

Congress sweats to regain north Karnataka

The Congress is sweating it out to regain its hold in north Karnataka to return to power in the third and final phase of polling Thursday for the assembly election in eight districts.

With an element of uncertainty about its performance in the first two phases May 10 and May 16, the Congress claims to have worked out its caste arithmetic to counter the influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the erstwhile Bombay-Karnataka province and the Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region.

In 2004, of the 70 constituencies in the decisive phase, the BJP bagged 31 seats, the Congress 17, the JD-S 13 and independents nine. Delimitation exercise has reduced the number of constituencies in the region to 69.

Of the 50 seats in the Bombay-Karnataka province, the BJP won 31. In the remaining 19 seats spread across Gulbarga and Bidar districts of the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, the JD-S made inroads in the Congress bastion by winning nine seats, taking a major chunk of votes from minorities, Dalits, tribals and backward classes.

Post-delimitation, the Congress is banking upon 13 seats reserved for Dalits and two for tribals across the region to neutralise the impact of non-BJP votes being cornered by the JD-S, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Samajwadi Party.

By unofficially projecting its state unit president Mallikarjun Kharge, a Dalit, as chief ministerial candidate, the Congress is banking upon its traditional vote banks among Dalits, tribals and backward classes to cross the halfway mark.

'The third phase of polling is critical for the Congress and the BJP as the outcome could make or mar the prospects of securing a majority to form a single-party government,' political analyst Sandeep Shastri told IANS.

'Though the presence of JD-S is confined to a few pockets, it remains to be seen what damage the BSP and independents would do to the Congress.'

The Congress is also wary of which way the politically dominant Lingayat community would vote as the BJP has projected a Lingayat-born B.S. Yedyurappa as its chief ministerial candidate.

'The BJP is riding on two horses to take on the Congress and JD-S by announcing that Yedyurappa will be the chief minister if it wins and hyping the 'betrayal factor' after the JD-S refused to share power with it despite its promise to do so,' Shastri said.

The battle for supremacy will be on seen in Belgaum and Gulbarga districts, which have 18 and 13 constituencies respectively.

While the BJP and Congress claim that the districts are set for straight contest between them, the Maharashtra Ekikaran Samiti (MES) and the JD-S have queered the pitch by working overtime in Belgaum and Gulbarga to make the fights triangular.

As a regional party fighting for the inclusion of Belgaum into Maharashtra over the last five decades, MES won four seats in the previous election.

With all the parties united against the MES move, the sensitive boundary dispute will affect the outcome in the seats where the regional outfit is strong.

In the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, old warhorses - Kharge and former Congress chief minister N. Dharam Singh - are pitted against the BJP in Jewargi and Chitapur (reserved) constituencies. Both seek to win a record ninth time.

Fakir Balaji (© IANS / India eNews)