

Campaigning ends for Feb 21 Uttarakhand assembly polls

As campaigning comes to an end for Uttarakhand's assembly polls Wednesday, political parties wrapped up helicopter blitzkriegs and feverish rallies in the state.

The last leg of hectic electioneering in the state saw political stalwarts - Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stalwart L.K. Advani and actor-turned-politician Shatrughan Sinha - descend here in a bid to garner support.

Former prime minister and Janata Dal-Secular president H.D. Deve Gowda, Babu Hukum Singh, a member of the BJP national executive, and senior BJP leader Arun Jaitley interacted with the press.

Flag marches by security forces were held in Dehradun, Vikasnagar and Rishikesh. Added forces of police personnel, the Central Reserve Police Force, the Rapid Action Force and the Indian Reserve Battalion personnel from Himachal, home guards and forest department personnel along with horse riders, dog squads and bullet-proof vehicles have been pressed into service.

Sensitive areas have been identified by the police force and adequately equipped with machine guns, rifles and sticks. VIP areas among all the 70 constituencies are being regarded as 'most sensitive'.

With major parties Congress and the BJP fielding low-profile candidates against VIPs from each other's parties, thereby conceding defeat even before the real battle, no disturbances are expected.

One exception, as per pre-poll predictions, is Forest and Environment Minister Nav Prabhat who seems to be fighting a lost battle, say political observers.

BJP state president Bhagat Singh Koshiyari won from Kapkot with an overwhelming margin of 27 percent votes in 2002 against his Congress rival. This time he has a tougher contender in Pratap Singh Kathait of Congress.

In Chakrata, Pritam Singh is still a strong candidate with his traditional supporters. BJP candidate Pratap Singh is relatively unknown in a large part of the constituency. Madhu Chauhan will cut into the BJP vote bank as an independent.

In Haldwani, Congress leader and Information Minister Indira Hridayesh appears to be comfortably poised. Had the BJP brought in a new face, it might have been in a position to give a tougher fight to this Congress stalwart.

In Bironkhal, Amrita Rawat is all set to win. Though Bironkhal was always a tough seat for the BJP as Amrita Rawat has been a popular legislator here, the party has chosen a young Deepti Rawat.

In the Rudraprayag seat, Congress has introduced a new candidate against experienced campaigner Matbar Singh Kandari, who is also the leader of the opposition in the outgoing assembly. An anti-incumbency wave against Kandari has been weakened by the selection of Virendra Butola as a Congress candidate.

Harbans Kapoor in the Uttarakhand assembly still stands strong in Dehra Khas. His main opponent

Lal Chand from Congress is contesting for the first time and is considered a weak contestant. Virendra Uniyal from Uttarakhand Kranti Dal (UKD) will compete for the second position on this seat.

In Ranikhet, Ajay Bhatt from BJP has always been a very strong contender. His fight could have been a bit tougher if Harish Rawat or his wife Renuka Rawat had contested from here as was earlier planned. Now with a weaker opponent in the form of Karan Mahra of the Congress, he hardly faces any opposition.

In Gangotri, Rajput voters will decide who will win the coveted seat. The last time it was won by Vijay Pal Sajwan of the Congress with a very low margin against Communist Party of India candidate Kamla Ram Nautiyal. This time both candidates appear to have lost some support, making BJP candidate Gopal Rawat a stronger contender.

In Rishikesh, Congress candidate Shoorvir Singh Sajwan is an adept fighter.

Vikas Nagar is one seat where two VIP candidates - Nav Prabhat and Munna Singh Chauhan - are contesting against each other. Forest Minister Nav Prabhat appears to be losing. With Chauhan in the BJP, he is clearly leading the race with a four percent margin at the moment.

In Rudrapur, Health Minister Tilak Raj Behad is comfortably placed against BJP's Rajesh Shukla. The Bahujan Samaj Party's Tasavvur Khan is the third candidate who may eat into some of the vote share.

In Mussoorie, Congress' Jot Singh Gunsola appears to be have the edge over Sahdev Pundir of the BJP and Prakash Joshi of the UKD.

Anjali Nauriyal (© IANS / India eNews)