

Result of polls will answer crucial questions

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The results of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly election scheduled for May 13 will answer two crucial questions. The first question is whether Karnataka society stands more communalized today. And the second, whether Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity, which did not help the BJP much in the previous Assembly elections here, can save the party in its bid to retain power in the State.



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The BJP government led by chief minister Basavaraj Bommai is facing anti-incumbency. In fact, the Bommai government cannot count on a single factor that will work in its favour in the election, except for a communally polarized electorate that the BJP has been trying to build for the past four years and the popularity of PM Modi. Both these factors have limitations in Karnataka's political context, but the BJP is left with nothing else to fight the crucial electoral battle in its Southern Gateway.

In a last-ditch effort, Bommai tried to placate various caste groups by changing the state's reservation policy. This election-eve announcement has led to more confusion among castes and sub-castes demanding a larger pie in the quota than pleasing any of them. Also, the BJP is trying to placate its old veteran B.S. Yediyurappa who was sulking, after he was asked to step down from the chief minister's post in favour of Bommai, two years ago. Yediyurappa is now leading the election campaign but lacks the previous vigour due to his advanced age and internal rivalry in the party.

Sensing in advance its receding fortunes in the post-Yediyurappa phase, the BJP adopted an aggressive communal strategy. From banning the wearing of Hijab by Muslim girls in educational institutions, orchestrating attacks on inter-faith couples (so-called Love Jihad), to laws on sale of beef and inter-faith marriages and forcing a ban on Muslim traders in Hindu temple festivals, proposing to build a series of new Hindu shrines across the state to scrapping of a 4 per cent reservation for Muslims under the OBC quota, the saffron party has tried every possible trick to communally mobilize the majority Hindu voters in its favour.

The communal strategy in the past worked well for it in coastal Karnataka considered as the laboratory of Hindutva. The social profile of the coastal electorate is very different from rest of the state. The region has no presence of the state's two dominant castes – Vokkaligas and Lingayats and the OBC castes, which constitute the majority population there, are too disparate to develop a political consciousness of their own.

In the rest of the State, where the Vokkaligas and the Lingayats still control political power, the BJP could not push its communal agenda easily. Although the Lingayats are supporting the BJP, they do so more because of their loyalty to Yediyurappa than because of any unequivocal acceptance of BJP's Hindutva. The BJP's efforts to saffronise the Vokkaliga belt of Southern Karnataka has also met with limited success so far or even proved counter-productive.

A case in point is the BJP's attempt to distort history to communally consolidate Vokkaliga voters. The BJP created two fictional characters of Vokkaliga community as those who had killed Tipu Sultan and tried to popularize this narrative through the media and the state-sponsored repertoire called Rangayana in Mysore. However, Vokkaliga leaders refused to buy this, and the community's powerful pontiff exhorted the party against projecting the Vokkaligas as pro-British and anti-Muslim. The BJP has been successful to some extent in communally mobilizing Dalit and OBC castes in interior Karnataka and northern Karnataka, but unlike their coastal counterparts, the Dalit, OBC castes here stand divided by their loyalty to leaders from different parties.

The BJP's communal polarization strategy thus seems to have yielded only mixed results beyond coastal districts, making it inevitable for the party to rely on Modi's popularity more than ever before.

The Prime Minister has made a series of visits to inaugurate infrastructure projects, which the Congress claimed were not completed. PM is expected to hold 20 election rallies in the state. All the Government advertisements feature the Prime Minister's picture more prominently than of chief minister Bommai. They speak more about what Modi has done to the State rather than what the State government has done.

The Modi factor did not work much in Karnataka in the past. In fact, the BJP did much better in 2008 when it faced elections with Yediyurappa as its leader. In the 2018 election in which Modi played a key role, the party could win only 104 seats in 224-member Legislative Assembly, six seats less than its 2008 tally. This time, the opposition is also

highlighting the fact that Modi was conspicuously missing when the state was reeling under the impact of floods and droughts in the past. The opposition narrative that Karnataka has been treated unfairly while allocating funds from the Centre, leading to a reduction in the state budgetary allocation for crucial development schemes, has taken the sheen out of the Prime Minister's promise of development of the State. No doubt the BJP could sweep the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in the state in the name of Modi, but the Karnataka electorate is known to vote differently in the national and the state elections. No party has repeated itself in power since 1985.

(Views expressed by the author are personal and not necessarily of the publisher. The author is a professor of public policy and governance at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru.)