

CONGRESS-LED U.D.F. WINS ON ANTI-MODI, ANTI-INCUMBENCY WAVE IN KERALA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ELECTORAL PERFORMANCE OF VARIOUS POLITICAL FRONTS IN THE 2019 LOK SABHA ELECTION IN THE STATE

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ABSTRACT

The 2019 Lok Sabha election marks the first time a non-Congress government comes to power for a second time, consecutively, with an absolute majority. The Indian National Congress (INC) party managed to increase its seats tally from 44 in the previous general election to 52 this time. Much against the national voting pattern, Kerala managed to get INC 15 seats, the highest it got anywhere in India. This paper analyses the causes of INC-led United Democratic Front's spectacular win in the state apart from looking into the causes of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Democratic Front's defeat, and the failure of Bharatiya Janata Party-led NDA.

KEYWORDS: 2019 Lok Sabha Election, Kerala, Indian National Congress, Left Democratic Front, United Democratic Front, India, Communist Party

The 2019 election to the Lok Sabha saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) single-handedly winning absolute majority seats and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) combine getting a whopping 300 plus seats. Its main rival the (United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was able to win significantly only in Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Meghalaya and Kerala; and among the three, only Kerala's electorate gave the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) a spectacular win with Congress getting 15 seats (the highest in the country) and the front getting 19. The easy race to victory for Congress is not something new given the surprise Kerala voters is known to throw up much against the national voting pattern.

For the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) which won the 2016 assembly election with a sizable majority, this verdict came as a shocker. Two broad factors that led to its defeat was: one, anti-incumbency, and two, the need to put up a secular alternative to the perceived communal government of BJP. It is on the waves of these two factors that the Congress could ride their way to a spectacular sweep of all the seats, barring one.

CAUSES OF LDF'S ROUT

To elaborate chronologically on the factors which led to LDF's defeat: first, the government failed to handle the after effects of Cyclone Ockhi which hit the coast of Kerala in November 2017.(Ameeruddin, 2018) This indifferent attitude

is best seen in the chief minister taking almost four days to visit Vizhinjam coast to assess the damage, a place which is hardly less than an hours drive from the state capital. Its casual handling of rescue operations, and in the giving of compensations including jobs promised for the widows of fisherman gave the impression of an uncaring workers' government. This did much to affect the government's public image.

Second, the government's management of the unprecedented flood of August 2018, one of its kind in a century since the first one in public memory in 1924.(Ameeruddin, 2019) Initially it was attributed to the severe rainfall but allegation of dam management emerged quickly and was later confirmed by the amicus curiae report submitted to the Kerala High Court as one of the factors that led to the catastrophe. This coupled with the bad management in providing flood relief, assistance and compensation to those affected made a wound so deep in people's mind.

Third, the government's failure to implement the supreme court order with respect to the control of churches under the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church which is divided into two factions namely, Orthodox and Jacobite.(Vellaram, 2018) The Jacobite faction preventing the implementation of the court order and the government's failure to mediate a solution earned the ire of the majority Orthodox faction against the government.

Fourth, the way the government played the Sabarimala issue of January 2019 was the final nail in the coffin for it and particularly the first of the two main causes for its defeat.(Ameeruddin, 2018) The government overlooked the court order of allowing hindu women and provided protection to women of other religious communities for visiting the temple, which was seen by one section of the hindu population as trampling on their beliefs and customs. This caused a divide within the hindu supporters of the CPM, whose votes went to the BJP, and the Congress, which became a major unintended beneficiary. It is this swing which enabled Congress to sweep 15 seats, and helped LDF to retain second position in all the constituencies except Thiruvananthapuram.

Fifth, is the political killing of two Congress workers at Periya in Kasargod district by CPM, the ruling constituent, during February 2019.(Sudhakaran, 2019) Such continuation of political violence and killings cannot be accepted by any civilized society and is generally looked down upon.

The sixth and the second of the two main causes for its defeat is the minority consolidation in favour of UDF to replace the government at the centre.(The Times of India, 24 may 2019) This consolidation probably happened because the LDF of which CPM is the major constituent party did not opt for an alliance with the Congress in the state, whereas in other states it allied with the Congress. This policy may have cast suspicion in minority communities about its sincerity to form a secular-alliance against NDA and swung its favour to Congress-led UDF which it thought would play a significant role had the UPA come to power in the centre. These factors in terms of government action and policy led the people to opt for an alternative which only the Congress-led UDF can be expected to provide.

UDF'S WINNING POINTS

Apart from being the beneficiary of the above grievances some of the reasons why the UDF won was: one, the need to provide a secular alternative to the BJP which is perceived by Keralites as promoting communalism. Though the LDF more than the UDF had been promoting this secular narrative, the UDF benefited because of consolidation of christian and muslim votes to Congress and its partner Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), apart from the swing votes.

The decision of Rahul Gandhi, the president of Indian National Congress, to contest from Wayanad as his second seat, helped to strengthen this secular narrative and also helped become a symbol of popular opposition. Though he campaigned only for a few hours his presence as a national leader helped turn the popular sentiment not only in Wayanad but the whole of Kerala in favour of UDF. This is clearly

reflected in his winning the seat by a record margin of 431,770 votes, the highest ever in the state for any Lok Sabha constituency.(News 18, 24 May 2018)

UNSUCCESSFUL NDA

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Front (NDA) in Kerala, which is now a third front, though could not win a single seat was able to improve its vote share. It got second position in Thiruvananthapuram and third in other constituencies.(Kiran, 2016 p 57-58) Though the party was able to make the Sabarimala issue into a political one the benefits went to UDF so as to prevent LDF from winning. Despite that, the front was able to improve its vote share from 10.4% in 2014 to 15.5% in this election.

ELECTION RESULT

The result of the 2019 Lok Sabha election in the state of Kerala is yet another indication of how religion, caste, and community plays in the victory of candidates. Though these factors play crucial role in deciding the fate of candidates, such communal politicking is covered using the holy garb of secularism. Political fronts and parties which publicly profess as patrons of secularism are seen covertly and overtly promoting communal interests of various religions, castes, and communities. Not only that, such forces has the power to swing the results in favour of fronts and make use of political power for their benefit.

Constituency	Elected Member	Party	Total Votes	% of Votes
Kasargod	Rajmohan Unnithan	INC	474961	43.18
Kannur	K. Sudhakaran	INC	529741	50.27
Vadagara	K. Muraleedharan	INC	526755	49.43
Wayanad	Rahul Gandhi	INC	706367	64.67
Kozhikode	M.K. Raghavan	INC	493444	45.85
Malappuram	P.K. Kunhalikutty	IUML	589873	57.01
Ponnani	E.T. Mohammed Basheer	IUML	521824	51.3
Palakkad	V.K. Sreekandan	INC	399274	38.83
Alathur (SC)	Ramya Haridas	INC	533815	52.4
Thrissur	T.N. Prathapan	INC	415089	39.84
Chalakyudy	Benny Behanan	INC	473444	47.81
Ernakulam	Hibi Eden	INC	491236	50.79
Idukki	Dean Kuriakose	INC	498493	54.23
Kottayam	Tmomas Chazhikadan	KC(M)	421046	46.25
Alappuzha	A.M. Arif	CPI(M)	445970	40.96
Mavelikkara (SC)	Kodikunnil Suresh	INC	440415	45.36
Pathanamthitta	Anto Antony	INC	380927	37.11
Kollam	N.K. Premachandran	RSP	499677	51.61
Attingal	Adoor Prakash	INC	380995	37.91
Thiruvananthapuram	Shashi Tharoor	INC	416131	41.19

Table 1. Election results of the 19 Lok Sabha. UDF [INC, IUML, KC(M), RSP], LDF [CPI(M)]

As said before, the two factors responsible for the sweeping victory of UDF are: one, the consolidation of minority votes; two, the swing of a section of votes belonging to the majority community affected by the government's implementation of the Sabarimala verdict. The consolidation of minority votes in favour of UDF is nothing new as it is the traditional front of choice of the minorities, yet, at times, may shift its favour to LDF in bad times. In spite of this alternation they make use of such opportunity for community gains. In this election, as a result of such swing, the Congress-led UDF won a total of 19 seats: the constituent parties, of which the Congress won 15; the IUML 2; Kerala Congress (M) and Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), one seats each.

With regard to LDF, the government's handling of the Sabarimala issue caused a section of its core vote bank, the ezhava and the scheduled caste community, to look the other way. It was also helped by the formation of Bharat Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS), a political outfit of the Ezhava community organisation, Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana) Yogam (SNDP). It is because of this that the LDF lost its traditional strongholds in northern Kerala like Kasargod and Kannur. The LDF's retaining its one and only Alappuzha seat is symbolic of the fact that its was where the communist party first established its base in Kerala by leading coir workers movements.

That apart, the sad reality of religious play in politics could be seen in the fielding of A M Ariff by CPI(M), and Shanamol Osman by Congress in Alappuzha. And the fact that Mr. Ariff won by a margin of a few thousand votes is a textbook example of how patriarchy of a minority community helped the male candidate win. It is also an indicator that it is the religion of the candidate that matters more than the party or front he/she represents. Had this split in muslim votes not happened between the Congress and the CPI(M), the latter would have lost this too.

In the case of NDA it was not able to win a single seat, though its partnership with the BDJS helped it increase its vote share. It emerged third position in all the places it contested except in Thiruvananthapuram where it emerged second. The growth of NDA's vote share can be seen as a sign of growing religious and political consciousness of the relative majority hindu community and its growth as an important third front in the state cannot be ignored as before.

The massive rout of LDF with the CPI(M) winning one seat need not be seen as end of the road for the party in the state. Its strong foundations can still be seen in the second position it acquired in most of the seats it contested. With the UDF being the traditional party of choice for the minorities,

LDF's future depends on how best it accommodates the interests of the now politically conscious hindu community after the Sabarimala issue, as well as how it calibrates its ideology and performs in the interests of the common people of Kerala, failing which, will lead to further erosion of its core vote bank, the ezhava community, and the economically weaker sections of other communities, to the benefit of its rivals.

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