

ISAS Brief

No. 32 – Date: 12 November 2007

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Political Intrigue in Karnataka: Implications for India

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Karnataka and Bangalore showed India the future by playing host to a then nascent, and now booming, information technology industry. It was in Bangalore, perhaps, that India's economic boom of the 1990s and the 2000s first began, back in the 1980s. The southern Indian state has, thus, been a symbol of India's economic drive and private entrepreneurship. In recent weeks, however, the state has been more in the news for its messy politics. Amidst all the intrigue and machinations of the politicians, the events in Karnataka, are perhaps an important pointer to the future of Indian politics, almost like the rise of the information technology industry was to the future of the Indian economy.

The politics of Karnataka has been in turmoil ever since the voters delivered a fractured verdict in the provincial elections held in 2004 – the legislative assembly was split three ways between the Congress, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S), with no single party close to a majority by itself. The incumbent Congress Party, in 2004, cobbled together a coalition with the JD-S, a centre-left party with a strong rural base in Karnataka, led by a former Prime Minister, H. D. Deve Gowda. The government collapsed after 20 months when Gowda's son, H. D. Kumaraswamy, defied his father to defect with a majority of JD-S legislators and join hands with right-wing BJP to form a government. The BJP, with more seats in the legislature than the JD-S, agreed to back Kumaraswamy for the Chief Minister's job for a period of 20 months after which he would back a BJP candidate for Chief Minister for the remaining 20 months of the assembly's life. All went according to plan until last month when Kumaraswamy and the JD-S, prompted by Gowda, reneged on their promise to hand power over to the BJP. The result was the fall of the Kumaraswamy government and the imposition of President's Rule in Karnataka. The legislative assembly was suspended, though not dissolved, by the Governor until someone else was in a position to form the government.

However, in a sudden turn of events, early in November 2007, the JD-S agreed to back the BJP to form the government in Karnataka. As can happen only in India politics, a bitter war of words between two former partners, turned into bonhomie and a new partnership overnight.

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The first implication of these events is the swearing in of B. S. Yeddyruppa as the first BJP Chief Minister of a southern Indian state, and what it means for Indian politics. Long considered by analysts as a party of, by and for the Hindi-speaking north of India, the formation of a BJP-led government in a non-Hindi speaking southern state is a major breakthrough for the right-wing party. Caught in disarray at the central level, with a major infighting over leadership issues, the formation of this government will be a shot in the arm for a beleaguered BJP. It also sends a timely reminder to a sometimes over confident Congress-led ruling alliance at the centre that opposition remains ever present, and strong, in many states across India. Elections for the centre are often decided by regional and local issues. And a dishevelled opposition at the centre isn't necessarily a hindrance to the ruling alliance being swept out of power. After all, the Congress central leadership looked in disarray when it won the general elections unexpectedly in 2004. Perhaps, something for the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) to keep in mind as 2009 approaches.

The second important implication of the recent events in Karnataka is for the 'Third Front' of non-Congress, non-BJP parties which hope to capture power at the centre in the near future, perhaps even in 2009.

The reality for the 'Third Front', an ill-defined group of disparate small parties, with a frequent turnover of membership, is that they are unlikely to be able to form a government at the centre without the support of either the Congress or the BJP. In 1990, the V. P. Singh-led National Front government was supported by the BJP from the outside. The Deve Gowda and I. K. Gujaral-led United Front governments, between 1996 and 1998, were supported by the Congress from the outside. Both experiments were short-lived as there was little incentive for the two big national parties to support them from the 'outside' for any length of time. The only incentive the BJP had in mind was to keep the Congress out in 1990 and the only incentive the Congress had between 1996 and 1998 was to keep the BJP out. In both cases, of course, the BJP and Congress stayed out of government. What the experiment in Karnataka shows is that the only way a Third Front-National Party arrangement can work stably is if power is shared between the two – a 30-30 month formula over a five year term for the leadership of government, with both partners being part of the government through the entire 60 months. Such a scenario isn't that far fetched, especially since the Congress and the BJP are in numerical decline – the elections in 2004 were perhaps the first time that both the national parties scored less than 150 seats each. In the event that both parties fall to 120 seats or below, the 'rest' will have greater bargaining power. At the moment, in the ruling UPA, the Congress with just 150 seats holds the post of prime minister and the top four ministerial jobs: Home, Defence, Finance and External Affairs. This may change if the 'Third Front' asserts itself in a future power sharing arrangement. Of course, this will only materialise if the 'Third Front', consisting of players like the Left Parties, the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra, the Bahujan Samaj Party or the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, the Rashtriya Janata Dal or the Janata Dal-United in Bihar, the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu and any other non-aligned (to Congress or BJP) party, gets together under a common umbrella of both policies and leadership, preferably in a strategic pre-poll manner rather than ad-hoc post-poll manner.

The third implication will, of course, be all the teething problems of a changing political scenario, as witnessed these parts few weeks and years in Karnataka. There will be betrayal. There will be machinations. There will be instability. But there will be an equilibrium point, even if it is at a lowest common denominator rather than a highest common factor. The

people of India will learn to live with it, as India's democratisation enters yet another phase with smaller parties taking precedence over the continuously declining national parties. The only consolation, for the Congress and the BJP, but no consolation for the country, is that they can take a turn at being the hostage takers while letting the 'rest' play the difficult role of administrator-cum-hostage, as the Congress is trying to do now with the Left Parties holding it at gunpoint.

Politics, of course, changes very fast to predict anything with certainty for a long-term future. The tone of the short term though, is very much on view in Karnataka. It is only a matter of time before the winds of change cover the short distance between Bangalore and Delhi.

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