

20 percent voting till noon in Karnataka's decisive phase

About 20 percent polling was reported till noon in the third and final phase of the Karnataka assembly elections Thursday, with voters queuing up early to avoid the scorching heat later.

Polling began on a brisk note in eight districts of north Karnataka for 69 constituencies to pick a new 224-member house.

An estimated 11.7 million voters, including 5.8 million women, are registered to exercise their franchise and decide the fate of 699 candidates, including several independents.

A state election commission official said voting was on in 12,389 polling booths in the districts of Bagalkot, Belgaum, Bidar, Bijapur, Dharwad, Gadag, Gulbarga and Haveri.

'About 20 percent voting was recorded in the first five hours of polling,' the official said. The districts comprise the erstwhile Bombay-Karnataka province and the Hyderabad-Karnataka region.

About 56,000 security personnel have been deployed to ensure smooth polling and prevent untoward incidents. The police have classified 4,358 booths as 'hyper-sensitive', hinting at the possibility of violence.

The first two phases of polling was conducted May 10 in 89 constituencies spread over 11 districts in the old Mysore region and May 16 in 66 segments across 10 districts of coastal and central Karnataka.

Counting of votes for all the 224 seats is slated for Saturday.

Prominent candidates in the fray are Congress state unit president Mallikarjun Kharge, a front-runner for the chief minister's post if his party secures a majority, former state chief minister N. Dharam Singh and Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) state president Mirajuddin Patel.

Kharge is contesting from the reserved Chittapur constituency in Gulbarga district. Singh is locked in a triangular contest from Jewargi in the same district. Patel is in the fray from Humnabad in Bidar district.

Kharge and Singh will set a record if they win for the ninth win in a row.

The campaign for the third phase was more vigorous than during the first and second phases, with BJP leader L. K. Advani touring the region for two days and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi electioneering four days.

The Congress campaign was led by party president Sonia Gandhi and general secretary Rahul Gandhi who addressed five public meetings between them.

JD-S president and former prime minister H.D. Deve Gowda, his son and former state chief minister H.D. Kumaraswamy and Bahujan Samaj Party (BJP) chief and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati also campaigned.

As in the second phase, the main battle in this round is between the Congress and BJP. The Congress dominance in the region was ended in 2004 when the BJP won 31 seats, enabling the party to emerge as the single largest group in the assembly with 79 seats.

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