followed by the Janata Dal (S) with just 38 seats. The poor performance by the Congress was largely due to the poor support extended to it by the Dalits and the Lingayats on which it had banked. In fact, the Congress in 2013 rose to power in Karnataka with a strong backing of minorities, backward classes, and Dalits, but the same groupings appear to have been instrumental in its ouster in 2018. The Congress desperately tried to add to the



Siddharamaiah. File Photo: PTI

coalition the Lingayat factor by granting religious minority status to the community – a move that did not work to its advantage.

Dalits and Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka are huge in numbers anywhere between 20 to 23 per cent, enough to make or break prospects for any political party to come to power. Dalits have traditionally been supporters of the Congress but the BJP has successfully managed to break into the support bases, particularly since the 2004 polls when it managed a social engineering exercise to attract a section of Dalit voters – called the Left Dalits. The Left Dalits are considered the most marginalised among such communities.

Unlike, Siddaramaiah who completed a five-year term [after a gap of over a decade in Karnataka, the last being S.M. Krishna (1999-2004)], there is no likelihood that

it will again repeat in the near future although Kumaraswamy has clearly spelt out that there is no rotational arrangement for the post of the Chief Minister in the understanding that has been arrived at with the Congress. It is, therefore, quite evident that the Congress will play its cards in the manner in which it chooses to, albeit after some time.

The Congress and the JD (S) which ran a coalition Government after the hung verdict in the legislative assembly elections held in 2004, fell apart and turned bitter enemies after the JD (S) pulled out for no plausible reason only to quickly align with the BJP to form another coalition government. Here again, the JD (S) did not fulfil its commitment to the BJP leading to a President's rule in the State followed by a fresh round of elections to the Legislative Assembly. The bitterness between the Congress and the JD(S) continues to this day although the two parties claim that the earlier incident is a forgotten chapter. Most Congressmen are aware that it is only a matter of political convenience and that the day is not far when they will again break up.

Governor's role questioned



B. S. Yeddyurappa.

Photo: Bhagya Prakash K

to form a Government and this can be rated as a

The role of the Governor, Vajubhai Vala, has also shocked many and he is being looked at as more of a BJP loyalist than a Constitutional head. His invitation to the BJP to form the Government and granting of a fortnight to prove its majority on the floor of the legislative assembly was much to the consternation of the Congress-JD (S) combine resulting in the Congress party petitioning the Supreme Court and obtaining a direction that a floor test be conducted within a day. The BJP suffered a

loss of face by the manner in which the party

went before Governor Vala in staking claim

mis-adventure since it could have

crossed the halfway mark only by effecting defections which is against the rule of law—as made out by the provisions in the tenth schedule of the Constitution. How did the BJP leadership approve of such an attempt to form a Government knowing it fully well that the party had to indulge in unlawful and unethical practices is an important question.

That Yeddyurappa chose to resign before facing the trust vote has saved the party of some prestige but then he had to do so since attempts to woo legislators from the Congress and the JD (S) did not work given the tight monitoring of their movements by their respective party leaders. There is still the lurking fear in the Congress and the JD (S) that the BJP may try to repeat the same exercise although it should be noted that a vote of confidence won by a legislature party leader can be put for another test only after a gap of six months. The fair name enjoyed by Karnataka of being one of the most peaceful States in the country has been sullied by the developments with political parties and their leaders changing colours overnight—having said one thing prior to the elections to draw the attention of the electorate and seeking to outdo one another in their act to grab power much to the displeasure of the voters who elected them.