

HIMALAYAN QUESTIONS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE ABSENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN UTTARAKHAND ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS CAMPAIGN

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: State Legislatures - structure, functioning, conduct of business, powers & privileges and issues arising out of these

In the run-up to the February 14 [Uttarakhand Assembly elections](#), temples and development are among the issues raised by politicians. Former Uttarakhand Chief Minister Trivendra Singh Rawat's attempt to bring the four shrines of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri as well as other temples under one board ended with the 2019 Act being withdrawn in November 2021, after continued opposition from priests. The new Chief Minister, Pushkar Singh Dhama, who in July 2021 replaced Tirath Singh Rawat, who had replaced Mr. Trivendra Singh Rawat in March of the same year, carried out a review. Mr. Dhama said while the decision to constitute the board may have been taken with good intentions, it had been rolled back after discussion within the Government. Going into the elections, everyone from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to local leaders in the BJP have touted the redevelopment of Kedarnath as among the achievements of what they call the "double engine" government in the Centre and Uttarakhand. In December, Mr. Modi inaugurated the start of the Lakhwar multipurpose project and 8,700 crore-worth of road projects. With the Government backing major infrastructure projects, Mr. Modi termed this the decade of Uttarakhand. While environmentalists have raised concerns over rules being broken for the large infrastructure projects, major parties have not yet raised the environmental concerns.

Issues of national security and the welfare of ex-service members are also dominating the campaign. With a large population of retired soldiers, Uttarakhand politics has always witnessed some grandstanding on issues that appeal to them. The brother of the late Chief of Defence Staff, General Bipin Rawat, Col. (retd.) Vijay Rawat, joined the BJP this week. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has projected another retired colonel, Ajay Kothiyal, as its chief ministerial candidate and promised government jobs to all ex-service members in the State. Mr. Dhama has spoken as the "son of a soldier" and said the BJP alone respects the forces. The BJP is trying to fight anti-incumbency and the impression that it is a divided house, having changed two Chief Ministers within months in 2021. The Congress is hoping to wrest back power, after having lost it in 2017. Infighting and tussles over ticket distribution within the party have come out into the open, with former Chief Minister Harish Rawat being one of the claimants to the leadership position. AAP has joined the race with the promise of development, replicating the Delhi model, and an end to the "power sharing" between the BJP and the Congress. A raft of promises, from free water and electricity to better schools, is being made. What is lacking is an informed debate on a development model that is suitable to the ecologically fragile place that Uttarakhand is.

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