

The Kerala election: A shift to the left – and a move to the right

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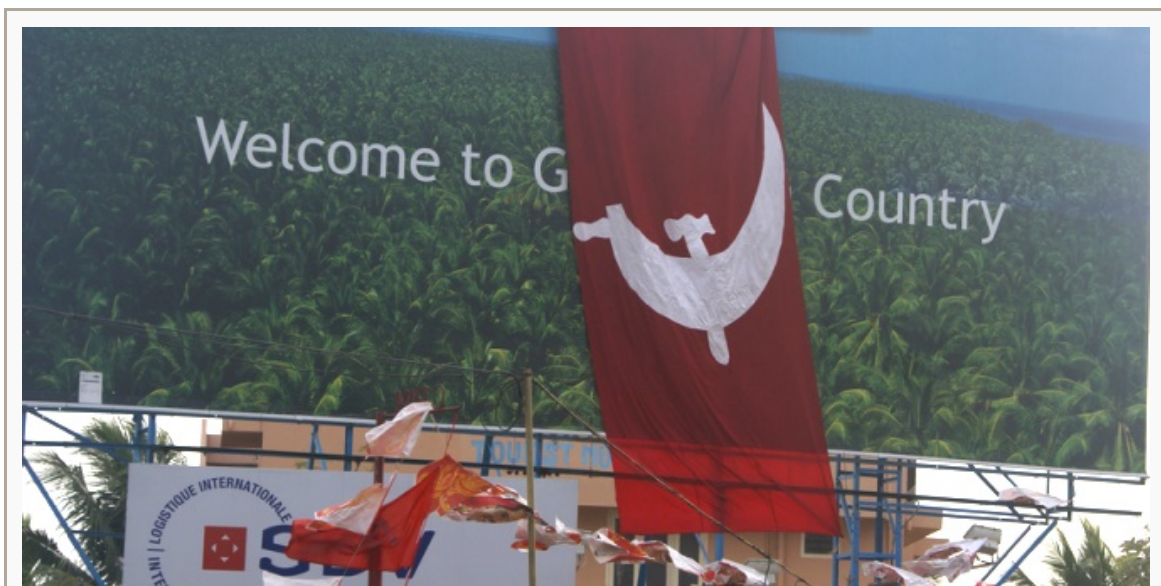
Last week Kerala's electoral pendulum swung to once again favour the Left Democratic Front over the Congress-led United Democratic Front. But **James Chiriyankandath** writes that this year's contest was unusual in that the BJP emerged as a more credible third force, suggesting the cycle that has developed in the last 60 years is no longer as stable as it looks.

This article forms part of a series on the 2016 Legislative Assembly Elections. Click [here](#) to read more.

In the six decades since the coastal south Indian state was formed and made history by becoming the first anywhere in the world to return a communist government to power through the ballot box in 1957, elections in Kerala have been remarkably consistent. Coalitions led by either the communists or the Congress Party – since 1982 the Left Democratic Front (LDF) or the United Democratic Front (UDF) – have alternated in winning all but one of thirteen elections (the exception was in 1977). The results of the polls on 16 May were no different: the LDF succeeded in ousting the UDF from office, claiming 91 of the 140 state assembly seats to 47 for the UDF.

Yet this was an unusual electoral contest with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, perennial 'also-rans' in Kerala but in power at the centre since 2014, gaining a seat for the first time; the remaining seat went to an independent. The domination of the two fronts faced more of a challenge than ever before from the BJP and its allies who captured 15 per cent of the popular vote; the BJP alone saw its vote rise from 6.1 to 10.8 per cent despite contesting only 98 seats (it fought 138 in 2011).

Also noteworthy was the inability of either of the main fronts to project an agreed sole campaign leader and chief ministerial candidate at the polls, a reflection of the internal problems bedevilling both. While Kerala's well established two-front politics may have survived for now, both the victorious LDF and the defeated UDF face an uncertain future as does what is – in terms of human development indicators – India's most advanced state.



A Communist party banner is draped over a billboard in Thiruvanthapuram. Credit: [Al Jazeera English](#) CC BY-SA 2.0

So what changed in the five years since the UDF led by Congress' Oommen Chandy narrowly edged out the ruling LDF led by V.S. Achuthanandan in 2011 with a wafer thin margin of just four seats and under one per cent of the

popular vote?

First, there is the surge in support for the BJP in the only state of any size in India that it had never before succeeded in winning representation in either the state Vidhan Sabha or the national Lok Sabha. The party in Kerala has been able to count on the support of a longer and better developed network of local branches (*shakhas*) of the Hindu nationalist parent organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) than in the other states of south India, a region where it has historically been weak. In December Kummanam Rajasekharan, an RSS *pracharak* (full-time propagandist) who had spearheaded several Hindu nationalist agitations in Kerala over the past three decades, was appointed the party's state president.

Until this year the BJP had never won more than 6% of the vote in assembly polls despite twice (in 2004 and 2014) claiming over 10% in national parliamentary elections. While resistant to the "Modi wave" that swept northern and western India in 2014, its 10.5% vote share two years ago showed that Kerala was not impervious to the national rise in support for the BJP. Modi himself made repeated visits to the state, making particular overtures to those Backward Class (BC) and Scheduled Castes (SC) and Tribes (ST) leaders unhappy at not being accommodated by the two main fronts in the way they wanted. Winning over a significant section of these groups is crucial to the growth of the BJP in a state where Muslims and Christians account for 45% of the population (and disproportionately support the UDF – Oommen Chandy, like his predecessor as Congress chief minister, A.K. Antony, is a Christian) and those belonging to the Hindu forward castes (notably Nairs and Brahmins), more likely to be sympathetic to Hindu nationalism, only around 15%.

The BJP succeeded in attracting the Bharat Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS) into the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) fold. The BDJS is a new party launched by Vellapally Natesan, the secretary-general of the SNDP Yogam, the main socio-religious organisation of the Ezhavas, Kerala's main Backward Class and largest Hindu caste. The BJP also drew one or two Dalit leaders. While this might have helped the NDA retain the support of the minority of BC and SC voters who voted for it in 2014, the BDJS performed disappointingly and [polling evidence](#) suggests that BJP voters remained more likely to be upper caste, more affluent, male, young and urban, pretty much as has been the case elsewhere in India.

Though the BJP appears to have benefited from disenchantment with the UDF, whose share of the vote fell below 40% for the first time, it was the LDF that captured the seats they lost, gaining 24 for the solitary loss of Nemom, to the south of the state capital Thiruvananthapuram, to the BJP.

The UDF had hoped to defy the regular swing of Kerala's electoral pendulum by pointing to the development of ambitious major infrastructural projects such as the Smart City and Metro rail in the state's largest city, Kochi, and the fact that Chandy was still relatively well regarded even after two spells as chief minister. This was belied by a popular backlash against the corruption scandals swirling around the chief minister and his government, notably the sensational allegations of sexual favours and bribery made by Saritha Nair, the director of a fraudulent solar energy company. The UDF's controversial adoption of a policy to impose total prohibition on the sale of alcohol within a decade, an initiative championed by the Congress Party's state unit president, V.M. Sudheeran, also rebounded. The moral stance taken by the government was undermined by allegations of UDF leaders taking bribes to renew bar licenses with Finance Minister K.M. Mani forced to resign last November; Mani is the veteran leader of the Kerala Congress (Mani group), the Congress' principal partner in the UDF alongside the Muslim League.

The UDF's cause was not aided by divisions in its ranks: the distribution of tickets to Congress candidates was delayed by an effort by Sudheeran to deny tickets to close allies of the chief minister facing corruption allegations. This had to be mediated by Congress' national vice-president, Rahul Gandhi, who had previously announced that the UDF campaign would be collectively fronted by Chandy, Sudheeran and Home Minister Ramesh Chennithala. The LDF also avoided projecting a clear prospective chief minister, allowing both 92-year-old ex-chief minister Achuthanandan, still regarded as its most popular campaigner, and his 71-year-old rival, Pinarayi Vijayan, the long-time state secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and its organisational strongman, to contest assembly seats. Despite this uncertainty, the traditionally more disciplined LDF still did better in presenting a united

front in focusing on the government's record on corruption while also appealing to voters apprehensive about the rise of the BJP (over the years scores of people have been killed in clashes between CPM and RSS and BJP workers). It reaped its reward by garnering close to two-thirds of the Assembly seats with only 43.5% of the vote, the lowest share for any winning coalition in Kerala's electoral history.

On 25 May, Vijayan, the son of a poor Ezhava toddy tapper, was sworn in as the twelfth chief minister of Kerala. Chosen by the CPM state secretariat in preference to Achuthanandan (who would have been the world's oldest head of government if he had returned to office) Vijayan faces the formidable task of governing in the face of a hostile NDA government at the centre and countering the increasing marginalisation of an Indian communist movement at a historic low. While Kerala's electorate may have shown itself again to prefer the continuation of constant but familiar change, the emergence of the BJP as a more credible third force indicates that the state's two main fronts now face more of a challenge in maintaining that stability.

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