

KARNATAKA

# H.D. Kumaraswamy and the art of walking on a knife-edge



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The first 100 days of the H.D. Kumaraswamy government have provided an excellent example of knife-edge governance, and indeed what can be achieved under it. It has not been smooth sailing for the government, not just because the Janata Dal (Secular) has less than half the number of seats as the other partner in the coalition, but because of the nature of the Congress' support.

The Congress was driven to support Mr. Kumaraswamy by its need to keep the BJP from power. Yet the coalition partners are the major contenders for power in south **Karnataka**. Unstinting Congress support for the government could then mean conceding the south to

the JD(S). Therefore, the party has to maintain a delicate balance between its national interests and its interests in a major portion of the State.

### **Family legacy**

Few political families in India have greater experience of walking on a knife-edge than that of the Chief Minister. His father, H.D. Deve Gowda, ran a similar arrangement at the national level for 11 months. And the approach Mr. Kumaraswamy has adopted has been a predictable mix of reliance on faith and not rocking the political boat. Even for a family that has always had a great deal of faith in religious rituals, Mr. Kumaraswamy has recorded a visibly high rate of weekly temple visits.

Behind this screen thrown by the public display of rituals is a calmer political strategy at work. Mr. Kumaraswamy has lost no time in using his latest stint to consolidate the Vokkaliga base of his party. His Cabinet has more than its fair share of Ministers from his caste. And his loan waiver was targeted at the farming community which, at least in southern Karnataka, is dominated by Vokkaligas. But beyond the consolidation of the party's traditional base, there has been no overt action aimed at helping the JD(S) grow in regions where the Congress is the bigger player. Indeed, at a public meeting in northern Karnataka, Congress national president Rahul Gandhi claimed the loan waiver was his party's initiative.

On other policy issues too, Mr. Kumaraswamy has played it safe and largely continued with the priorities of the Siddaramaiah government. The most widely discussed of these policies are the various welfare schemes the former Chief Minister. While there has been the occasional modification, the emphasis on these schemes has remained.

### **Attitude to Bengaluru**

The more interesting continuation on the policy front is in the attitude towards Bengaluru. The State capital had been gaining an increasingly dominant place in Karnataka's economic growth ever since the information technology revolution of the mid-1980s. At the turn of the century, the S.M. Krishna government further accentuated the process by virtually creating the impression that the growth of Bengaluru was the only way to keep Karnataka growing.

Over the years, this strategy developed considerable fatigue. Efforts to provide infrastructure for the city's growth did not pay adequate attention to the costs. The resultant high-cost growth made Bengaluru less suitable for industries leveraging a low-

cost advantage. A major casualty was the garment industry, which had contributed quietly to the city's growth since the 1970s. Add to it the problem of an emphasis on individual projects rather than planning for the city as a whole, and other inefficiencies ate into the Bengaluru advantage.

The State thus needed to move away from the preoccupation with Bengaluru, and the Siddaramaiah government took the initial steps in this direction. It identified several other centres in the State that it believed could be developed. Mr. Kumaraswamy has been quite vocal in supporting the same strategy.

### **Sustained pressure**

The strategy has run into some bureaucratic and other roadblocks, and it is too early to say if they will be overcome. But what is clear is that sustained pressure from the top is essential for this much-needed alternative growth strategy to succeed. Being on a knife-edge and not knowing just when Mr. Rahul Gandhi will do a Sitaram Kesari on him may be enough for Mr. Kumaraswamy to push for an economic strategy that could give him lasting success even if his current term is cut short.

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