

Changing Politics in Kerala and the Lok Sabha Verdict 2019

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Introduction

Elections has become an inevitable part of social life (Saari, 2001). In a democracy election are said to be the best alternatives to revolutions. It ensures a peaceful transformation of political power from one section of society to the other. As such it is a tool to protect and promote democracy (Goodwin-Gill, 2006). It offers a platform to the public to validate the promises and performances of the political spectrum (Schofield & Sened, 2006). In the twenty first century electoral democracy has become the hegemonic 'legitimate' political system in the world (Huat, 2007). In democracies, popular elections also contribute in legitimizing the regime, that is, conveying power and authority to the democratic rulers (Tavits, 2008).

Indian national elections have been the largest electoral exercise in the world ever since the first national elections in 1952. The cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity of the Indian society, as well as the federal nature of the Indian state, make this event a particularly complex one (Lama-Rewal, 2019). The populist elements in Indian elections is also well acknowledged (Kenny, 2017). It is described as one of the largest mass movement in democracy which is credited with the mobilization of around 900 million people. Successive general elections to the House of the People and to the State Assemblies, held over the period of the last five decades, have demonstrated to the entire world that democracy has taken firm roots and flourished in our country (Election Commission of India, 2000). Prasad (2007) observes,

Elections in India have always been a spectacle of colour, enthusiastic popular participation, innovative modes of self expression. The sheer diversity of the Indian cultural map makes the elections an event of kaleidoscopic variety and changeability (Prasad, 2007:148).

The 2019 electoral results to Lok Sabha is significant in many ways. At the national level it offered a second term for the Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP) government. It also indicated that alliance arithmetic by itself does not guarantee a victory (Shastri, Kumar, & Sisodia, 2019). The 17th Lok Sabha elections verdict has given the BJP-led NDA 37.4 per cent vote share against 31 per cent in 2014 elections. Almost every opposition parties barring those from Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and a few other states have suffered big setback in these elections. This verdict points out to a clear stratification of political orientations in different parts of the country. In North, West and Central India, BJP won a clear victory over its rivals¹. In many states in the region BJP established its dominance by challenging the hegemony of ruling parties. In the south side the former players remained decisive actors in electoral politics. Karnataka was the only state in the region to accept BJP dominance². It is found that the 2019 Lok Sabha elections evidenced the BJP strategy of retaining its strongholds and expanding to newer domains of power. The Congress led UPA alliance and the regional parties failed to gather electoral support for their policies. The 2019 elections evidenced the success of a well-planned electoral strategy by the BJP.

Against the national pattern, the electoral politics in the state of Kerala offered a unique model of stable bipolarism. When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made big waves in almost all states in India, its attempt to open its account in Kerala remains elusive. (Ibrahim, 2019). The bipolar politics of the state of Kerala operated in a new pattern in 2019. The ruling CPM led coalition Left Democratic Front (LDF) was left with a single seat in the 20 Lok Sabha constituencies in the state against 19 seats by opposition coalition United Democratic Front (UDF) led by Congress party. The significant question in this background is that whether the Kerala bipolar model is getting weakened and giving way to new political equations.

Understanding Kerala Politics

The history of the state of Kerala starts with the merging of two independent kingdoms of Travancore and Cochin with the Union of India after India gained independence in 1947. On 1 July 1949, the two states were merged to form the state of Travancore-Cochin. The first elections to the state assembly was held in the year 1957, and a reformist, Communist-led government came to power, under E. M. S. Namboodiripad. It was the first time a Communist government was democratically elected to power anywhere in the world. It initiated many land reforms in the state which led to better standards of living for the marginalized in the state. In the educational sector also there

were larger reforms in structures and policies. These reforms consequently laid the foundations of a new 'Kerala Model of Development'³.

The story of the Kerala model of bipolar politics started from the days of the first legislative assembly elections itself. Thereafter the political power of the state rotated between two dominant groups. However the exact formation of the present coalition politics emerged only after late 70's. During the period 1967-82 Kerala elected a series of leftist coalition governments. This was something peculiar to the social structure of the state which contained a majority of middle classes and was also dominated by religious and communal forces. Naturally the political alignment does not go well with the social alignment. There were several attempts to explain the leftist orientations of a middle class dominated society in Kerala. One explanation goes to the historic roots of the national movement in the state. Unlike many other parts of India, the Indian National Congress and its national movement raised not much hype in the state, particularly in the earlier days of national movement. There were significant social and religious movements which considerably influenced the political fabric of the state. The opening up of liberal education by the missionaries promoted an atmosphere of considerable free thinking and this was further promoted by the intervention of intellectuals. The socialist movements became mass movements and people naturally accepted the tradition. In this context the Indian national Congress found it difficult to establish its claims in the society. A second reason for the promotion of leftist ideology is attributed to the 'convenience politics of the state. Even though the two coalitions were led by different ideological groupings, the constituent political parties in these coalition adapted a flexible policy of shifting alliances without hurting their ideologies. For example, a dominant regional party like Kerala Congress used to shift alliances and served with left and right coalitions several times.

BI-Polar Politics in Kerala

Politics in Kerala takes place in a multi-party democratic framework, within the overall context of the national politics of India. Kerala has a unique position in India, as one of the most politicalized state. The state holds an unbroken position of having largest politically aware population, who participate in state's politics actively. It has 20 parliamentary seats and was the first Indian state to vote for the communists. In Kerala, it is generally difficult for a single party to contest and win even a single seat, because the voter perception is towards voting for a coalition.

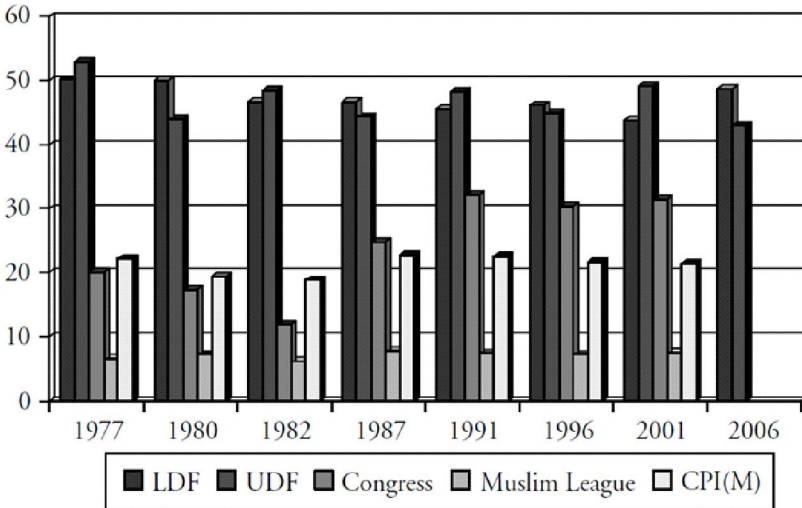


Figure 1: Voting share of Political Parties and fronts in Kerala legislative Assembly 1977-2006

(Source Dyke, V. V. (2007). ‘Jumbo Cabinets,’ Factionalism, and the Impact of Federalism: Comparing Coalition Governments in Kerala, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh. In R. Roy, & P. Wallace, *India’s 2004 Elections: Grass-roots and National Perspectives*. New Delhi: Sage. P-134

Political Coalitions is a major feature of Kerala Politics. The state has developed a two-front system in which relatively stable coalitions of parties compete in a manner similar to a two-party system (Dyke V. V., 2007). In coalition politics a number of parties are united under a common banner and they fight election together. After elections they will share political offices. In Kerala two major political coalitions are existing- UDF and LDF. The UDF stands for United democratic Front and it is led by the Indian National Congress. The coalition represents rightist politics in the state. The LDF stands for Leftist Democratic Front and is led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). They mostly comprise of the leftist parties. A special feature of present Kerala coalition politics is that after a general election the ruling coalition is normally rejected by popular vote and they have to stay in opposition for the next five years.

By the end of 70's the politics of Kerala has stabilized around the coalitional forces. Ever since 1979, the power has been clearly alternating between these two fronts without any significant change. The figure shows the almost stable vote base of both fronts and political parties and it can be seen that the change in support base is very minimal. This is one of the major peculiarities of Kerala coalition politics.

Most of the major political parties in Kerala, except for Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), belong to one or the other of these two alliances, often shifting allegiances a number of times. In terms of individual parties, the state has a strong leanings towards socialism and thus Communist parties have strong inroads in Kerala. Indian National Congress has a very strong presence in Kerala, even during Pre-Independence days.

The Indian Union Muslim League, is a powerful pro-Muslim community-oriented party, which was started as Muslim League prior to partition of India, yet decided to remain their allegiance to India after partition. The party has strongholds mostly in Muslim dominated districts like Malappuram. and they form the second largest party within UDF. Mass population of Muslims support Indian Union Muslim League in most of the elections.

Kerala Congress, which has more than 4 denominations, after breaking away from original party, has strong influence among settlement populations in hilly regions of the state. The various Kerala Congress denominations are primarily patronized by Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Nair community. Today, most of Kerala Congress parties are aligned with UDF. Socialist groups, consisting of several small fragmented parties like NCP, SJD-S, JDS, Congress-S, are mainly pro-center left socialist parties having very limited influences in few pocket areas. Most of the socialist groups are with LDF, though at few instances, some of them changed their loyalties to UDF. Communist parties, consists of various socialist groups, which have broken away from CPIM which mostly are Center left parties and few are extreme left.

Verdict 2019- How Does Kerala Voted?

The 2019 election was a hard battle for the ruling CPM led coalition and the Congress led opposition. In most of the constituencies the bipolar politics of the state operated. However, the BJP led NDA posed a significant challenge to both coalitions in certain constituencies. A total of 76.82% of 2.61 crore voters exercised their franchise to elect 20 Lok Sabha members from Kerala.⁴ The election results badly hit the CPI(M) led coalition. Out of the 20 Lok Sabha seats, the coalition got

only one seat and that also by a bare margin⁵. The electoral politics in the state acquired a new turn with the Congress decision to field its national president as a candidate from Wayanad constituency of Kerala. The left has read it as a message that the congress has chosen Left as its major opponent against NDA in the state level.

Table1: Lok Sabha Elections 2019: Voting pattern

Sl No	Coalition	Vote 2014	Vote 2019	Vote Percentage 2014	Vote Percentage 2019	Fall/Increase in Votes	Fall/Increase in percentage
1	UDF	75,46,830	96,28,034	42.04	47.23	20,81,204	5.19
2	LDF	72,11,257	71,56,387	40.2	35.1	(-)54,870	(-)5.1
3	NDA	19,44,204	31,71,738	10.8	15.56	12,27,534	4.76

Sources: Various news reports and election commission reports

The above table shows that both NDA and UDF registered increase in the vote share in comparison with 2014 elections. While the LDF lost 54,870 votes, UDF gained 20,81,204 votes and NDA 12,27,534 votes. Even though the NDA failed to secure any seats from the state the coalition made an increase of 4.76% votes. In the outset the data suggest an upper hand to UDF in the electoral politics. But beyond the percentages the UDF gain is to be evaluated against the ideological and structural deficiencies and odds met by the UDF coalition. The constituent members in the coalition were much divided on the seat sharing and the candidate selection was done at last minute only. LDF was having an evident upper hand in election campaigns and candidate selections. They were also having the advantage of a well-structured party organization and discipline. However, the general public voted against the omissions and commissions of the ruling coalition. And UDF won against all the odds. Another interesting outcome is the increase in the voting share of BJP in the elections. Even though the percentage increase is a single digit it was achieved against a firmly rooted bipolar politics which usually never permits an outside actor to play any significant role in the state politics.

Table 2: Comparing Assembly results 2016 and LS Results 2019

Sl No	Coalition	Vote 2016 Assembly	Vote Percentage 2016	Vote 2019 LS	Vote Percentage 2019	Fall/Increase in Votes	Lean in Assembly Constituencies
1	UDF	78,08,743	38.8	96,28,034	47.23	18,19,291	123
2	LDF	87,25,934	43.35	71,56,387	35.1	(-)15,69,973	16
3	NDA	30,20,886	15.01	31,71,738	15.56	1,50,852	01

Source: Various news reports

Table 2 shows that the LDF has lost 15,69,973 votes in comparison with the 2016 assembly elections in the state. The coalition gained a lead only in 16 assembly constituencies. The advantage was reaped by UDF with an increase of 18,19,291 votes and lead in 123 constituencies out of 140 constituencies. NDA also had increased their votes by 1,50,852. The data suggest an evident erosion of LDF support in most of the constituencies with respect to 2016 assembly elections. The NDA performance is not much improved with respect to the previous elections. It is to be noted that NDA was not a significant political player until recently. The situation had changed markedly from 2004. In 2004, the NDA polled 12.5 percent votes and won a seat in a triangular contest. BJP also did well in Thiruvananthapuram, Palghat, and Kasargode constituencies (Gopakumar, 2011). This trend was carried over to the subsequent elections also.

The setback suffered by the left in the state of Kerala is to be read together with the national trends⁶. The CPI(M) central committee admitted that in many constituencies, the total votes polled by the party is less than the total membership of class and mass organisations. This voting gap informs political observers that the process of politicisation of mass organisation is alarmingly low.

Table 3: Seat share to Lok Sabha by Major Alliances from Kerala 1991-2019

Sl No	Alliance	Seats in 1991	Seats in 1996	Seats in 1998	Seats in 1999	Seats in 2004	Seats in 2009	Seats in 2014	Seats in 2019
1	UDF	15	10	11	11	1	16	12	19
2	LDF	5	10	9	9	18	4	8	01
3	NDA	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0

Source: Various news reports

The table shows that contradictory to the stable coalitions and regular power shifting between the powers in state legislature elections, there is a different pattern of voting in Lok Sabha. The people of the state take a broad view in the national elections. This means that there is a possibility of accepting a third front in the LS elections, given that the new front has something concrete to offer.

Concluding Remarks

One of the notable peculiarities of coalition politics in the state of Kerala since 1982 is that unlike its southern counterparts both the fronts

alternately ruled Kerala. On the other side, in Lok Sabha elections UDF had the advantage over the LDF. The only exception is 2004 elections. However in the post-Emergency 1977 general election the Congress–Communist Party of India (CPI) led coalition won all the seats. In 2004 LDF secured 18 seats, and the UDF gained one seat and the other seat was won by NDA.

With the 2019 election results the politics of the state became more complex. The two dominant coalitions identified the potential of a third coalition and most of the election propaganda was targeted against the BJP led politics rather than local issues. This is evident from the election analysis statement issued by CPM central secretariat.

The struggles against the ideology and politics of the RSS-BJP will be relentlessly carried forward by the Party. The Party will forge a united resistance against the neo-liberal policies that are ruining people's livelihood. Such struggles will be intensified along with the struggles for the defence of democracy and democratic rights of the people. The Party will utilise all its strength to build and advance the Left and democratic forces⁷.

The Lok Sabha elections 2019 in the state of Kerala seems to be a turning point in the state politics of Kerala. In the first instance it was established that both the ruling and opposition coalition failed to gauge the public response. In the national level, congress party failed to gather coalition forces against the BJP opposition⁸. The role of left in the national politics was reduced to the minimum.

The Congress led coalition was successful in mobilizing public opinion in their favour. This was done despite of the factionalism inside the party and coalition (Ibrahim, 2019). The argument that the Lok Sabha elections in Kerala is always in favour of UDF does not stand good in the face of the majority secured by the winning candidates. 2019 proposed a new scenario. The soft policies of UDF helped them to gain larger public support.

The left space in Kerala politics has much narrowed down and this may open up possibilities of new coalitions. BJP led NDA can emerge as one of the major political competitors in the state by virtue of its national acceptance. But for that they have many internal and external obstacles. One of the major issue here is the concern of the minorities. The minority voters are decisive factor in Kerala politics and as such NDA has to work out hardly to reach them⁹ The minority communities constitute about 45% of the total population of the state with Muslims 27% and Christians 18%.

Reference

- [1] Punjab is an exception in the region. Here the Indian National Congress led alliance won 40.12% vote share with 8 seats out of 13. The voting share of BJP led national democratic alliance was 37.08 with 4 seats.
- [2] In the state of Karnataka BJP led National Democratic Alliance won 27 out of total 28 seats. BJP alone won 26 seats with independent securing 1 seat. The major opposition Indian National Congress won only a single seat.
- [3] From the mid-1970s, social scientists were focusing upon Kerala's unusual social statistics. Social scientists discovered that Kerala was an area of the 'third world' where both the birth rate and the infant mortality rate were falling, where average life expectancy was approaching 70 years, where the large majority of the women and men could read and write, and where women outnumbered men. In popular literature on development, Kerala emerged as a welcome tale of promise. 'The success of Kerala', particularly in lowering its birthrate, emboldened economists to speculate about 'a Kerala model of development' elsewhere' (Jeffrey, 1992).
- [4] Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/kerala-election-results-live-updates/article27208644.ece>, accessed on 16-08-2019
- [5] The Party had a similar reverse in the 1977 Lok Sabha elections after Emergency. At that elections the party failed to get a single seat.
- [6] In West Bengal the Party has registered the worst electoral performance in the Party's history in 17th Lok Sabha elections. As per electoral estimates the CPI(M) polled 6.28 per cent while the Left Front polled 7.44 per cent. This is a decline of 22.17 per cent.
- [7] Review of the 17th Lok Sabha Elections (Adopted at the Central Committee meeting held on June 07-09, 2019) P-22.
- [8] In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress contested independently. In Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh – it did not made any efforts to arrive at any electoral understanding with other parties. In Haryana and Delhi they failed to arrive at any understanding with other opposition parties.
- [9] The minority communities constitute about 45% of the total population of the state with Muslims 27% and Christians 18%.

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