

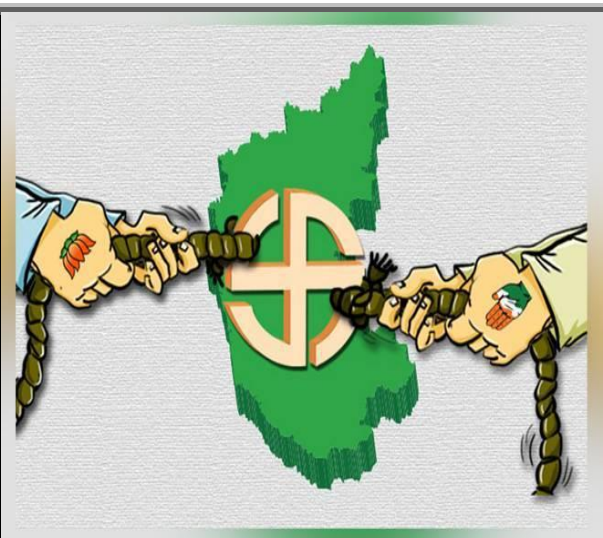
## DECODING KARNATAKA'S ELECTIONS: UNVEILING THE LOCAL DYNAMICS AT PLAY

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



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Assembly elections in the Indian State of Karnataka are of significant importance for both the ruling party and the opposition in the context of the next Lok Sabha elections in 2024. The two upfront rivals are the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the previous elections, BJP was able to win in the State Assembly and secure majority seats in Lok Sabha elections. This time, Congress appears to be placed in a better position because of a host of socio-economic, political, ethnic, and religious factors.

Karnataka is a southern state in India with a population of 69.59 million.<sup>1</sup> While for Lok Sabha elections, the state is divided into 28 political constituencies, for the State Assembly, there are 224 seats. While INC and BJP are the strongest parties in the contest, the Janata Dal (S) is considered 'kingmaker' as happened back in 2018. The BJP was in clear majority winning 104 seats out of 224, while Congress could win only 80 seats. It was the JD(S) that made Congress win with the help of their 37 seats. However, in 2019, 16 legislators resigned from Congress and two MLAs joined the BJP bringing the latter into power again.<sup>2</sup> For the State Assembly elections, Congress announced tickets for 223 candidates while not nominating anyone in Melukote as it is supporting a regional party

<sup>1</sup> "Karnataka Population," India Census, accessed May 09, 2023, <https://www.indiacensus.net/states/karnataka>.

<sup>2</sup> "Karnataka Election Result," Times of India, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/karnataka/results>.

Darshan Puttaiah of Sarvodaya Karnataka. For its part, BJP announced a list of 224 candidates.<sup>3</sup> The support of the regional parties remains floating and depends upon the benefit they can secure from the possible victor.

Both BJP and Congress have claimed in their campaigns that they have the majority votes. BJP has been seeking local support on the basis of development and economic 'rise' of India; while Congress has focused on local issues ranging from social to economic. In the pre-poll surveys, Kannada outlet, Eedina, claimed that Congress would emerge as a single winning party with a clear majority of around 140 seats. This was countered by a pre-poll survey conducted by Zee News that predicted BJP's victory.<sup>4</sup> Both outlets claimed their survey results to be reliable based on audience they had engaged. Since Zee News is known for its pro-government approach across national and international audience, its results could be seen as partisan.

Unveiled by its national President JP Nadda, the BJP manifesto focussed on food, education, healthcare, and financial support to the people. It also pledged the implementation of Uniform Civil Code in Karnataka and providing three cooking gas cylinders to all below poverty line families.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the manifesto released by Congress promised to end all "anti-people and unjust laws" of BJP and scrap National Education Policy (NEP) while announcing women empowerment projects. Called *Sarva Janangada Shanthy Thota* (Peaceful garden of all communities), the manifesto pledges electricity upto ₹2,000 to all women heads of families per month, food gains to BPL families, free travel for women under State buses, and unemployment support. The Congress manifesto also promises developmental and social projects for people's welfare.<sup>6</sup>

Besides these promises, there are certain on-ground factors that can actually impact Karnataka's future. Firstly, the 'Amul Vs Nandini' controversy that Congress has been cashing on to muster local

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<sup>3</sup> "Karnataka assembly elections: list of congress candidates", Hindustan Times, May 03, 2023, accessed May 05, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/bengaluru-news/karnataka-assembly-elections-here-is-the-full-list-of-congress-candidates-101683086290515.html>; "Karnataka elections 2023: list of BJP, Congress and JD(S) Candidates and their constituencies", Financial Express, April 20, 2023, accessed May 05, 2023, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/karnataka-election-2023-bjp-congress-jds-candidates-constituency-wise-full-list/3054905/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Karnataka polls: Pre-poll survey shows a clear win for congress; BJP calls it 'bogus'," mint, April 30, 2023, accessed May 4, 2024, <https://www.livemint.com/elections/assembly-elections/karnataka-polls-pre-poll-survey-shows-clear-win-for-congress-bjp-calls-it-bogus-11682817255453.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Karnataka assembly elections: BJP releases poll manifesto, here's what party promises," Times of India, May 1, 2023, accessed May 2, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/karnataka/news/karnataka-assembly-elections-bjp-releases-poll-manifesto-heres-what-party-promises/articleshow/99902059.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>6</sup> "Karnataka Assembly Elections 2023: Congress releases manifesto, promises to repeal 'anti-people laws' passed by BJP", The Hindu, May 2, 2023, accessed May 08, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/karnataka-assembly/karnataka-assembly-elections-2023-congress-releases-manifesto-promises-to-repeal-anti-people-laws-passed-by-bjp/article66802659.ece>.

support. Nandini is a local dairy brand of INR 21,000 crores that supports local milk production and consumption while also supporting local farmers and villagers.<sup>7</sup> The public in the State have emotional attachment with the Nandini brand. Back in December 2022, Home Minister Amit Shah announced Amul, a Gujrati brand, to come to Karnataka to do wonders by joining hands with Nandini. Although Amul dairy products had been sold before in the State, on April 5, the Amul brand officially launched its commercial affairs.<sup>8</sup> This is impacting local production and Nandini. Congress is targeting this initiative by BJP as an attempt to undermine the local economy. These bashings can impact voters' turning in favour of Congress as dairy farmers have influence in 120 constituencies.

The second possible factor that can influence Karnataka elections outcome is the 'Hijab vs Saffron' controversy. The controversy started back in February 2022 when college authorities in Udupi banned Hijab in the classroom. Later, it was implemented at the University level backed by BJP's decision to ban Hijab on campuses to eradicate 'inequality.'<sup>9</sup> The Hijab ban instigated protests across the State by Muslims, but will it impact election outcomes in coastal areas of Udupi and Dakshina Kannada? Looking at the demographic dynamics, in Udupi Muslims are just 8.22% against 85.72% Hindus, while in Dakshina Kannada Muslims are 24.02% compared to 67.18% Hindus. As such, it seems that the Hijab ban would not dent BJP's popularity in this region as happened back in the 2018 election when the BJP bagged 12 out of 13 seats in the State Assembly.<sup>10</sup>

Another important local factor is the support of Lingayats and Vokkaligas, contributing 17% and 11% of the population of the State respectively.<sup>11</sup> Lingayats are mostly BJP supporters and believed to have strongholds in around 100 constituencies. On the other hand, Vokkaligas support the Janata Dal and Congress. In previous Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won 16 seats in the constituencies where

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<sup>7</sup> "Amul vs Nandini controversy in Karnataka," *The Economic Times*, April 11, 2023, accessed May 08, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/amul-vs-nandini-controversy-in-karnataka-all-you-need-to-know/articleshow/99400460.cms>.

<sup>8</sup> Sneathish Roy, "What is Amul-Nandini controversy that erupted political slugfest in Karnataka?" *Hindustan Times*, April 11, 2023, accessed May 09, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/bengaluru-news/what-is-amul-nandini-controversy-that-erupted-political-slugfest-in-karnataka-101681191115088.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "What was Hijab row? Is it a major issue in Karnataka elections?" *Times of India*, April 30, 2023, accessed May 09, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/karnataka/news/explained-what-was-hijab-ban-row-is-it-a-major-issue-in-karnataka-elections/articleshow/99886128.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>10</sup> "Hijab not a major issue in coastal Karnataka election campaign", *The Siasat Daily*, April 25, 2023, accessed May 05, 2023, <https://www.siasat.com/hijab-not-a-major-issue-in-coastal-karnataka-election-campaign-2575621/>.

<sup>11</sup> Armaan Bhatnagar, "Karnataka elections: Who are vokkaligas and how many seats can they impact," *The Times of India*, April 19, 2023, accessed May 09, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/karnataka/news/karnataka-elections-who-are-vokkaligas-and-how-many-seats-can-they-impact/articleshow/99614567.cms>.

Lingayats and Vokkalias were in influence.<sup>12</sup> While JD(S) is perceived as 'kingmaker', its political inclinations remain uncertain at this point. So far, neither Congress nor BJP has shown any tilt to ally with JD(S). But, both parties will try to secure its support before the election results are out.

Last of all the major factors is the 'rebel' factor and the poor performance of the BJP government in the last few years. Congress is playing on public frustration to enhance its own appeal. The State Contractors Association made charges against the Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai government for his alleged '40% commission' and corruption issues. Posters carrying Bommai's picture in the QR code, with the tag "Pay CM-40% accepted here" are splashed across the State. Congress is highlighting the issue in its election campaign.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Prime Minister Modi's personal participation in the campaign, seen as an 'X' factor in the elections, can significantly influence the outcome.<sup>14</sup> He conducted an extensive, State-wide campaign including 18 public rallies and 3 roadshows.<sup>15</sup>

Apparently, it seems that the BJP is able to mobilize support in the State elections. But factors like the Amul-Nandini controversy, JD(S) probable tilt towards Congress, and the BJP Chief Minister's corruption cases could tilt the balance towards Congress. Local groups like Lingayats can play their role in BJP's votes, but not majorly as does JD(S). However, the vote gap anticipated by pre-poll surveys is closed by Prime Minister Modi's visit to spearhead the party's campaign himself. Given the multiple dynamics at work, it is difficult to predict the final outcome of the election.

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<sup>12</sup> Rahul Aripaka, "The play at key Lingayat and Vokkaliga seats in Karnataka's Assembly election," *The Economic Times*, May 08, 2023, accessed May 08, 2023, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/karnataka/the-play-at-key-lingayat-and-vokkaliga-seats-in-karnataka-assembly-elections/articleshow/100054402.cms>.

<sup>13</sup> Prathima Nandakumar, "Pay CM-40% accepted here': Congress launches poster campaign against Bommai; BJP sees red", *The Week*, September 21, 2022, accessed May 06, 2023, <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2022/09/21/pay-cm-40-accepted-here-congress-launches-poster-campaign-against-bommai-bjp-sees-red.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Ajay Sukumaran, "Why PM Modi's campaign is an X factor in Karnataka polls," *India Today*, May 06, 2023, accessed May 07, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/why-pm-modis-campaign-is-an-x-factor-in-karnataka-polls-2375549-2023-05-06>.

<sup>15</sup> "Narendra Modi winds up his campaign for Karnataka Assembly polls with rallies and a roadshow", *The Hindu*, May 08, 2023, accessed May 08, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/karnataka-assembly/narendra-modi-winds-up-his-campaign-for-karnataka-assembly-polls-with-rallies-and-a-roadshow/article66824322.ece>.