

Vijayan has a sporting chance



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

The tagline is #UrappanuLDF (#LDF for sure). Really?

Can the Left Democratic Front (LDF) break the political tradition in Kerala: That the Congress- and CPI(M)-led alliances take turns in running the state?

All the opinion surveys done in the state so far say the LDF will return. The reasons vary. But the one thing they have in common is the high rate of endorsement for Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan.

Most chief ministers tend to get embroiled in one or other kind of corruption scam and Mr Vijayan is no exception. The Supreme Court has posted for final hearing and disposal the SNC-Lavalin case in which he is an accused though he has been dis-

charged in all the lower courts so far. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) did its best to negotiate an early hearing but the earliest the Bench could schedule it was April 6 — the election day for the 140-seat Assembly (though the Bench couldn't have known this). The Bench did warn the CBI that with two earlier orders in favour of Mr Vijayan, it would need very strong reasons for the Supreme Court to overturn them. The case now has limited political utility for the opposition — the Congress-led UDF, which referred the case to the CBI in the first place, and the BJP, which has a limited electoral presence but a strong appeal.

The SNC-Lavalin case dates back to Mr Vijayan's tenure as power minister in Kerala. A hydroelectric infrastructure contract between the Indian government and Canadian company SNC-Lavalin in 1995 resulted in an alleged loss of ₹374 crore to the exchequer because of Mr Vijayan's "inordinate interest" in the contract, the CBI says. Even if the apex court were to come up with a surprise, it will impact only the post-election scenario, not the campaign itself.

The bigger scandal is the manner in which the Chief Minister's Office has been directly drawn into a gold-smuggling racket with a bureaucrat who was his right-hand

man and in custody till recently (he has now got bail). How could this have happened without the chief minister's knowledge? The case has taken the sheen off Mr Vijayan's otherwise efficient administration, barring its law and order record.

Mr Vijayan, the son of a toddy tapper, was himself a handloom weaver. He has risen through the ranks and managed to best veterans like V S Achuthanandan (former chief minister who quit the chairmanship of the state Administrative Reforms Commission a month ago at 97). Last year, Mr Vijayan had to axe his number two, Industries Minister E P Jayarajan, following charges of nepotism. Many argue that like the gold-smuggling case, in which a bureaucrat paid the price for the chief minister's mistakes, Mr Jayarajan was sacrificed by Mr Vijayan to protect his own position. Either way, it has certainly strengthened the claim of the LDF that it is committed to a nepotism- and corruption-free administration.

But the moral high ground goes only so far in ensuring re-election — governance does count. Despite a terrible law and order record, the Vijayan government has produced results. The 444-km Kochi-Koottanad-Bengaluru-Mangaluru pipeline

project (KKB MPL) of GAIL was commissioned in 2013. But hit by problems of land acquisition, campaigns by religious groups, and other kinds of political obstruction in North Kerala, the company was on the verge of winding up the project as in the intervening years, it had been able to build only 39 km. The project was crucial for the future of Petronet LNG's terminal in Kochi, to ensure natural gas supply for domestic and industrial use in Kerala and in South India. It was finally completed and inaugurated by the prime minister in January this year. Kochi Metro began operations during his tenure, and Kannur got an international airport during his chief ministership. The Vizhinjam seaport project, in collaboration with Adani Group, has missed deadlines but is expected to be ready by October 2021. The important thing is, the state government has dropped its objections to it.

More than this, it is the handling of the pandemic, especially the free ration to all scheme, that has won hearts. So has enhancing the social welfare pension. Kerala was considered the best state on a compassion index when it came to handling the problems of migrants during the Covid-19 outbreak. In four years, the state has had to battle cyclones (Ockhi and Nivar), two floods, and two epidemiological disasters (Nipah and Covid-19). If people bring Pinarayi Vijayan back to power, he must have done something right.