

Campaigning ends for Saturday's by-elections

Campaigning for Saturday's by-elections in 31 assembly constituencies across seven states and a solitary Lok Sabha seat in Uttar Pradesh ended Thursday evening.

Balloting will be held for 11 seats in Uttar Pradesh, 10 in West Bengal, three in Kerala, two each in Rajasthan, Assam and Himachal Pradesh and one seat in Chhattisgarh. The votes will be counted Nov 10.

It will be the first popularity test in the country after the Oct 17 assembly elections in Haryana, Maharashtra and Arunachal Pradesh that have produced mixed results for the Congress party.

Although these are only by-elections, the results will be keenly watched, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, where Chief Minister Mayawati has no friends, and West Bengal, where the Communists are on the backfoot after being in power for more than three decades.

While the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) rules Uttar Pradesh, the Left is in command in West Bengal and Kerala. Of the remaining four states, two each are governed by the Congress and the BJP.

Uttar Pradesh will witness a keen tussle to get into the Lok Sabha from Firozabad. The by-election was caused by the resignation of Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav's son Akhilesh after he was also elected to parliament from Kannauj.

The Samajwadi Party has fielded Akhilesh's wife Dimple, while the Congress has put up film star Raj Babbar, a former Samajwadi Party MP.

The 11 Uttar Pradesh assembly seats are Powayan (SC), Lucknow West, Padrouna, Rari, Isauli, Jhansi, Kolasala, Hainsar Bazar, Lalitpur, Etawah and Bharthana. Some 4.9 million voters will elect their representatives from among 117 candidates.

West Bengal's assembly elections have become a do-or-die battle for the ruling Left Front led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), which faces an increasingly aggressive Trinamool Congress of Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee -- who has vowed to oust the Marxists come what may.

After defeating the Left Front in the Lok Sabha and all subsequent by-elections, the Trinamool-Congress combine is keen on utilising Saturday's exercise to further cement its public support.

The elections are taking place mainly in opposition citadels. Seven of the seats had elected Trinamool or Congress candidates even during the Left Front's sweep of 2006.

The 10 seats are Kalchini (ST), Rajganj (SC), Sujapur, Goalpokhar, Bongaon, Contai South, Egra, Serampore, Alipore and Belgachia East.

The CPI-M and Trinamool are contesting five and seven seats respectively. The others have been given to Left Front allies and the Congress.

In Kerala, the Kannur assembly seat, a Congress bastion within a larger Communist stronghold, will witness a tough fight between the Congress and the ruling CPI-M.

The Congress has fielded A.P. Abdulla Kutty, who till early this year was a two-time Lok Sabha MP of the CPI-M. The Marxist candidate is heavyweight M.V. Jayarajan, who won from nearby Edakadu constituency in 1996 and 2001.

Ernakulam and Alappuzha in Kerala will also see elections.

The ruling Congress and the BJP are the main contenders for the two Rajasthan seats: Todabhim and Salumbar.

The Congress-ruled Assam's seats are Salmara South and Dhekiajuli. In BJP-governed Himachal Pradesh, Rohru and Jawali constituencies go to the hustling. Vaishali Nagar in BJP-ruled Chhattisgarh will also see balloting Saturday.

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