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## **Karnataka Assembly Elections 2023 and Religious Minorities**



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The sixteenth legislative assembly elections in the south Indian state of Karnataka were held on May 10, 2023. The election results were declared on May 13, 2023. Several national and regional political parties contested the elections, including the Indian National Congress (INC), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS), the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI), and the All India Majlis-E-Itthadul Muslimeen (AIMIM).

The 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election was contested for a total of 224 seats. The INC won 135 seats, the BJP won 66 seats, the JD (S) won 19, and others won 4. The INC formed the government as it won the most seats. The overall voter turnout in this election was around 73.19 per cent reportedly the highest so far in any of the legislative assembly elections in Karnataka. It shows the significance of the assembly election and the increased interest generated among the larger electorates. This election was contested on a wide variety of issues, such as corruption, unemployment, inflation, communal polarisation, reservations, handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and farm laws. Parties also pitched their manifestos revolving around other themes such as the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), National Register of Citizens (NRC), infrastructure, transportation, electricity, health, and ration.

The 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election significantly impacted the state and the national level. The electorate in Karnataka has a history of not returning the incumbent party to power, and this trend continued even in 2023. The BJP, despite its massive election campaign and star campaigners, was unable to retain power. The INC and other opposition parties focused on the major issues and problems faced by the people and created a serious setback for the incumbent ruling party. The opposition capitalised on the dissatisfaction of the public over several issues and came to power, which is seen as a resurgence of the INC in Karnataka.

Religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, have been an important factor for all political parties in Karnataka, regardless of their ideological positions. According to the 2011 census, Muslims and Christians make up around 12.92 and 1.91 per cent respectively of the state's total population. This is a significant number for state governments and political parties to consider. This percentage would have increased by 2023, when the elections were held, making minorities even more significant. Furthermore, the interface between the state government and minorities was neither cordial nor welcoming from 2018 to 2023. This created a sense of alienation among minorities, who felt that their concerns were not being addressed by the government and therefore they were both discriminated against and disempowered. Additionally, the cohesive society and politics of Karnataka were already way ahead in becoming divisive (Assadi, 2017).

Minorities in Karnataka have faced several challenges and barriers, namely

- (a) Religious discrimination, wherein they have been targeted for their religious beliefs and practices, such as the wearing of the hijab, the call to prayer (*Azaan*), and the slaughter of animals for halal meat.
- (b) Economic marginalisation, as they are economically weaker than the majority population, and face discrimination in employment, credit availability, and access to both public and private resources (Aziz, 2018).
- (c) Political disenfranchisement due to underrepresentation and non-representation in governments and decision-making bodies right from gram panchayat to state legislative assembly and thereby less access to political power (Japhet, 2015).
- (d) Social exclusion as they are often excluded from mainstream society, ghettoisation, alienation and face prejudice and discrimination in day-to-day life.

The discontinuation of state welfare schemes and programmes directed towards the welfare of minorities wherein these schemes provided necessary services to minorities, such as education, employment, skill development, training, healthcare, and economic development. The termination of these programmes and schemes has harmed the lives of several minorities, particularly those who are trying to secure a meaningful education and employment. Most significantly, the cancellation of reservations in public employment for Muslims and their OBC status was a big dent in the promotion and protection of minorities. Affirmative actions are a significant path to

ensure that minorities secure equal opportunities in both the domains of education and employment.

All these challenges have significantly impacted the lives of minorities in Karnataka, and have made it difficult for them to achieve their full potential. It is very much pertinent to address these challenges to ensure that all citizens of Karnataka have equal opportunities, irrespective of their social, economic, and religious identities. Moreover, these challenges have led to a sense of alienation and distrust among minorities, and they have made it difficult for them to be aware, participate, and represent fully in society. The election results in Karnataka point out that these challenges are having a significant impact on the political, social, and economic landscape, and they are likely to continue to be a major issue in upcoming future.

Additionally, the importance of minorities in Karnataka politics is likely to continue in the future. As the state's population grows, so too will the number of minorities. This means that political parties as well as state governments will need to pay significant attention to the larger concerns of minorities to be more successful and gain the trust of the minority communities.

The 2023 Karnataka Legislative Assembly election saw a slight increase in the number of Muslim and Christian party candidates who won, with nine Muslims and one Christian elected. However, this is still far less than the population proportion of minorities in Karnataka. According to the 2011 census, at least 29 Muslim and 4 Christian MLAs should have been elected (Khan, 2022). While the winning candidates represent a positive signal, they represent only a small fraction of the minority community. The state government and ruling political party have a lot of responsibility to fulfil their promises, missions, and visions, and thereby empower the vulnerable sections of society. The most precedence task at hand is to rebuild trust and confidence between the minority communities and the state government. The second priority is to restore the cohesiveness of politics and society in the state of Karnataka found many decades earlier (Manor, 1989). The third prime concern would be to broaden and deepen democracy (Raghavan & Manor, 2009) to empower the vulnerable sections of society.

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