

Karnataka set to vote in nationally crucial election

More than 40 million voters in Karnataka are eligible to elect a new state assembly in three phases from Saturday in an electoral battle that has assumed national importance.

For decades Karnataka's choice has invariably gone against the trend in other states and at the national level. Still the outcome of the election to the 224-member legislature could end up being a pointer to the timing of the next polls for the Indian parliament.

Political analysts believe that if the Congress wins, it will be tempted to for an early Lok Sabha election, which is otherwise scheduled for 2009.

The Karnataka elections are also the most important after the battle for the Gujarat legislature that was decisively won by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), for the fourth time in a row, at great cost to the Congress.

The BJP is a rising power in Karnataka. In 2004, despite losing power in New Delhi, the BJP bagged 18 of the 28 Lok Sabha seats, its highest tally in the state.

In the assembly polls held simultaneously, the Congress lost power. The BJP became the single largest party with 79 legislators. The Congress won just 65 seats.

Now with rising food prices upsetting millions, Karnataka will test the popular mood and provide valuable lessons to the Congress and the BJP, the major contenders for power in the state as well as nationally.

If the BJP wins, it will be the first time it will get to rule a state in southern India. For the Congress, it will have to come to power to prove that Karnataka is not slipping out of its hands.

The Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) also needs to prove a point by becoming the kingmaker even if it does not win outright.

While the Congress may claim a moral victory even if it emerges as the single largest group in the legislature -- if only to keep the BJP from power, the BJP is faced with a dilemma.

In 2004 it did not find any partner even after winning 79 seats. Thus, anything less than close to 100 seats will derail its ambitions because of its bitter experience of coalition politics.

The BJP agreed to make former prime minister H.D. Deve Gowda's son H.D. Kumaraswamy the chief minister in January 2006 to forge an alliance though the latter's Janata Dal-Secular had just 49 legislators.

But Kumaraswamy failed to honour his word to hand over chief ministership to the BJP in October 2007. The BJP pulled out of the alliance. But it went back on its decision a month later only to see its chief minister B.S. Yediyurappa being unseated after being in power for only seven days.

BJP leader L.K. Advani has declared that his party would prefer to sit in the opposition if it does not get a majority.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi, who addressed two public meetings Wednesday, has also sought a clear mandate for her party, underlining the ill-effects of coalition politics.

The first phase of polling Saturday covers 89 constituencies in what is commonly known as Old Mysore comprising 11 districts - [Bangalore](#) city and surrounding urban and rural areas, Mysore, Tumkur, Chikkaballapur, Ramanagaram, Mandya, Hassan, Kodagu, Chamarajnar and Kolar.

The first phase is crucial for the Congress and the Janata Dal-Secular as the BJP is weaker in these areas dominated by the Vokkaliga community to which Deve Gowda belongs.

Bangalore city and the surrounding urban districts have 28 seats and the Congress hopes to reap a rich harvest. Its suave and urbane face, former chief minister S.M. Krishna, has extensively toured these constituencies urging voters to give a clear mandate to the Congress.

Some 17.28 million people, including more than 8.4 million women, are eligible to vote in the first phase.

The second phase May 16 is for 66 assembly constituencies in 10 districts: Raichur, Koppal, Uttara Kannada, Bellary, Chitradurga, Davanagere, Shimoga, Udupi, Chikmagalur and Dakshina Kannada. This region accounts for 11.26 million voters.

About 11.77 million voters, including 5.76 million women, will be eligible to vote in the last phase May 22 in 69 constituencies in the districts of Dharwad, Gadag, Haveri, Bidar, Gulbaga, Bijapur, Bagalakot and Belgaum.

The votes will be counted May 25.

The second and third phases will mainly be a battle between the Congress and the BJP as the Janata Dal-Secular does not have much support in these areas.

All eyes are, however, on the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati. The BSP may undercut the traditional Congress support base. The BSP is contesting in 218 seats.

In 2004, the BSP is believed to have spoiled Congress chances in around 60 seats although Congress managers put the number at only around 20.

Of 224 seats, two constituencies have attracted maximum interest.

One is Ramanagaram on the outskirts of Bangalore where Kumaraswamy is pitted against Congress candidate Mamatha Nichani, eldest daughter of the late Ramakrishna Hegde, a charismatic former chief minister. Ramangaram goes to the polls Saturday.

The popular belief is that Mamatha has been fielded because the Deve Gowda clan, many believe, cannot win against a woman. Gowda lost to a political novice, Tejaswini Sri Ramesh of the Congress, in the 2004 Lok Sabha polls.

The other constituency is Shikaripura in Shimoga district, about 270 km from Bangalore, where the BJP's chief ministerial candidate, B.S. Yediyurappa, faces former Karnataka chief minister and state

Samajwadi Party chief S. Bangarappa, a former chief minister.

The Congress and the Janata Dal-Secular are supporting Bangarappa and have not fielded candidates. Shikaripura votes May 16.

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