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Karnataka: A Dominant Caste ‘Revolt’?

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Abstract:

This article explores the changing political dynamics of Karnataka following the 2024 general elections. In 2024, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition comprised of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Janata Dal Secular party, which together represent the interest of dominant caste groups including Brahmins, Lingayats and Vokkaligas. This was necessitated by the Indian National Congress’ dominant showing in the 2023 state elections, attributed to its coalition of religious minorities, backward castes and Dalits. This paper will show that despite its success in the 2024 elections, the NDA coalition has not yet been fully consolidated. It further argues that the dynamics of contemporary politics in Karnataka may challenge its long-term sustainability. The paper argues that to consolidate this coalition, caste-based campaigning will likely now dominate state-level politics centred around questions of welfare and affirmative action. Communal issues, which marked the previous BJP government’s term in office, will be restricted to parts of the state where it remains socially and politically beneficial.

Introduction

The case of Karnataka can reveal valuable insights about the growth and trajectory of the Hindu nationalist movement in India. After all, it was the first south Indian state where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) tasted significant electoral success in 2008 and continues to play a prominent role. With the BJP’s emergence, Karnataka’s political system was transformed into a tri-party system consisting of the BJP, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Janata Dal Secular (JD(S)) (Assadi 2009; Shastri 2013).¹

Historically, barring a few pockets, political mobilization along caste lines has played a more important role than communal campaigning (Assadi 2006; Deshpande 2014; Madar and Basavaraja 2024). The arrival of the BJP in the state intensified communal appeals, particularly in the coastal areas which have a large Muslim and Christian population (Assadi 2002; Selvaraj 2025; Shastri 2025). In assembly elections, there is an astute emphasis on local issues rather than national ones (Shastri and Padmavathi 2009; Shastri 2013; Attri and Mishra 2024). Notably, since 1985, the Karnataka assembly election results have thrown up different winners from the national elections. As such, noted scholar, James Manor describes the state’s voters as ‘demanding, sophisticated and impatient’.²

¹ Given that recent Karnataka elections rarely result in large majorities, at times, the once-prominent JD(S) now serves the role of being a Kingmaker when coalition politics so dictates, and sometimes as King as was the case in the 2018 state elections when JD(S) leader HD Kumaraswamy was made the leader of the JD(S)-INC alliance.

² <https://commonwealth-opinion.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2023/making-sense-of-the-karnataka-state-election/>

In 2024, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition won 19 of Karnataka's 28 Lok Sabha seats (the BJP won 17 and the JD(S) won 2) and secured nearly 52 percent of the vote share. This alliance between the BJP and the JD(S) was described as a dominant caste 'revolt'³ as it appeals to the state's historical dominant groups such as Brahmins (believed to represent 5 per cent of the state's population), the Lingayats (believed to represent 17 per cent) and the Vokkaligas (believed to represent 15 per cent),⁴ respectively. This new alliance was necessitated to combat the INC's rising AHINDA coalition (a Kannada acronym for Alpasankhyataru or religious minorities, **H**indulidavaru or backward classes, and **D**alitaru or Dalits) which proved to be incredibly potent, delivering a decisive victory a year earlier in the 2023 state assembly elections. As this paper will show, despite its success in the 2024 elections⁵, the NDA coalition has not yet been fully consolidated. Further, the dynamics of contemporary politics in Karnataka may challenge its long-term sustainability. The paper, therefore, argues that to consolidate this coalition, caste-based campaigning will likely now dominate state-level politics centred around questions of welfare and affirmative action. Communal issues which marked the previous BJP government's term in office will be restricted to parts of the state where it remains politically and socially beneficial such as coastal Karnataka (Shastri 2025).

First, this paper unpacks the 2024 general election results to nuance this early success of the 'dominant caste revolt' to show that the consolidation is not fully complete. The second section demonstrates how the INC's success in the 2023 state elections necessitated this coalition. The third section argues that despite this early success, there are numerous challenges to the viability of this coalition in the long run, primarily how parties choose to appeal to Vokkaliga communities. The fourth section shows that given this likely renewed focus on caste-based politics; Hindutva-style communal politics will be restricted only to certain districts. For its analysis, the paper will draw on electoral results and (pre and post) poll surveys from the 2023 state and 2024 national elections. This will be complimented by newspaper coverage of the two elections.

The 2024 Verdict

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition won 19 of Karnataka's 28 Lok Sabha seats and secured nearly 52 per cent of the vote share. This verdict was not out of character for the BJP which had won 18, 19, 17, and 25 seats in the four preceding national elections. So dominant was the BJP's performance in 2019 (when it won 25 seats) that the erstwhile INC-JD(S) alliance could win only two seats (one each), with the final seat going to an independent

³ For more on the relationship between Lingayats and Vokkaligas, read Manor (1977), Assadi (2006) and Deshpande (2014).

⁴ While both Lingayats and Vokkaligas are categorised as OBCs, much like the Yadav/Jats in the Hindi heart belt, they are considered forward amongst other OBCs. Both groups have had a disproportionate grasp on political power in Karnataka. In 2018, the two communities accounted for 100 of the 224 sitting state legislators. The Chief Ministership has been held by a Lingayat eight times, a Vokkaliga four times, a Brahmin twice and four times by someone from a disadvantaged caste (Madar and Basvaraja 2024). Notably, Lingayats prominently supported the INC until 1990 when they started drifting outwards but have now consolidated behind the BJP.

⁵ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/vokkaliga-lingayat-support-to-nda-led-to-cong-s-loss-expert-101717618230620.html>

candidate, the widow of a popular Kannada actor. While the NDA lost 6 seats in 2024, it still outperformed expectations and predictions after its loss in the 2023 state elections (discussed later). This 2024 result showed the viability of the newly emerging BJP-JD(S) political alliance.

Despite its strong showing at the state assembly elections just a year earlier, the INC won only 9 seats in 2024, and in all but two, their winning margins were meagre, indicating that the results could have gone very differently on a different day.⁶ Despite this, the INC could be encouraged by their 45 per cent vote share (up from 32 per cent in 2019) demonstrating support for its AHINDA vote bank.

The BJP comprehensively won in its traditional strong-holds, the Lingayat-dominated Kittur-Karnataka (north-west) region, Bengaluru and coastal Karnataka, while its alliance partner, the JD(S) won two seats in the Vokkaliga-dominated southern part of the state. The INC, too, swept its stronghold, the backward and impoverished Kalyan-Karnataka region in the north, while making inroads into JD(S)-dominated Vokkaliga old Mysuru region, and picking up two seats in southern Karnataka and one in Kittur-Karnataka (Shastri and Devi, 2024).

Notably, results from the *CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey* show strong support for the two coalitions but not a complete consolidation. The NDA alliance held on to almost three-fourths of the Lingayat vote while the Vokkaliga vote was split between the NDA and INC. Notably (and impressively), the NDA also secured over two-thirds of the non-dominant Other Backward Classes (OBC) vote, which ate into the INCs support base. There was, however, a consolidation of other pillars of the AHINDA collation behind the INC with two-thirds (66 per cent) of the Dalit vote, and an overwhelming 92 percent of Muslim votes. This significant rise in Muslim votes may be attributed to the JD(S)'s Muslim party workers alienation over the NDA alliance which was perceived to discard the party's 'secular' credentials.⁷ Expectedly, the BJP/NDA continued to do well among the upper middle class and the rich while the INC saw greater support among the lower middle class. Importantly, the votes of the poor were equally divided between the two parties (Shastri and Devi, 2024).

Caste Groups	INC	NDA	Others	INC	BJP	JD(S)	Others
	24	24	24	23	23	23	23
Upper Caste	22	71	7	22	60	14	4
Vokkaliga	56	44		49	24	17	10
Lingayat	20	76	4	29	56	9	6
Other (non-dominant) OBCs	31	66	3	34	37	17	12
Dalit	66	33	1	63	23	10	4
Adivasi	44	56		45	39	13	3

⁶ <https://opencity.in/analysing-the-results-from-the-2024-general-elections-in-karnataka/>

⁷ <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/karnataka/over-60-jds-office-bearers-to-resign-today-over-alliance-with-bjp-30000-estimated-to-leave-in-coming-days-2702774>

Muslims	92	8		70	10	14	6
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Table 1: Vote Preference among castes and communities in the 2024 General Elections and 2023 Assembly Elections
Compiled by the author from the CSDS- Lokniti Post-poll surveys ⁸

The Logic of the BJP-JD(S) Alliance

To understand the basis and rationale for a BJP-JD(S) alliance, we must turn our attention to the assembly elections held almost exactly a year before. Not even the energetic efforts of popular Prime Minister Modi’s prolific campaign, and his promise of a ‘double engine government’⁹ (the state and national government working in sync through a common governing party) could distract voters from significant anti-incumbency due to rising inflation and the state BJP’s perceived anti-minority agenda (discussed later). The INC won decisively, winning 135 out of 235 seats and 43 percent of the vote share - its best performance since 1989.¹⁰ This propelled Siddaramaiah back to the Chief Minister’s role. The BJP was reduced to 66 seats and the JD(S) won only 19 seats. In their campaign, to combat the rising communal appeals of the BJP, the INC successfully emphasized the twin planks of economic welfare and social justice which largely appealed to its AHINDA coalition.¹¹

Importantly, the INC expanded its vote base in 2023 by making inroads into the JD(S)-dominated Vokkaliga areas and subsequently elevated DK Shivkumar, a prominent member of the Vokkaliga community, to the deputy chief minister position. Notably, of the 46 Vokkaliga-dominated constituencies, the JD(S) was reduced from 25 seats in 2018 to 11 in 2023. This erosion of support stoked the JD(S)’s insecurities about the INC eating into its vote base – fears which ended their previous coalition in 2019.

Electoral, for the JD(S), the BJP’s existing support from the state’s Brahmins and Lingayats was perceived to pose less of a challenge to its historic appeal amongst Vokkaligas. For the

⁸ <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/csds-lokniti-post-poll-survey-social-coalitions-shaped-the-verdict-in-karnataka/article68268946.ece> and <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/karnataka-assembly/lokniti-csds-survey-the-ahinda-advantage-for-the-congress/article66851101.ece>

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65446161> and <https://www.theindiaforum.in/politics/understanding-verdict-karnataka-2023-between-past-and-future>

¹⁰ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/karnataka-elections-analysis-ahinda-resurrection-limits-of-hindutva-and-economic-pain-drive-congress-victory-101683973668084.html>

¹¹ The AHINDA strategy was initiated by former INC Chief Minister Devraj Urs in the 1970s to counter the dominant influence of the Lingayats and Vokkaligas communities in Karnataka’s political landscape (Manor 1977). The success of this AHINDA strategy in turn led to Lingayats and Vokkaligas coming together (despite significant differences) in the 1980s to counter the AHINDA agenda (Assadi 2013; Rodrigues 2014). The AHINDA strategy was also employed by Siddaramaiah (from the relatively backward OBC Kuruba community) between 2013 and 2018 (Assadi 2013). He lost his re-election bid in 2018 because this AHINDA/pro-poor strategy alienated Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities. Siddaramaiah had further perturbed Lingayat Seers and voters because of his proposal to classify Lingayats as a separate religion. However, despite the shock electoral loss, the INC/Siddaramaiah’s vote share rose from 36 per cent in 2013 to 38 per cent in 2018 demonstrating the appeal of the strategy for the INCs electoral futures.

BJP, allying with the JD(S) allowed them to also deflect from the fact that, despite its electoral success, the party is yet to develop a strong regional political identity which the INC and JD(S) have.¹² This alliance would therefore benefit the BJP in the midst of contentious debates such as the imposition of Hindi, the national language in the state which was organized linguistically around the regional language, Kannada.¹³ This NDA alliance would also particularly be potent against the INC in future state elections as most constituencies are contested between the INC and either the BJP or JD(S), with the JD(S) and BJP rarely competing against each other. Notably, an analysis of the 2023 election results by the *Trivedi Centre for Political Data* showed that 61 out of the 135 seats were won by the INC by a ‘close’ margin of 5 per cent.¹⁴ As the national election results showed, this dominant caste coalition has already proved to be competitive.

Can the ‘Revolt’ be sustained?

Despite the obvious rationale behind this ‘revolt’ and its early promise, this evolving coalition is plagued by many challenges, primarily how parties choose to appeal to the Vokkaliga communities. While the NDA (primarily the BJP) has consolidated its support amongst Lingayat voters, support amongst Vokkaligas is split between the NDA and the INC (see Table 1). The JD(S), which has traditionally appealed to Vokkaligas, has seen a steady decline in Karnataka politics since 2013 when the prominent Gowda family was perceived to take full control of the party’s affairs. Recently, many party workers had become disillusioned after former Prime Minister and Chief Minister Deve Gowda’s decision to dissolve the party’s executive committee in 2023 and appoint his son, HD Kumaraswamy, as ad-hoc president of the state unit.¹⁵ Currently, the JD(S) is very much a junior partner in this current coalition; contesting in only 3 out of the 28 seats in 2024.¹⁶ If things persist, analysts suggest that the JD(S) runs the risk of being reduced to (at the most) a ‘Hindutva Offshoot’¹⁷ in Karnataka, a shell of the secular party it once was. There are also genuine fears that the JD(S) could fade into obscurity if the BJP begins to appeal to Vokkaliga voters through the coalition, and this would return Karnataka to a two-party system. This is not an unthinkable reality as the BJP could be seen by Vokkaligas as a stronger option than the JD(S), given its success at the state level and its links to national-level politics. The JD(S) may also be weary of the BJP’s political astuteness and consistent deployment of poaching MLAs from other parties, including the JD(S).¹⁸

¹² <https://scroll.in/article/1049144/karnataka-decoded-45-charts-that-reveal-where-the-bjp-went-wrong-and-what-went-right-for-congress>

¹³ <https://www.newslaundry.com/2024/09/23/karnatakas-pushback-on-language-imposition-grows>

¹⁴ <https://scroll.in/article/1049144/karnataka-decoded-45-charts-that-reveal-where-the-bjp-went-wrong-and-what-went-right-for-congress>

¹⁵ Kumaraswamy has now been made Minister of Heavy Industries and Public Enterprises in the Modi government at the Centre.

¹⁶ <https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S10.htm>

¹⁷ <https://scroll.in/article/1066773/how-karnatakas-once-powerful-janata-dal-secular-was-reduced-to-a-hindutva-offshoot>

¹⁸ <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/karnataka-assembly-polls-2023/story/how-did-17-operation-lotus-mlas-fare-in-karnataka-polls-election-result-bjp-congress-2378765-2023-05-13>

The BJP's appeal to Vokkaliga voters could also benefit from the often-times tenuous relationship between Siddaramaiah and Shivkumar, who the INC coalition heavily depends on. The 62-year-old Shivkumar's aspirations for the top position are well known but have been tempered by the Gandhi family to whom he is known to be close. However, he most likely will be the next face of the state party when the 77-year-old Siddaramaiah eventually exits politics, or maybe even as soon as the next elections. It is unclear how Shivkumar will hold on to the AHINDA vote while also continuing his appeal to dominant-caste Vokkaliga voters. There is, of course, the chance that the INC will drift away from its AHINDA strategy under Shivkumar's leadership to pursue the Vokkaliga vote. Keeping this precarious coalition together is a genuine concern for the INC, and a lucrative opportunity for the BJP, amid a waning JD(S) which shows no sign of renewal.

The Siddaramaiah- Shivkumar rift within the INC is already visible around current discussions about the state's *Socio-economic and Educational Survey* (referred to as the state's caste census) which was tabled in front of the Karnataka Cabinet in April 2025. The survey was commissioned in 2015 by Siddaramaiah during his first term, but amidst pressure from Lingayat and Vokkaliga leaders, including Shivkumar, it has not been tabled despite the INC being in power for almost two years. The official results of the survey have not been released at the time of writing, but leaks suggest that the Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities were found to constitute a much smaller proportion of the population than previously claimed, each representing only around 10 percent. Significantly, the report suggests that minoritized groups such as Muslims, Christians and Scheduled Castes now outnumber them.¹⁹

These findings will have major implications for the state's affirmative action (community-based reservations in government jobs, and admissions to educational institutions) and social welfare policies which has historically been a contentious issue in Karnataka, as it has been across the country (Deshpande 2014). However, as the number of government jobs shrinks, the demands of prominent groups like the Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities will not have much credence.²⁰ In fact, with the proposed greater reservation for other groups, their relative share of the pie will shrink leading to fewer opportunities. As such, there is a greater need for communities to continue to support whichever party or alliance they think can best promote their interests. Therefore, given the twists and turns of Karnataka politics, the sustainability of the NDA coalition is very much in question.

Will Hindutva-style politics still have currency in Karnataka?

The BJP has steadily moved from the peripheries to prominence in Karnataka through a potent cocktail of its astute caste calculations (especially its appeal to Lingayat voters), its 'development' agenda and its communal campaigning. Given its current trajectory, it is highly likely that its electoral success will continue. However, with significant caste mobilization

¹⁹ <https://www.news18.com/politics/leaked-caste-census-turns-karnataka-politics-on-its-head-gives-siddaramaiah-new-lease-of-life-ws-kl-9298410.html>

²⁰ <https://thesouthfirst.com/news/socio-politically-dominant-yet-lingayats-in-karnataka-want-more-reservation>

likely to dominate the state's future, what place does Hindutva-inspired politics have in appealing to voters?

The BJP's first full term in office (2008-13) was marked by anti-Christian violence in coastal Karnataka, efforts to introduce an anti-conversion law, and significant allegations of corruption which saw the Chief Ministership change hands three times (Selvaraj 2025). Its second term (2019-23) was marked by, amongst others, a ban on the slaughter of beef and the eventual institution of the anti-conversion law which have made parts of the state prone to moral policing, vigilante violence and deep communal tensions ²¹(Nielsen, et al., 2023; Selvaraj 2024).

In both terms, these Hindutva-inspired policies did not go unchallenged in the proudly 'progressive' state. For example, in the run-up to the 2023 elections, civil society groups representing activists, artists, scientists, Dalits, farmers, and workers came together to articulate their resistance and to 'defeat' Hindutva. They ran campaigns against the spread of communalism, inflation, and unemployment.²² One such example is *Eddelu Karnataka* (Wake Up, Karnataka), a civil society collective which actively opposed the BJP during the assembly elections by strategically identifying constituencies which could be turned. The group organized over 200 workshops on constitutional values and produced substantial material to be distributed on social and print media.²³ These efforts received a significant boost from Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra (India Unity March) where the INC leader walked the length of the country from Kanyakumari in the South to Jammu and Kashmir in the north over 150 days.²⁴ Social scientists, Feyaad Allie and Rasuf Ahmed noted a correlation between the itinerary of the yatra and the INC's successful performance in the 2023 elections.²⁵

In its 2013 electoral loss, the BJP saw a dramatic fall in its vote share which was attributed to a cocktail of poor governance, corruption and anti-minority violence (Shastri 2013). However, despite a similar cocktail in its 2023 loss, the party's vote share remained largely unchanged from its successful 2018 campaign. This shows that while there was some degree of consolidation of its vote base, voters were turned off by poor governance, anti-incumbency and its Hindutva-inspired politics. However, there is evidence to show that anti-minority violence still has currency in certain districts. Analyst A Narayana observed that the constituencies which experienced communal flare-ups during the BJP's second term between 2018 and 2023 saw a rise in vote share for the BJP (see Table 2).²⁶ This lends credence to the notion that targeted violence could still lead to the consolidation of votes behind the BJP at least in some

²¹ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/reality-karnataka-beef-ban-what-s-legal-what-s-not-167109>

²² <https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/karnataka-lesson-how-civil-society-groups-fought-hate-turned-democracy-watchdog-177206>

²³ <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/features/specials/eddelu-karnataka-the-butterfly-effect-that-voted-out-bjp-1.8928914>

²⁴ <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/opinion/bharat-jodo-yatra-evokes-massive-response-in-karnataka-people-recall-mahatmas-dandi-march>

²⁵ <https://scroll.in/article/1049144/karnataka-decoded-45-charts-that-reveal-where-the-bjp-went-wrong-and-what-went-right-for-congress>

²⁶ <https://www.theindiaforum.in/politics/understanding-verdict-karnataka-2023-between-past-and-future>

districts such as those in coastal Karnataka where the party can benefit from demonizing large Muslim and Christian populations (Selvaraj 2024; Shastri 2025). Further, the BJP’s continued appeal to voters in communally tense but economically advanced coastal districts such as Udupi and Mangalore North and South constituencies could indicate that voters are willing to overlook (or even endorse) the persistence of communal politics if ‘development’ continues to takes place.

Constituency	BJP Vote Share (2018)	BJP Vote Share (2023)
Madikeri	41.68	45.63
Mangalore North	56.02	57.00
Mangalore South	52.97	56.46
Udupi	52.31	58.46
Srirangapatna	6.41	22.84
Vijayapura	50.30	51.47
Thirthahalli	43.03	52.28

Table 2: Vote shares of the BJP in constituencies which witnessed communal Incidents between the 2018 and 2023 Assembly Elections
Created by the author based on Narayana’s evaluation²⁷

Unlike states such as Uttar Pradesh where communal campaigning has played a significant role in the BJP’s success, in Karnataka, it has proved to be less potent. Given that Karnataka politics is now likely to be focused on caste-centric mobilization on issues of social welfare and reservations, and the BJP’s communal campaigning has only a limited effect, it is likely that the BJP will soon exhibit a politics of restraint around communal issues in Karnataka and instead focus on caste mobilization and promises of ‘development’ where it can gain significant traction in this vital moment in Karnataka’s political history.

Conclusion

The dominant caste ‘revolt’ represented by the NDA alliance represents a significant moment in the long political history of caste mobilization in Karnataka. With the hardening of these two alliances, we are likely to see a return to the caste-based politics reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s. In the immediate future, the INC will likely deepen its appeal to AHINDA voters in the form of social justice issues such as reservations while the NDA alliance will likely respond by advocating for the interests of dominant caste groups which ironically also include reservations, particularly for Lingayats²⁸ (Deshpande 2014). Despite the early promise of the NDA alliance, many challenges plague the long-term viability of the coalition, particularly as

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/bjp-jds-karnataka-nda-dominant-castes-lingayat-vokkaliga-siddaramaiah-ahinda/article68300060.ece>

parties and coalitions vie for the support of the Vokkaliga community. In this context, we are likely to see a retreat of communal politics.

The case of Karnataka demonstrates the BJP's political astuteness and responsiveness to the state's political climate. As it has in other states like Orissa, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, it is playing the long game, knowing that there is the potential to become the state's dominant political force, if it can fully consolidate its support amongst dominant caste groups. In pivoting to caste-based campaigning, it realizes the limits of its communal politics.

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