

India: Kerala's Left Front election campaign: where are the women?

Friday 22 March 2019, by [AMEERUDHEEN TA](#) (Date first published: 13 March 2019).

The ruling alliance has declared nominees for all 20 parliamentary seats, while the Congress and the BJP camps are yet to field any.

Soon after the general election schedule was announced on Sunday, Kerala's ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) put out a social media post: "Is your infighting over? Our team is ready!"

It was a dig at the party's rivals, primarily the Congress but also the Bharatiya Janata Party, which appear to be far behind the ruling coalition in their preparations for the election. While the Left Democratic Front declared its candidates for all 20 Lok Sabha seats of Kerala by Saturday, the Congress-led United Democratic Front and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance are both struggling to finalise their nominees.

The ruling coalition hopes to significantly improve its 2014 tally. In that election, it won eight seats with the United Democratic Front taking the rest. The NDA drew a blank.

This time, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) is contesting 16 seats, and the Communist Party of India four. The coalition has not given any seats to its other partners such as the Janata Dal (Secular) and the Loktantrik Janata Dal.

Kerala votes in a single phase on April 23.

It's largely a straight fight, as it was in 2014, between the Left Front and the United Democratic Front. The BJP has never won a parliamentary seat in Kerala but it has come to be a serious contender in Thiruvananthapuram, where the Congress's Shashi Tharoor edged the BJP's O Rajagopal by 15,470 votes in 2014. The Communist Party of India, which held this seat before Tharoor took it for his first term in 2009, finished a distant third. The party has now entrusted the task of reclaiming the constituency to former state minister C Divakaran.

The BJP is banking on the consolidation of Hindu voters it believes has been brought about by the Sangh Parivar's violent agitation against the Supreme Court's September 2018 ruling allowing women of menstruating age to enter the Sabarimala temple. The Sabarimala row is expected to be a major campaign issue. In February, an opinion poll conducted by the TV news channel Asianet found 64% of the respondents considered it the main election issue, far ahead of rising fuel prices (25%) and demonetisation (15%).

The communists, on the other hand, are banking on the popularity of Divakaran, who has won multiple Assembly elections from Thiruvananthapuram. He comes from the backward Ezhava Hindu community, which makes up around 21% of Kerala's Hindu population. His presence in the fray could prevent the Ezhavas from allying with the upper caste Nair community in favour of the BJP.

Not enough women

Though the communist parties support 33% reservation for women in legislature, they have fielded just two women, sitting MP from Kannur PK Sreemathi and the legislator Veena George, both from the Communist Party of India (Marxist). This has surprised political observers, especially since the ruling front organised a statewide “women’s wall” in January to press for gender justice.

Kodiyeri Balakrishnan, Kerala chief of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), said they could indeed have nominated more women. “We could not because we were forced to consider several other factors. But we fielded two women candidates in sure seats,” he said.

S Sudhakar Reddy, the general secretary of the Communist Party of India, sounded apologetic for not fielding woman candidates. “We are contesting only four seats in Kerala,” he said. “We would have accommodated them if we had more seats. And the party has to consider the winnability factor first.”

Some commentators argued that women could have received fair representation had the Left Front not fielded six incumbent legislators. But Balakrishnan countered, “Our only intention is to increase Left Front’s numbers in Parliament. So we picked the best candidates. MLAs have contested parliamentary elections in the past. In 2009, the Congress fielded four legislators in the Lok Sabha polls.”

Some controversial names

There are some controversial names among the Left Front’s candidates. The filmstar Innocent is seeking to retain Chalakkudy in Thrissur. He came under fire in 2017 for making anti-women comments. Innocent, then president of the powerful Association of Malayalam Movie Artists, had said, “The Malayalam film industry is clean now and no such thing as casting couch exists in the industry. But if the woman is bad, maybe they will go to bed”.

He was also accused of being soft on fellow actor Dileep after he was charged with planning the abduction and rape of an actress.

The ruling party’s decision to field PV Anwar as an independent from Malappuram and Joyce George from Idukki is also expected to draw a lot of criticism. Anwar has been accused of land grab and causing ecological destruction by building an illegal bund. George has also been accused of land grab in the ecologically sensitive Idukki district.

TA Ameerudheen

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Scroll.in

<https://scroll.in/article/916201/is-your-infighting-over-as-keralas-left-front-hits-campaign-trail-rivals-struggle-to-keep-up>