



Third-place winner?

With the Congress losing the mandate and the BJP not getting one, the JD(S) may get lucky

A three-way contest without a dominant campaign issue in a politically fragmented State was always going to be too close to call. As the last vote is counted in Karnataka, all the three major parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress, and the Janata Dal (Secular), believe they have a right to stake claim to form the government. The Congress clearly lost the election, but the BJP could not win it. The JD(S) retained its core support base, and finished a respectable third. In such a situation, the contest continues beyond the announcement of the results. Quickly realising it had lost the mandate, the Congress wasted no time in reaching out to the JD(S) with a promise to back its leader H.D. Kumaraswamy for the chief ministership. In contrast, the BJP was slowed down by its own ambition. As the early trends showed it ahead in a majority of the seats, the BJP made no overtures to the JD(S), and sat quietly in the hope of finishing with an absolute majority. What the BJP did to the Congress in Manipur, Goa, and Meghalaya, the Congress is attempting to do to the BJP in Karnataka: steal the election from right under its nose. For the JD(S), the Congress offer is too good to be turned down. With a battle-bruised Congress ready to go to any extent to keep the BJP out of power, the JD(S) did not even have to bargain hard to stake claim for the chief ministership. The BJP’s chief ministerial candidate, B.S. Yeddyurappa, might complain that the Congress is subverting the people’s mandate, but the fact is that no party has a mandate in a hung Assembly.

Actually, the Congress polled the single largest percentage of the votes (38), ahead of the BJP (36.2), improving on its 2013 share of 36.59%. But the BJP had a better vote-share to seats conversion, sweeping coastal Karnataka and Bombay-Karnataka, and finishing behind the JD(S) and the Congress in many constituencies in southern Karnataka. The three-way contest helped the BJP make the most of its Lingayat vote-base, as the controversy over the status of a religion for the Lingayat sect did not loosen the party’s hold in northern and central Karnataka. With the JD(S) emerging as a contender in the Assembly election, both the national parties slipped in terms of vote-share from what they polled in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. Only convention and common sense dictate the actions of the Governor in a situation where no one party has a majority. Ordinarily, who gets the first shot at forming the government should not matter if neither group engages in engineering defections: the issue is best settled on the floor of the House in a confidence vote. But that is a big ‘if’. Karnataka can do without the spectacle of horse-trading, and much will depend on how Governor Vajubhai Vala handles the situation.

At last, a scheme

Cauvery basin States must quickly agree on an authority to apply the water-sharing award

Now that the Karnataka election is over, the Centre has finally mustered the courage to submit a draft scheme in the Supreme Court to implement the final decision on apportioning the Cauvery waters among the riparian States. The draft, which gives no name for the authority it proposes to create to monitor implementation of the Cauvery Tribunal’s final award, as modified by the Supreme Court, has been largely drawn from the Tribunal’s directions. It will be a two-tier structure, with an apex body charged with the power to ensure compliance with the final award, and a regulation committee that will monitor the field situation and water flow. The powers and functions of the authority are fairly comprehensive. Its powers would extend to apportionment, regulation and control of Cauvery waters, supervision of operations of reservoirs and regulation of water releases. The draft makes the authority’s decisions final and binding. However, there is an ambiguous clause: if the authority finds that any one of the States is not cooperative, it can seek the Centre’s help, and the Centre’s decision will be final and binding. This can be seen either as an enabling clause to resolve the situation when there is a stand-off, or as one that gives scope to the Centre to intervene on behalf of one State. To allay apprehensions of the Centre acting in a partisan manner, it would be better if it is not given the final say, but mandated to help in the implementation of the Tribunal’s award at all times.

There are a few differences between the Cauvery Management Board envisaged by the Tribunal and the authority proposed in the scheme. The Tribunal favoured the chairperson being an irrigation engineer with not less than 20 years of experience in water resources management, whereas the scheme says the chairperson could be a senior and eminent engineer with wide experience in water resources management or an officer in the rank of Secretary or Additional Secretary to the Union Government. Similarly, the representatives from the four States would be administrators rather than engineers as proposed by the Tribunal. It is possible that Karnataka and Tamil Nadu may have differing views on the nature and powers of the authority, as well as its name and composition. But it is vital that all States accept the mechanism, and that the authority itself have adequate autonomy. The Cauvery dispute has dragged on for several decades, and it would be unfortunate if the implementation of a final decision arrived at through rigorous adjudication is not monitored by an independent authority. All States should agree to the broad contours of this scheme and comply with the authority’s decisions. The most welcome feature of such a mechanism is that an issue concerning the livelihood of thousands of farmers will be taken out of the political domain and entrusted to experts.

Pieces of a scattered mandate

There is a change in the electoral cartography of Karnataka, also highlighting the potential for alliances



VALERIAN RODRIGUES

There are some trends that stand out in Karnataka’s 2018 Assembly elections. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has held on to the Central Karnataka region and the coastal and Malnad belt. In the Bombay-Karnataka region, while the BJP has held on to its existing advantage, in the Lingayat region of central North Karnataka, it has conceded much more space to the Congress as compared to the 2013 Assembly elections or the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

However, the BJP has made significant advances in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, except Ballari. Moreover, it has emerged as the rival to the Janata Dal (Secular), or the JD(S), in the southern belt dominated by Vokkaligas, replacing the Congress, although in Mysuru and Chamarajanagar the latter is still holding out. In Bengaluru city the BJP and the Congress are almost equipoised. In the North Bombay-Karnataka region, hitherto dominated by the BJP, the Congress has made significant inroads.

It is important to note that in Ballari district, dominated by the mining barons, the Congress has succeeded in whittling down the hold of the BJP-linked Reddy brothers. While the JD(S) is sitting pretty in the Old Mysuru region, except Malnad, it has made significant gains in Hyderabad-Karnataka and in some parts of the North Bombay-Karnataka region. While one can always draw parallels to the 2013 Assembly elections and 2014 Lok Sabha elections, what is

important to note is the significant shift in the electoral cartography that this election signals.

Shift in the electoral base

There has been a shift in the JD(S)’s electoral constituencies, and the support extended by Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) as an ally, and by All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslims publicly has been crucial in some constituencies. In Hyderabad-Karnataka, where the BSP always enjoyed a base, it also rallied Muslims towards the JD(S). The memory of the recent Gorakhpur and Phulpur Lok Sabha by-elections, where the Samajwadi Party and BSP set up an alliance to inflict a stunning defeat to the BJP, was too fresh to be ignored. It is important to point out that Madigas, the most numerous Dalit community in this region and who form the main base of the BSP, have nursed a grievance that major benefits of reservation have accrued to Ho-leyas, and the Congress has tended to give relatively fewer seats to them. Besides, there is not even a single influential Muslim leader from this region in the State Congress today, particularly after the passing away of Qamarul Islam.

Two measures that the outgoing Chief Minister, Mr. Siddaramaiah, embraced, although much criticised, made the loss bearable to the Congress. The first was to undercut the dominant mining barons in Ballari. Otherwise, it was quite possible that the Congress would have suffered a great loss of face in this district.

The second issue was the recommendation of the Siddaramaiah cabinet to accord to Lingayats a distinct religious minority status. The inroads that the Congress has made in the Bombay-Karnataka region cannot be explained without significant sections of Lingayats shifting their loyalties to the



Congress. The BJP may face the prospects of a declining social base in Northern and Central Karnataka if it does not respond to this recommendation. The genie is out of the bag!

The BJP has truly consolidated its power in the State, but the reasons vary across regions. In the coastal belt it has been strident Hindutva mobilisation alongside a new alliance between land-holding sections and business interests. In the Bombay-Karnataka and Malnad regions, it is a complex set of factors alongside Hindutva: self-conceit among Lingayats, that they be regarded as the first in the order of priority, and identification with B.S. Yeddyurappa as their salvific agent. Lingayats as well as Vokkaligas have smarted under the assertion of lower castes on Mr. Siddaramaiah’s watch. Further, the split along the Lingayat-Veerashaiva axis came too late, without attending to their other grievances. Like Lingayats in the North, in the Old Mysuru region, Vokkaligas were smarting under the assertion of Kurubas, Mr. Siddaramaiah’s caste.

What about the Narendra Modi factor? While this and BJP president Amit Shah’s organisational finesse were important, it was only relative to some of the important cleavages and trends mentioned above.

The Congress’s takeaway

The Congress is still to come to terms with Hindutva as a mass ide-

ology, particularly with extensive support among the young across the caste divide. This ideology is sustained through regular public enactments and demonstrations of communal solidarities. The Congress, believing that secularism is too weak to combat Hindutva’s attraction, decided to play popular Hinduism with an inclusive appeal.

But popular Hinduism in Karnataka today is largely in the grip of Hindutva, and therefore the Congress gesture sounded inauthentic, as there is no major battle that the Congress has fought so far to retrieve a distinct version of Hindutva. The time has come for the Congress to ask whether a different Hinduism, or for that matter Islam or Christianity, can speak?

The Congress thought that the track record of the Siddaramaiah regime with lower caste concerns upfront and a large number of populist measures, combined with a sustained attack on Modi government, could be an adequate plank. It was not explained why it had centred on these populist measures and not others, and why for measures targeted at a section of the population others should vote for the party.

Even within the caste bloc that Mr. Siddaramaiah came to wield, there was much restiveness with regard to opportunities and resources, and it came to be dubbed as a pro-Kuruba bloc not merely by the upper castes, but by castes and communities below in the social hierarchy.

There was little enthusiasm within the Congress leadership in the State with regard to certain measures that Mr. Siddaramaiah embraced. Dalit and Vokkaliga Congress leaders in the State showed little interest in the Lingayat issue, and none of them brought the issue of sub-catego-

ries within Dalits or the marginalisation of Muslims in the State to the fore. Eventually, the proverbial Congressman was interested in his safe niche.

Several charges made against the Siddaramaiah regime, both by the BJP and the JD(S), stuck a popular chord, such as corruption and institutional disarray. Often Mr. Siddaramaiah was found alone battling against such charges.

One wonders why the Congress did not forge an alliance in Karnataka with the BSP or even the JD(S). There was everything going for it, particularly in view of the 2019 elections. Mr. Siddaramaiah, of course, had a personal axe to grind with the JD(S) leadership. While he has deep roots and a mass base in the State, it was important to supplement charisma with political prudence.

On the ground

There is one consequence of this election which probably none of the contenders had expected, or sought. Suddenly the boundaries of the State have become expansive and stretch to its northernmost and north-westernmost ends, with Mr. Siddaramaiah invoking the rich legacies of Pula-keshin II in Badami, Sonia Gandhi addressing a political twilight speech in Vijayapura, and Mr. Modi, Mr. Shah and Congress president Rahul Gandhi making repeated sorties to this region. Hitherto, much of the politics in the State was concentrated in the centre and the south of its territorial expanse. It is in North Karnataka that most of the problems of poverty, underdevelopment and distress migration lie, as well as resources to reimagine the deep plural legacies of the region as a whole.

Valerian Rodrigues holds the Ambedkar Chair at Ambedkar University, Delhi

A triple blow to job guarantee scheme

A lack of sufficient funds, rampant payment delays and abysmal wage rates are to blame



RAJENDRAN NARAYANAN & MADHUBALA POTHULA

The ₹11,000 crore fraud that diamond merchant Nirav Modi is said to have created is a figure that needs to be put in perspective. The total amount of wages pending under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme for the whole country (2016-17) was around ₹11,000 crore too. This sum is a fifth of the MGNREGA budget announced for financial year 2018-19.

MGNREGA stands out in its worker-centric legislation and stated emphasis on transparency and accountability. Several potentially progressive measures such as a real-time management information system have been put in place. The scheme is meant to be demand-driven in the sense that the government is mandated to provide work within 15 days of a worker seeking work. Otherwise the worker is entitled to an unemployment allowance. A second key provision of the Act pertains to payment of wages within 15 days of completion of work, failing which

a worker is entitled to a delay compensation of 0.05% per day of the wages earned. However, both these provisions have been routinely violated. There is an ongoing Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court (*Swaraj Abhiyan v. the Union of India*) concerning these violations. We look at three ways in which a lack of funds has led to a subverting of these provisions in letter and spirit.

First, budget allocation over the years has been insufficient. While there has been an increase in the nominal budget in the last two years, after adjusting for inflation, the budget has actually decreased over the years. The real budget of 2018-19 is much lower than that of 2010-11.

Further truncation

Second, even this low budget allocation has undergone various kinds of curtailment. By December of each year, through a bottom-up participatory planning approach, every State submits a labour budget (LB) to the Centre. This contains the anticipated labour demand for the next financial year. The Centre, on its part, has been using an arbitrary ‘Approved Labour Budget’ to cut down funds requested by States (using the National Electronic Fund Management System, or Ne-FMS), making this a supply-driven programme.



Ne-FMS guidelines issued in 2016-17 say the Management Information System (MIS) “will not allow” States to “generate more employment above the limits set by Agreed to LB”. This meant that the work demand of workers was not even getting registered and the MIS was being used as a means to curb work demand. Thus the “approved labour budget” puts a cap on funds. So, for 2017-18, for example, if one aggregates the requested LB of all States, the minimum budget requirement adds up to ₹72,000 crore. However, the initial allocation was only ₹48,000 crore, which is in synchrony with the approved LB (as on the first week of April 2018).

Because of the ongoing PIL, the Centre was forced to rescind guidelines that enabled the use of the MIS to constrict demand for work. The Centre releases an Annual Master Circular (AMC) each year that serves as a guide to the programme implementation of MGNREGA. The most recent AMC suggests the setting up of an Empowered Committee (EC) to this

effect.

The lack of payment of wages on time has meant a violation of the second key aspect of the Act. By analysing transactions (over 90 lakh in 2016-17 and over 45 lakh in the first two quarters of FY17-18), a study on wage payment delays has highlighted how the Centre has completely absolved itself of any responsibility of a delay in the release of wages. Only 21% of payments in 2016-17 and 32% of payments in the first two quarters of FY17-18 were made on time.

In response to the first phase of the study, the Ministry of Finance issued an office memorandum. Acknowledging the validity of the study’s findings, the memorandum also said that the principal reasons for payment delays were “infrastructural bottlenecks, (un)availability of funds and lack of administrative compliance”. The study findings and this memorandum are at odds with the Centre’s dubious claims of 85% of payments having been made on time. The situation worsened in the last six months of FY17-18. Around 25% of the funds transfer orders (FTOs) pertaining to worker wages from January to April this year are still to be processed by the Centre. Last year, the Ministry froze the processing of FTOs (over ₹3,000 crore) due to a lack of funds. In August 2017, the Ministry of Rural Development demanded a supple-

mentary MGNREGA budget of ₹17,000 crore, but the Ministry of Finance approved only ₹7,000 crore, that too in January 2018. The poor are paying a heavy price for this throttling of funds by the Centre.

Stagnating wages

The third point is about stagnating MGNREGA wages. Delinking of MGNREGA wage rates from the Minimum Wages Act (MWA), 1948 has contributed to this. MGNREGA wages are a less lucrative option for the marginalised, being lower than the minimum agricultural wages in most States. As primary beneficiaries of the Act, women, Dalits and Adivasis could be the most affected and pushed to choose more vulnerable and hazardous employment opportunities. Such contravention of the MWA is illegal.

MGNREGA now faces a triple but correlated crisis – a lack of sufficient funds, rampant payment delays, and abysmal wage rates. What this reflects is not only a legal crisis created by the Centre but also a moral one where the fight is not even for a living wage but one for subsistence. One hopes for a just order from the judiciary.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Karnataka result

The outcome of the Karnataka election appears to be more or less in tune with exit poll results – of there being a hung Assembly. One is sure that money power will now play the key role in every aspect of government formation. such as government formation The result shows that there needs to be a law to curb money power and a misuse of the popular mandate.

KSHIRASAGARA BALAJI RAO, Hyderabad

■ As predicted by some opinion and exit polls, the Karnataka elections have thrown up a hung assembly. It is for sure that there will be much horse trading in the days to come, making a mockery of democracy and the electoral process. If H.D. Kumaraswamy of the JD(S) becomes the Chief Minister, with the support of the

Congress party, it would amount to a negation of the people’s verdict. The Congress needs to introspect on the message behind the Karnataka verdict, rather than propping up a rank opportunist with the sole objective of keeping the Bharatiya Janata Party out of power. V. JAYARAMAN, Chennai

■ The result shows that the people of Karnataka are neither in favour of the BJP nor the grand old party, the Congress, despite the BJP being at a slight advantage. Once again the Governor faces a litmus test of impartiality as in the true spirit of the Constitution. But if one looks at how the governments were formed in Goa, Manipur and Meghalaya after the Assembly elections, one is in doubt. P. RAMA KOTESWARA RAO, Hyderabad

■ After making tall claims about soundly defeating the BJP, the Congress’s performance has been an anti-climax. The strenuous campaigns by Mr. Siddaramaiah and the Congress president in the form of well-publicised visits to temples, appeasing a particular community and alleging corruption in the BJP do not seem to have clicked. The result is a huge setback to Rahul Gandhi’s leadership. While the Congress could win in Punjab due to the popularity of the leader there, it is a pointer that it could not repeat the outcome in Karnataka despite Mr. Siddaramaiah’s good governance. Y.G. CHOUKSEY, Pune

■ It is distressing to note that the political class resorts to measures that are low in morals and ethics the moment there is an

unfavourable verdict. A worrying aspect is the trend of post-poll alliances. It is most unethical that two parties that have contested against each other join hands after the election results to form a government. The judiciary needs to step in. R.K. THOMMANDRA, Bengaluru

A shuffle

The move to divest Smriti Irani of the portfolio of Information and Broadcasting is no surprise (“Rathore replaces Irani as I&B Minister”, May 15). It is intriguing how the Prime Minister initially chose her to head the HRD Ministry even though her mettle to mentor such a key portfolio was not well-established. It appears that she needs

better exposure to the nuances of handling ministerial affairs. SIVAMANI VASUDEVAN, Chennai

Fomenting terror

Nawaz Sharif’s belated admission, of his country’s role in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, is not shocking as the whole world knows what kind of a nation Pakistan is. It is a fact that the U.S. too has on more than one occasion shown its double standards while dealing with Pakistan. Aid in the form of billions of dollars only emboldened Pakistan to get away with its acts. The West needs to turn the mirror around and look at itself. N. VISVESWARAN, Chennai

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

“SC plans ordinance on SC/ ST Act” read the headline of a report (May 14, 2018, some editions) which was actually about the government’s plan to issue an ordinance to that effect. The headline was corrected to read “Centre plans ordinance on SC/ ST Act” in the later editions.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers’ Editor’s office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail:readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers’ Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers’ Editor are on www.thehindu.com