

## BJP, Congress lock horns in Karnataka's second poll phase

In the second phase of polling Friday, the die is cast for a no-holds-barred contest between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress in 66 assembly constituencies across 10 districts in coastal and central Karnataka.

In all, about 590 candidates are in the race, many of them rebels and independents, determined to damage the prospects of the mainstream and regional parties.

Besides the BJP and Congress, the Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Samajwadi Party are locked in triangular and multi-cornered contests to make or mar the outcome May 25, when counting of all votes takes place after the third and final phase of polling May 22.

The Congress and BJP faced in the first phase of polling May 10, in 89 segments spanning 11 districts of Old Mysore region, a strong challenge from the Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S). The two parties are slugging it out in the second and third rounds to make up for any shortfall by raising the campaign pitch.

Unmindful of the pre- and exit poll survey predictions, both the parties are not taking any chances to safeguard their vote banks and hatching new ones to grab as many seats as possible in the 224-member assembly to form a single-party government or deny the opportunity to the other.

Having won in 33 of the 68 constituencies across the two regions in 2004, an upbeat BJP is going for the kill to not only retain them but grab many more. As campaign issues, it is accusing the JD-S of 'betrayal' -- for not letting it govern the state despite an accord -- and the Congress of failing to check rising food prices.

If the BJP wins the election, it will form its first government in south India.

In contrast, the Congress, which won 20 seats in both the regions in 2004, is facing the heat of BJP's shrill campaign.

Although the JD-S was able to win in 11 segments in 2004, its actions during its 40-month coalition rule first with the Congress (June 2004 to January 2006) and later with the BJP (February 2006 to October 2007) and also desertions by some of its mass-based leaders such as Siddaramaiah, P.G.R. Sindhia and M.P. Prakash along with hundreds of cadres have made it inconsequential in the crucial second phase.

According to political analyst Sandeep Shastri, though it is advantage BJP in coastal and central Karnataka due to caste combinations and socio-economic matters, anti-incumbency, rebellion and consolidation of non-BJP votes fuelled by minorities, Dalits, tribals and other backward classes in substantial numbers will make the going tough for some BJP candidates.

'BJP leaders are working overtime to retain its hold in Shimoga and Dakshina Kannada districts, where it won six of eight and eight of nine assembly segments respectively, piggy-riding on the popularity of former chief minister S. Bangarappa who joined it in 2004 but quit a year later,' Shastri told IANS.

Bangarappa is taking on BJP's chief ministerial candidate B.S. Yeddyurappa in the high-profile Shikaripura constituency in Shimoga district.

The delimitation exercise has also caused problems for the BJP as it has carved 10 reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and 12 seats for Scheduled Tribes out of 66 constituencies in the two regions.

Though the reserved seats are spread across, with four for Dalits in Raichur district and five for tribals in Bellary district, their voting preference to the Congress or other like-minded parties may change the equation and tilt the balance in favour of its main rival.

'The prospects of Dalit leader and (state Congress president) Mallikarjun Kharge becoming chief minister in the event of his party getting a clear majority and backward class leader Siddaramiah as his deputy will be a influential factor in these 22 seats,' Shastri pointed out.

On the flip side, the BJP is banking on the evolutionary progression of coming to power after being the main opposition party and emerging as the single largest party in 2004.

The BJP is also banking on the rich mining brothers - Lok Sabha member from Bellary Karunakara Reddy, state legislative council member Janardhan Reddy and its Bellary candidate Somashekar Reddy - to neutralise the possible swing in favour of the Congress. The brothers are known for their popularity -- and also money and muscle power.

As in Shikaripura, a fierce battle is on the cards between Somashekar and Congress nominee and mining tycoon from Sandur Anil Lad, who switched over from the BJP after he was denied ticket.

Similarly, Karunakara has entered the fray from Harapanahalli in the neighbouring district of Davanagere to take on former deputy chief minister Prakash, who joined the Congress and commands a strong following in the dominant Lingayat community to which Yeddyurappa also belongs.

'The BJP grip in coastal and central Karnataka is a worrisome factor for Congress desperate to wrest power as it has more stakes at the state and national levels than its opponent,' political commentator Chandrakant Patil said.

*Fakir Balaji ( © IANS / India eNews)*