

# Agrarian Crisis Set To Influence 2019 Polls

By Saurabh Katkurwa

NEW DELHI: Agrarian crisis emerged as a major political concern in 2018, fuelled mainly by a fall in crop prices and a poor procurement mechanism which will provide opposition parties a common ground to rally against the BJP ahead of the next year's general elections.

The anger brewing against the perceived "anti-farm policies" of the government could be measured by the poor performance of the BJP in the rural parts of Hindi heartland states in the just-concluded Assembly elections, that saw the BJP ousted from power in all three states.

In past one year, the national capital alone saw at least five major rallies of farmers, despite the BJP-government coming up with a new price-fixation formula and a score of schemes to impress the tillers of the soil.

The police firing in Madhya Pradesh's Mandsaur last year that led to the death of six farmers, sparked agitations throughout the country over rural distress, which snowballed into a major political and social issue this year. The simmering discontent among farmers gained political traction in 2018.

Various opposition parties have been raising their voices against different issues to suit their electoral needs but they showed unanimity in expressing their solidarity with the demands for better crop remuneration and farm loan waivers during the November 30 farmers' rally in the capital.

At the same rally, Congress President Rahul Gandhi had said: "The voice that is reverberating



Farmers participate in Kisan Mukti March in November, 2018 in New Delhi Pic: IANS

now across the country is of the farmers who are in deep distress and crisis."

For the first time, the 2019 Lok Sabha elections will be fought on issues revolving around rural distress, said Yogendra Yadav of Swaraj India, who is credited with bringing over 200 farmers' outfits under one banner -- the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC).

"There has always been agrarian distress in the country. However, it never got an occasion to become a principal factor in the elections. The BJP's defeat in the Assembly polls, coupled with the newly-achieved unity among farmers, has ensured that farm distress would take a centre stage in the 2019 elections," Yadav told IANS.

He termed the BJP regime led by Prime Minister Naren-

dra Modi "the most anti-farmer" government in the history of the independent India because of its "unsympathetic" treatment of farmers in the past four-and-a-half years. Many videos throughout the year went viral on the social media, featuring angry farmers throwing their harvest and milk on the roads in the absence of remunerative prices.

Amid protests, the government increased the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for certain agriculture commodities. However, the farmers found this not at par with their demands and expectations.

Also, poor procurement of commodities owing to inadequate numbers and delay in the opening of purchasing centres by the government agencies forced the farmers to make distress sales.

In the case of vegetables, while the retail prices hovered between

Rs 20-30 in major cities, the prices received by farmers for semi-perishable commodities such as potatoes and onion slumped to Rs 1 per kg.

The Agriculture Ministry seemed "ineffective" to create a redressal mechanism, activists said, though it came up with three procurement plans. Notably, Union Minister and Senior BJP leader Nitin Gadhkari had in June this year acknowledged that there was agrarian crisis due to surplus crop output and sought action to address the problem.

And yet, the BJP-government failed to take corrective action by analysing the demand-and-supply situation, said Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana leader and Lok Sabha member Raju Shetti, who quit BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) over farmers issues' last year.

"The government has been quite aware of the farmers' issues. However, it did not take required action to ensure remunerative prices for farmers and the procurement of their harvest was ineffective," Shetti added.

Noted agronomist Ashok Gulati said there was "lack of understanding" and "lack of vision" in the current BJP regime. He said the government did not carry out the required market reforms but resorted to just slogans.

"Even after the Mandsaur firing episode, the government did not act," he said.

Any government needs a smart agriculture minister for effective implementation of schemes, he added. Interestingly, Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh chose to attend a Yoga session with Baba Ramdev in Bihar two days after the Mandsaur firing.

## Permanent Peace Eludes J&K, As It Has For Past 30 Years

By Sheikh Qayoom

Jammu/Srinagar, Dec 17 (IANS) It's been a fairly turbulent year in the state, both security-wise and politically. It saw more violence compared to last year, even though the security forces killed many militants, including some top commanders of militant outfits.

There were 587 incidents of violence during 2018 compared to 329 last year. Official figures say 240 militants were killed during the year against 200 last year.

Casualties among civilians and the security forces have also been comparatively higher. Thirty-seven civilians and 86 security men were killed in 2018 against 36 civilians and 74 security personnel killed last year. Permanent peace eluded the state in 2018 as it has during more than 30-years of strife.

According to senior intelligence officers, there are still around 240 militants, including foreigners, who are active in the state. "The number keeps on varying depending upon infiltration of new militants from across the line of control (LoC) and recruitment of local youth into militant ranks", said a senior intelligence officer.

Summing up the security scenario, Lieutenant General A.K. Bhatt, who commands the Srinagar-headquartered 15 corps of the Indian Army and is the senior-most army officer in the Valley, said: "The security forces have a limited role in controlling the ground situation in the state. The final solution has to be political."

On the political front, there was a dramatic turn in June when the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) suddenly announced in New Delhi that it was withdrawing from the ruling coalition in the state, headed by the Peoples Democratic Party. The announcement was not unexpected as the two ideologically opposed parties were ruling the state for four years through an arrangement that appeared brittle from day one since the late Mufti Muhammad Sayeed announced it in 2015.

With the withdrawal of BJP support, the Mehbooba Mufti-led coalition fell and Governor N.N.Vohra dismissed the government, even though the state assembly was kept in suspended animation for any future alliance to stake claim to power.

Vohra was subsequently replaced by Satya Pal Malik who became the first politician to be made the state governor. As compared to his predecessor, Malik chose to speak to media as often as he could to put forth his view point, sometimes to the embarrassment of both New Delhi and Malik himself.

The first thing the new governor did was to announce local urban bodies and pan-



Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chairman Yasin Malik detained while leading a protest march in Srinagar on Dec 17, 2018. (IANS)

chayat elections in the state. Both these democratic processes were concluded peacefully throughout the state and their conduct is considered a feather in the administration's cap as the elected government had been shying away from conducting the elections.

With the imposition of governor's rule, the PDP started suffering desertions as some of its dissident legislators launched an open rebellion against the party leadership. In the forefront of the dissidents was senior Shia leader and former state minister Imran Ansari who finally joined the Peoples Conference (PC) headed by Sajad Lone, himself a former minister in the PDP-BJP coalition government.

Sajad's PC started emerging as the possible Third Front that could, in future, pose a challenge to both the PDP and the regional National Conference (NC) headed by Farooq Abdullah.

Ever since the elected government fell, rumours started doing the rounds in the state that dissidents in the PDP, the NC and even the Congress party were waiting in wings to join the Third Front. The visit of BJP general secretary Ram Madhav to the state and his meetings with Sajad Lone and dissidents kept fuelling these rumours even when Madhav said there was no immediate move to form a government in the state.

The fear of their flock being poached pushed the arch rivals, the NC and the PDP, come close to each other. In a surprise move, Altaf Bukhari, senior PDP leader and former minister emerged as the contender for the Chief Minister's post with outside support by the NC. With the NC's 15 and the PDP's 29 seats, the two parties hold a simple majority in the 87-member state assembly.

The NC and the PDP said they had decided to sink their differences to protect the special status of the state as article

35-A and other constitutional provisions were being challenged to dilute this. There were also reports that the Con-

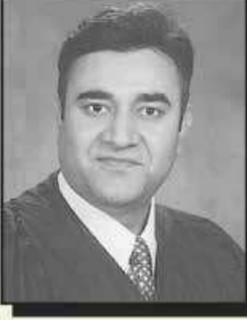
gress was in the loop to shoot down horse-trading in the state. The PDP president, Mehbooba Mufti, sent a fax to the Raj Bhawan seeking an appointment with the Governor to stake claim to power. The fax was never received as the Governor said later the fax operator at the Raj Bhawan was off duty due to a holiday.

Amid claims and counter-claims, Governor Malik, in a dramatic move, dissolved the state assembly on November 21, justifying this by saying that he wanted to "prevent horse-trading".

The possibility of any dialogue between the centre and the separatist remained a distant possibility during the year. In all likelihood, this will have to wait till a new government takes office at the centre after the 2019 elections. Elections to the state assembly are also likely to be held simultaneously with the 2019 Lok Sabha elections around April-May next year.

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