

Congress in a bind over arrack policy

The Congress, fighting to recapture power in Karnataka, found itself in a bind following a controversial statement by one of its leaders about lifting ban on arrack, a popular decision of the previous Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coalition government.

Former Karnataka Congress party chief B. Janardhana Poojary last week announced during poll campaign that the ban would be lifted if the Congress was voted to power, inviting a barrage of criticism.

Now other Congress leaders are making it a point to dismiss Poojary's statement as his 'personal view' and not that of the party.

Former deputy chief minister and now head of the Congress Campaign Committee, Siddaramiah told reporters in Davangere in central Karnataka Monday that the party had no plans to lift the ban on arrack.

State Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge too has distanced himself from Poojary's statement. The party manifesto for the polls makes no mention about this. 'We are in favour of continuing the ban,' he said in Chitapur in northern Karnataka district of Gulbarga from where he is contesting.

Manufacture and sale of arrack was banned in July 2007 by the then deputy chief minister and finance minister B.S. Yediyurappa of the BJP. He is now the party's chief ministerial candidate in the assembly polls that got underway May 10.

The ban was demanded by women's groups, particularly in villages, on the ground that their menfolk spent most of their earnings on arrack, which is sold at comparatively cheaper rates than IMFL (Indian Made Foreign Liquor).

The Karnataka government's earnings in the last few years from excise and other duties on arrack sale were around Rs.16 billion a year.

The loss has been somewhat made up by the increased sale of cheaper variety of IMFL, introduced following the arrack ban, according to the state excise department.

The ban was widely welcomed by women's groups

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