

Voting begins in 66 constituencies in Karnataka

Voting began Friday morning in 66 constituencies in 10 districts of central, coastal and parts of north Karnataka in the second phase of elections for the 224-member state assembly.

Over 11 million people are eligible to vote to decide the fate of 589 candidates - an overwhelming majority of them independents - in Raichur, Koppal, Uttara Kannada, Bellary, Chitradurga, Davangere, Shimoga, Udupi, Chikmagalur and Dakshina Kannada districts.

Polling is taking place in 12,271 booths, 3,754 of which are considered hypersensitive - having possibility of violence during voting - and 4,282 sensitive.

A total 56,000 security personnel are on duty to ensure smooth polling. Of these, 21,000 are from the state police, 22,000 from paramilitary forces, 10,000 are home guards and 3,000 from the state reserve police.

About 500 personnel from the state anti-naxal force have been deployed in Maoist-active districts of Udupi, Shimoga and Chikmagalur.

Security personnel on duty in these areas have been told to shoot-at-sight if Maoists attempt to disrupt the polls. The leftist extremists have been distributing pamphlets in some areas calling for election boycott.

The second phase battle is mainly between the Congress and the BJP as the third major player in Karnataka politics, Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) headed by former Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda, does not have much support in these districts.

JD-S' main base is in the 11 districts that went to the polls in the first phase May 10 to elect 89 members.

The third phase polling is on May 22 for 69 seats in eight districts in north Karnataka. Counting is on May 25.

The second phase is also an all-important one for BJP as its chief ministerial candidate B.S. Yediyurappa is facing a tough battle against former chief minister and state Samajwadi Party president S. Bangarappa in Shikaripura, about 330 km from Bangalore.

While Yediyurappa has dominated Shikaripura's political scene for over two decades, Bangarappa has lorded over the rest of Shimoga district for over three decades. This is the first time he is contesting from Shikaripura while for Yediyurappa it is the seventh time.

Yediyurappa has won from Shikaripura five times and lost once, in the 1999 polls.

Bangarappa's home constituency is neighbouring Sorab which has now become a battleground among his two sons. The elder one, Kumar Bangarappa, is seeking re-election on the Congress ticket and the younger one, Madhu Bangarappa, is fighting as Samajwadi Party candidate. Kumar had defeated Madhu in the 2004 polls. At that time Madhu and his father were in BJP.

The other poll battle attracting attention is in the politically volatile iron-ore rich Bellary district, where both BJP and the Congress have fielded mining magnates for the Bellary city seat.

G. Somashekara Reddy of BJP is taking on Anil Lad of the Congress in a straight fight as JD-S candidate M. Diwakar Babu retired from the contest Monday in support of Lad.

In the neighbouring Davangere district's Harapanahalli constituency, former JD-S deputy chief minister and now Congress nominee M.P. Prakash is taking on BJP's G. Karunakara Reddy, also a mining baron from Bellary. Reddy is now a member of the Lok Sabha.

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