

What does 2022 hold for Karnataka Politics?

Dr. Sandeep Shastri

Vice-Chancellor

Jagran Lake City University, Bhopal

What awaits us in Karnataka politics in 2022? While astrologers and soothsayers are having a field day in predicting the events to come in the New Year that is round the corner, this is a brave attempt to look at possible developments from the prism of a student of politics!

2022 will be a pre-election year. It will have its share of sops and schemes aimed at wooing the voter. These government schemes will have to be seen in the backdrop of a few recent reports. Neeti Ayog, in a report released recently, saw Karnataka fall from the 16th position to the 19th position in health care infrastructure. In the Good Governance Index for 2021, Karnataka ranked sixth behind Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Haryana and Kerala. In the Public Affairs Index (PAI) 2021 which looks at growth, equity and sustainability indicators, Karnataka fell to the seventh position from its fourth position in 2020. It is clear that 2022, will need the government to focus aggressively on 'catching up' and even 'moving ahead', if the above statistics are any indicator.

There has been a sustained debate on whether political stability in a state impacts its development indicators. Having had four Chief Ministers in three years (Yediyurappa became Chief Minister twice), there is a persuasive case for arguing that instability in government leadership (especially not merely turnover of leaders but ruling parties within the term of an Assembly) does not augur well for focused attention to development. Yet one should not forget that two recent Chief Ministers (Krishna and Siddaramaiah) who had a near full term (Krishna got the assembly dissolved early and called for fresh elections), were voted out of power in the next elections. Data from the National Election Study (NES) conducted by Lokniti-CSDS, indicates that the level of satisfaction with successive state governments has not been exceptional. Thus, will 2022 see the government making a conscious effort to ensure that development schemes and infrastructure projects are implemented with greater vigour and efficiency or is one likely to see the voter remaining increasingly pessimistic of the government's record on governance?

The battle for Karnataka has always been about the developments in the different regions of the state. Northern Karnataka has always played a pivotal role in propelling a party to power. No ruling party in the recent past has been able to make a bid for power on its own, unless it does well in this region. In recent times, the mainstay of the BJP support has been from this region. The Chief Minister too hails from Northern Karnataka. How this region pans out in 2022 would be indicative of the way its electoral politics would shape up in 2023.

The Old Mysore Region which accounts for half the assembly seats in the state, has been witness to a concerted effort by the BJP to make inroads into the vote base of both the Congress and the Janata Dal(S). The alliance in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections between the Congress and JD(S) helped the BJP expand its political presence in the region. 2022 will see that battle for electoral support in the region, further intensify.

All political players in the state will be on their toes in 2022 as the ready themselves for the electoral battle of 2023. The BJP as well as the Congress will need to get their house in order to present a united picture before voters. The JDS would need to convince the voters of its continued relevance in the politics of the state. A tall order for all political players!

It is truly a pleasure to write about a friend, colleague, co-researcher and close associate. I have known Dr Harish Ramaswamy for over four decades now. Our paths first crossed when we were postgraduate students in Political Science. While Harish was at Mysore, I was at Bangalore. Later when he joined Karnatak University, Dharwad we continued to meet and interact. Our association and interaction got further cemented when we started Lokniti in 1995 and inaugurated a new generation of National Elections Studies (NES) in 1996. Harish was a close and active associate in the Lokniti activities and was our Karnataka Supervisor for the project for many years. He continued his association with Lokniti and was active in all the field work we did in the last quarter century. We have co-authored several articles which got published in edited books and reputed journals as well as wrote pieces for the newspapers, fulfilling our role as public intellectuals.

I was privileged to see Harish rise from strength to strength both academically as well as in terms of administrative responsibilities. During our frequent interactions at academic seminars, I saw the depth of his understanding on key issues and the useful insights he offered. As an administrator he took on several responsibilities and brought a sense of diligence and dignity to the many roles he played. Be it as Head of the Department of Political Science or as Special Officer to the Vice Chancellor and now as Vice Chancellor, he has been a role model and mentor.

I have known Harish not merely as a fellow political scientist but also as a friend. Our families have been extremely close and bonded very well. His mother has been very affectionate and loving. My mother too was very fond of Harish and spoke to him with great affection whenever he visited our home. Our wives have been close friends and so have our children. The many conversations that Harish and I have had for the last four decades have focused on both the personal and the professional. Our career graphs too have taken a more or less, a similar trajectory. As Harish formally retires from the University, I wish him well in his next innings in life and I am sure he will spread the sunshine of his presence in whatever he does.

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