

FROM MASS FRONTS TO COMMUNITY FRONTS: CHANGING COALITION STRUCTURES IN KERALA POLITICS.

Chaithanya E P

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, SN College, Nattika, Thrissur

*Corresponding author: chaithanyaep@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Kerala is widely recognized as one of India's most progressive states, celebrated for its achievements in education, healthcare, gender development, and participatory governance. The "Kerala Model of Development" emerged from a historical convergence of radical social reform movements, sustained communist mobilization, and strong state-led welfare policies (Heller, 2020). However, in recent decades, Kerala's political landscape has witnessed a growing prominence of identity-based politics. Communities are increasingly mobilizing around caste, religion, gender, and ethnic identities, compelling political parties to accommodate diverse group-specific demands (Jeffrey, 1992; Josekutty, 2019). This shift raises critical questions about the nature of democratic representation and the future of ideological politics in the state. In this context, the paper examines whether emerging identity coalitions represent a crisis of ideology or a new horizon of democratic pluralism.

Keywords: *Identity Politics, Coalition Building, Community Mobilization, Ideological Shift, Kerala Politics.*

INTRODUCTION

Kerala's political arena reflects a distinctive interplay between ideological traditions and identity-based mobilizations. Historically, politics in the state were anchored in strong ideological currents, most notably the rise of the Communist Party, which drew strength from agrarian struggles, labor movements, and progressive social reforms during the mid-20th century (Jeffrey, 1992; Hardgrave, 1977). The election of the first Communist government in 1957 marked a watershed moment that placed class politics and welfare-oriented governance at the forefront (Mattumanni, 2023).

Over time, however, the compulsions of coalition politics and electoral pragmatism led both the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) to increasingly accommodate caste and religious interests, diluting their ideological commitments (Heller, 2020). Minority-based parties such as the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and Kerala Congress exerted substantial influence in coalition governments by articulating community-specific demands (Menon, 1994).

In recent years, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has emerged as a potential third pole by appealing to Hindu identity politics and capitalizing on perceived minority appeasement by the dominant fronts (Varma, 2024). This shift signals a growing tension between ideological commitments and identity-based alignments, with class politics increasingly intersecting with caste and communal agendas (Sasikumar & Sunilraj, 2020). Kerala's political trajectory thus represents a continuous negotiation between its ideological past and its identity-centered present.

1. Coalition Politics In Kerala

Since the formation of the state in 1956, Kerala's party competition has been structured around a Left–Right axis, with Communist-led coalitions positioned left of the Congress (Kaul & Kannangara, 2023). The early Communist government (1957–1959), though short-lived due to Central intervention, implemented land and education reforms that fundamentally reshaped the state's political economy (Herring, 1983). The 1960s witnessed intense factionalism within both the INC and CPI, leading to splits that produced the CPI and CPI(M) in 1964 (Jeffrey, 1992). Their rivalry eventually consolidated into two stable coalitions:

- **Left Democratic Front (LDF)** led by CPI(M)
- **United Democratic Front (UDF)** led by INC, supported by IUML and Kerala Congress factions

This bipolar coalition system has remained durable despite periodic realignments (Josekutty, 2019). Electoral outcomes have historically been tight, with alternating governments until 2021. In 2021, the LDF broke Kerala's four-decade trend of alternating governments by winning 99 out of 140 seats—an outcome largely attributed to effective governance during natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic (Heller, 2020).

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections, however, disrupted this narrative. The UDF swept 18 of 20 seats, while the BJP won its first Lok Sabha seat in Thrissur—largely due to a notable OBC shift, particularly among Ezhavas (The Hindu, 2024). The BJP's rise—from 15.64% vote share in 2019 to 19.23% in 2024—indicates a possible reconfiguration of Kerala's traditionally bipolar coalition politics (Varma, 2024). Thus, while LDF and UDF remain dominant; caste-religion alignments significantly shape coalition outcomes. The growing footprint of the BJP may reshape coalition politics ahead of 2026.

2. Ideological Orientation And Social Base Of The Parliamentary Left

Kerala became the second polity in the world after San Marino to democratically elect a Communist government (Mattumannil, 2023). Scholars attribute this rise variously to class-based mobilization and to caste-community dynamics (Jeffrey, 1992; Hardgrave, 1977). Communist mobilization historically drew support from lower castes—Ezhavas, Pulayas, and other SCs—despite being led by largely upper-caste leaders (Hardgrave, 1977). Land reforms and social welfare programs further cemented this support (Heller, 2020). Yet the Left has historically struggled with minority support: only 25–35% of Muslims and Christians vote for the LDF (CSDS, 2016). This limited appeal reflects both ideological differences and the influence of IUML and Kerala Congress among minority communities (Heller, 2020). Despite this, the Left has made tactical alliances with minority factions, especially since 2011 (Hindustan Times, 2024). Kerala's fragmented social structure—marked by caste, religion, and region—compels the Left to adopt accommodative coalition strategies that dilute ideological purism (Heller, 2020).

3. Ideological Orientation And Social Base Of The Indian National Congress In Kerala

Unlike the national INC's emphasis on secular modernism, the Kerala unit historically leaned toward cultural conservatism and accommodation of dominant caste and religious groups (Jeffrey,

1978; Weiner, 1967). In the early years, while the INC supported Gandhian social reforms, it resisted structural reforms such as land redistribution (Desai, 2005). This reluctance pushed many radicals toward the Communist movement (Jeffrey, 1992). The Vimochana Samaram of 1959—supported by Christian institutions and landed elites—illustrated Congress's anti-communist stance (Menon, 1994).

Over time, the INC maintained strong alliances with Nair elites and Syrian Christian groups (Weiner, 1967). It adopted selective welfare programs but upheld conservative cultural positions, as seen in issues like Sharia debates (1984), textbook controversies (2008), and Sabarimala (2018) (Sasikumar & Sunilraj, 2020). Thus, the INC balances welfare rhetoric with cultural conservatism—an ideological stance shaped by its caste-religious base.

4. Ideological Shift: Alignment Or Realignment?

Kerala's political dynamics reflect fragmentation shaped by caste, religion, and increasing class consciousness (Josekutty, 2019). The bipolar coalition structure has created a political environment in which small parties gain disproportionate bargaining power (Kumar, 1980). Historically, ideological differences—such as between the CPI(M)'s land reforms and Congress's resistance—reflected class and caste interests (Herring, 1983). Similarly, education policy disputes were shaped by religious institutions, especially Christian managements (Mathew, 1989; Lieten, 1977). Realignments continue to shape every election cycle, enhancing the influence of IUML, Kerala Congress, BDJS, NDP, and SRP (Josekutty, 2019). These parties often extract concessions that undermine consistent ideological governance (Kumar, 2014).

Examples include:

- LDF's concessions to minority educational institutions (Kumar, 2014)
- Congress ceding Rajya Sabha seats to Kerala Congress (Economic Times, 2012)
- LDF's temple priest recruitment reforms and EWS quota (Heller, 2020)
- Competition among CPM, Congress, and BJP over temple festivals (Josekutty, 2019)

Such developments illustrate the erosion of ideological coherence. The rise of identity-based mobilization—particularly from caste organizations like NSS and SNDP—further blurs ideological boundaries (Josekutty, 2019). As Prabhash (The Hindu, 2020) notes, Kerala politics has increasingly shifted from principled ideological contestation to competitive power politics driven by community calculations.

CONCLUSION

Kerala's political history highlights an enduring tension between ideological commitments and identity-driven mobilizations. The Communist movement's early successes rooted in class struggle and welfare reforms once provided a strong ideological anchor. Yet coalition compulsions, electoral pressures, and social fragmentation have gradually eroded ideological consistency in both the Left and Congress.

The emergence of the BJP as a third force—alongside the assertiveness of caste and religious

organizations—has diversified political competition but also intensified identity politics. As the 2026 Assembly elections approach, Kerala's political future will depend on whether major parties can balance identity claims with inclusive welfare governance.

REFERENCES

- **CSDS.** (2016). *Lokniti–State of Democracy Survey*. Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.
- **Desai, A. R.** (2005). *State and society in India: Essays in dissent*. Popular Prakashan.
- **Economic Times.** (2012, May 18). Minority parties dominate UDF cabinet composition. *The Economic Times*. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>
- **Evans, G., & de Graaf, N. D.** (2013). *Political choice matters: Explaining the strength of class and religious cleavages in cross-national perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- **Hardgrave, R.** (1977). *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu*. University of California Press.
- **Heller, P.** (2020). Challenges to Kerala's development model. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(32), 24–28.
- **Herring, R.** (1983). *Land to the tiller: The political economy of agrarian reform in South Asia*. Yale University Press.
- **The Hindu.** (2024, June 5). *Lok Sabha elections | Big win for Congress-led UDF in Kerala with 18 seats, BJP opens account*. The Hindu Group. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/lok-sabha-elections-big-win-for-congress-led-udf-in-kerala-with-18-seats-bjp-opens-account/article68251683.ece>
- **Jeffrey, R.** (1978). *Politics, women and well-being: How Kerala became a "model"*. Macmillan.
- **Jeffrey, R.** (1992). *Politics, women and well-being: How Kerala became a "model"* (Revised ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- **Josekutty, P.** (2019). Communalism, caste, and coalition politics in Kerala. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 42(3), 411–432.
- **Kaul, V., & Kannangara, P.** (2023). Reassessing Kerala's early Communist reforms. *Indian Economic Review*, 58(2), 122–140.
- **Kumar, C. R.** (1980). Coalition politics in Kerala. *Social Scientist*, 8(11), 23–35.
- **Kumar, C. R.** (2014). Community pressures and coalition governments in Kerala. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(16), 398–404.
- **Lieten, G.** (1977). The first Communist ministry in Kerala: A retrospect. *Social Scientist*, 6(8), 3–20.
- **Mathew, G.** (1989). Communal politics and education in Kerala. *Journal of Politics in India*, 5(1), 41–58.
- **Mattumanni, A.** (2023). Kerala's political history and the Left's rise. *Modern Asian Studies*, 57(4), 987–1008.
- **Menon, A.** (1994). *The Christian Church and the liberation struggle*. Heritage Publishers.
- **Prabhash, J.** (2020, August 15). Kerala's declining ideological politics. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/>
- **Sasikumar, K., & Sunilraj, S.** (2020). Identity politics and coalition shifts in Kerala. *Economic and*

Political Weekly, 55(28), 32–40.

- **Sunilraj, S., & Sasikumar, K.** (2020). Cultural conservatism and Congress in Kerala. *Indian Journal of Political Science*, 81(3), 411–427.
- **Varma, A.** (2024, June 10). OBC shifts and BJP's rise in Kerala politics. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ndas-vote-share-in-kerala-grew-from-13-to-16-68-this-lok-sabha-elections-101717618711520.html>
- **Weiner, M.** (1967). *Party politics in India*. Princeton University Press. <https://www.charansingh.org/sites/default/files/1968%20Weiner%2C%20M%20ed.%20State%20Politics%20in%20India.pdf>