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Karnataka Politics: The Road Taken and the Journey Ahead

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Karnataka politics has been in the national limelight for a slew of reasons. The fact that the first BJP Government south of the Vindhyas has completed an eventful and tumultuous two years in office has by itself attracted the spotlight of attention. The periodic volcanoes that erupted in the political world created a heat that generated tremendous curiosity and excitement about the future of the State Government in particular and the direction of politics in Karnataka in general. The scams and scandals that have raised their head with ferocious regularity have dented both the credibility of the government and the image of the State. The latest chapters in this unfolding political story are the recent results of the by-elections and the subsequent reshuffle of the Council of Ministers. What appears to have rescued the government is the presence of a hopelessly divided and directionless Opposition. An all-too-familiar process of 'muddling through' appears to be the essence of governance in the State.

When the BJP came to power in Karnataka after the 2008 Assembly elections it was clearly a mandate with inherent limitations. (For details see Shastri and Padmavathi) The party had just fallen short of a majority and required the support of independent legislators to convince the Governor to invite them to form the government. The compromise had already begun. The 2008 Assembly elections saw the party doing well in areas which were traditionally not its strongholds. This was possible largely because of the conscious efforts of the BJP leadership (over the last decade) to recruit influential leaders who hailed from sections which were not traditionally associated with the BJP. These included the now famous leaders of the mining lobby, the largely underplayed and under-estimated real estate lobby and disgruntled elements from the Congress and JD(S) who were influential caste leaders in their areas. The clash of interests and priorities of the traditional BJP cadres and the new 'recruits' was inevitable and played out in the public domain soon after the party came to power. The decision to launch 'Operation Kamal' was a clear reflection of the presence and influence of the 'new' forces within the BJP. 'Operation Kamal' was a strategy to manufacture a majority on the floor of the House by getting legislators from the Congress and Janata Dal (S) to resign. The reward for those resigning was a plum chairmanship of a Board/Commission or the BJP ticket in the by-election and a Ministership post-victory. While 'Operation Kamal' was a success, it had its long-term negative political consequences. At one level it

sharpened the divide between the traditional and new forces within the BJP. Secondly, it forced the State BJP leadership to reward those who switched political loyalties thus creating an impression that you needed to be politically savvy and sensitive to the right 'cues' in order to gain political mileage and advantage. Thirdly, it increased the stranglehold of the new lobbies within the BJP (especially the mining lobby) as they were the 'brains' behind 'Operation Kamal'—and its apparent 'short-term' success.

The 2009 Lok Sabha elections came along and the BJP secured a default victory. (For details see Shastri, Veena Devi and Padmavathi). One was the fact that the 'honeymoon' with the electorate was still on as the party had not even completed a year in office. To add to the BJP's advantage was the failure of the Congress to get its act together and the inability of the JD(S) to take on the role of the principal Opposition. The Lok Sabha victory lulled the BJP leadership into a state of complacency and this cost them dearly. Each one was claiming credit for the victory of the party candidates. With the Chief Minister claiming that the good performance of the BJP was a direct corollary of the commendable performance of his government, the mining lobby leadership swung into action. Claiming credit for not only the creditable performance in the Lok Sabha elections, the mining lobby leadership argued that they were responsible for the party coming close to the majority mark in the 2008 Assembly elections and also for the success of 'Operation Kamal'. At the height of the rebellion they even staked their claim to nominate a Chief Minister of their choice. This was clearly a ploy to gain greater political leverage and ensure that the government acted in a manner that promoted their business interests. The strategy appeared to have worked as the leadership issue was resolved in favour of the incumbent—though after paying a heavy political price.

The internal turmoil within the BJP was now out in the open. The elements which appeared to have gained the upper hand in the party, acted with brashness in flexing their political muscles and dictating policies and government actions often involving a manipulation of rules, norms and regulations. This 'new' BJP was something that the traditional supporters of the party could not recognise or even reconcile themselves to. Yet another hiccup the government had to deal with was the behaviour of fringe Hindu 'Rightist' groups that appeared to have got emboldened with the BJP coming to power. Attacks on minority religious institutions and select symbols of 'Westernisation' became all too frequent. The formal government line continued to be that all violators of the law would be dealt with firmly. The BJP was increasingly realising that to draw a line of

distinction between the ruling party and government was not an easy task. We have the recent instance of the Chief Minister promising the leaders of a particular religious minority that he would get his party legislator to publicly apologise for an alleged statement and the concerned legislator refusing to heed to the advice of the Chief Minister.



THE recent by-elections have only confirmed this trend. Having staked the reputation of the government in the by-elections, the Chief Minister launched a high-visibility campaign in both the Assembly constituencies which went to the polls. The campaign period saw government activity coming to a virtual standstill with prominent Cabinet Ministers assigned either to Gulbarga South or the Kadur campaign (the two seats in which the by-elections were held). The internal contradictions (between the traditional BJP leaders and the new recruits) once again came to the fore in the two by-elections. The BJP lost the seat it had earlier held to the JD(S) largely on account of ignoring the claims of the family members of the deceased MLA (Gulbarga South) and wrested a seat from the principal Opposition, the Congress, on account of infighting within the main Opposition party (Kadur).

The reshuffle of the Council of Ministers by the Chief Minister soon after the by-poll results was a master strategy to strengthen his hold over the party and government. He first won over the State party chief and then dropped three Ministers—two Independents and one from his party. There already were three vacancies caused by three resignations. The six new entrants were handpicked and meant to satisfy different interests. They all served one important interest—both potential rebels and diehard loyalists were rewarded. The hitherto powerful mining lobby did let out a few murmurs but was in full attendance at the swearing-in ceremony. The reshuffle of the portfolios again had the stamp of authority of the Chief Minister. The voices of dissidence continue to make themselves heard. A leading BJP aspirant, who is considered the architect of the Kadur victory, has openly declared that there is no reward for loyalty to the party with newcomers being rewarded in a disproportionate way. (C.T. Ravi in Deccan Chronicle September 26, 2010) The present round seems to have been won by the Chief Minister but the battle is far from over.

After two years in power, the BJP Government appears to have become a victim of its own contradictions. In its aspiration to come to power it consciously had sought to expand its base and recruited new leaders to the party. In the run-up

to power, it did a tight-rope walk of reconciling the diverse forces which were now part of the party. Once in power, the contradictions were out in the open as every group saw its chance to assert its presence and carve out (for itself) as big a piece of the benefits of power as possible. It could be argued that this phenomenon is typical of any ruling party, especially when it comes to power for the first time. What has added to the BJP's woes is the inability of the State leadership to rise above different factions and groups within the party. As a result, during its time in power, the BJP seems to be more in a continuous 'crisis-management' mode with little scope for ensuring a focus on stability, continuity and a clear policy direction.

The acts of omission and commission by the government have also attracted public attention. The Lok Ayukta submitting his resignation and later withdrawing it focused the spotlight of attention on the government going soft on corruption and misuse of power. The increased media focus on the actions of the mining lobby has also impacted on the image of the government.

What has worked in favour of the ruling party is the fact that the principal Opposition—the Congress party—is still to get its act together. A careful reading of Karnataka politics would indicate that no one defeats the Congress party—it manages to defeat itself. The party has not been able to capitalise on the several opportunities to put the government on the mat. The recent 'padayatra' from Bengaluru to Bellary saw all prominent leaders of the Congress coming together after many years. Their inability to sustain this act of unity was clearly visible in the party nominees coming third in both the seats where there were by-polls. While the Janata Dal (S) has its strength in select areas, its style of functioning and the unhappiness with the role of its leading political family makes it a limited political force in the State.

Karnataka politics appears to be at an interesting cross-road. The ruling BJP will face its acid test in the next one year as its internal contradictions would be more out in the open with each passing day with each group being desperate to ensure that it makes best of the opportunity of being in power. On the other hand, the Congress High Command would need to ensure that the party focuses on challenging the ruling party rather than intensifying its internal power struggle for leadership at the State level. It is still unable to annoint a new President for the State unit.

Politics, as it plays out in the next few months, will be crucial because it will clearly shape the nature of course of the long-term political developments in the

State.

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