

55 percent voting in Karnataka's decisive phase

About 55 percent of an estimated 11.7 million voters Thursday exercised their franchise in 69 constituencies in eight Karnataka districts in the decisive third and final phase of elections to the 224-member assembly.

Balloting in 12,389 polling booths in the districts of Bagalkot, Belgaum, Bidar, Bijapur, Dharwad, Gadag, Gulbarga and Haveri was peaceful, police and election officials said here at end of voting at 5 p.m.

About 56,000 security personnel had been deployed to ensure smooth polling.

The first two phases of polling was conducted May 10 in 89 constituencies (11 districts) of Old Mysore region and May 16 in 66 segments (10 districts) of coastal and central Karnataka.

Counting of votes for all 224 seats is slated for Sunday.

Winning a majority of the seats in this round is critical for the Congress as well as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) if they need a clear mandate to rule the state, which saw the fall of three coalitions in less than four years after a split verdict in the 2004 assembly polls.

Prominent candidates Thursday included state Congress president Mallikharjun Kharge, former Congress chief minister N. Dharam Singh and JD-S state president Merajuddin Patel.

Dharam Singh and Kharge will set a record if they are elected because it will be the ninth win in a row for the two. Singh is seeking re-election from Jewargi, which has sent him to the assembly eight times. Kharge had to shift from his home seat Gurmitkal as it has been de-reserved and made a general constituency. He is contesting from nearby Chittapur.

The campaign for the third phase was much more vigorous than the first and second with BJP leader L.K. Advani touring the area for two days continuously and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi spending four days.

Spearheading the Congress campaign was party president Sonia Gandhi and general secretary Rahul Gandhi.

Janata Dal-Secular president and former prime minister H.D. Deve Gowda, his son and former Karnataka chief minister H.D. Kumaraswamy and Bahujan Samaj Party chief and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati also campaigned for their candidates.

Like in the second phase, the main battle in this round is between the Congress and the BJP. The Congress dominance was ended by the BJP in 2004 when it won 31 seats from the region to emerge as the single largest group in the house with 79 seats.

The Congress bagged 17 and the JD-S was a surprise victor in 13 seats. The remaining went to independents.

The BJP is perceived to have further strengthened its hold on the region because there is a sizeable

population of politically influential Lingayat community, a section of which is upset with the Congress for allegedly neglecting its interests.

The JD-S is also expected by observers to take a hit in the region for pulling down the first BJP chief minister in the state, B.S. Yediyurappa, in November, just a week after he was sworn in.

Yediyurappa belongs to the Lingayat community and the BJP has projected him as its chief ministerial candidate.

In the first phase of polling, the main contenders were the Congress and the JD-S though the BJP is confident of doing well there too.

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