

Institute for the Study of Developing Areas (ISDA)
Two-day Workshop on
Coalition Politics in Kerala: Historical Trajectories, Political
Economy, and Social Dynamics
11-12 August 2025

Concept Note

Background and Rationale

Kerala, a state with one of India's most literate and politically aware populations, has a long-standing tradition of coalition politics dating back to 1957. Dynamic interactions among ideology, social movements, and institutional frameworks have shaped the state's political landscape. Since 1979, power has alternated mainly between two major coalitions—the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front (UDF)—reflecting a relatively stable bipolar system. However, this rhythm was disrupted in the 2021 state elections when the LDF returned to power for a second consecutive term, breaking the four-decade trend of electoral alternation.

Beneath this apparent bipolarity lies a deeply fragmented political field held together by intricate coalition arrangements. Smaller regional and caste-based parties play a pivotal role in shaping electoral outcomes by mobilising support in specific constituencies. Their ability to sway marginal seats has secured them influential positions on both fronts. This dynamic has fostered a culture of consensus politics that, while ensuring political stability, also necessitates compromises with entrenched interests, including capital, caste-based lobbies, and religious organisations.

The ideological boundaries between political formations have often blurred as parties adapt to socio-economic realities. Consequently, coalition politics in Kerala has evolved into a pragmatic exercise rather than a purely ideological contest. Political actors frequently navigate competing pressures from economic reforms, grassroots mobilisation, and identity-based demands, making the formation of ideological unity across parties increasingly elusive.

In recent years, the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a visible political force, though still electorally marginal, has signalled the possibility of a tripolar contest in the future. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has seen a steady increase in vote share, particularly among segments of the middle class and Hindu social groups. While the party has yet to secure significant legislative representation, its growing presence adds new complexities to Kerala's political equation.

At the same time, Kerala's development experience—often hailed as the 'Kerala Model'—has drawn global interest. Characterised by high health, education, and social welfare indicators despite low per capita income, the model presents a unique case of human development without commensurate industrial or economic growth. The dichotomy between robust social sector performance and a stagnant productive economy has intensified under the pressures of

globalisation and neoliberal reform. These structural challenges increasingly intersect with political agendas, redefining the contours of public policy and governance.

The workshop aims to critically explore the socio-political and economic factors shaping coalition politics in Kerala today. By examining historical continuities and recent transformations, the workshop will delve into the broader implications of coalition governance, identity politics, and democratic deepening in the state.

Objectives

1. To examine the historical trajectories of coalition politics in Kerala and its institutional evolution.
2. To analyse the political economy of coalition governance, including fiscal policy, welfare spending, and developmental priorities.
3. To explore the social dynamics embedded in coalition arrangements, including the representation of marginalised communities, caste-class alignments, and identity politics.
4. To facilitate scholarly discourse and policy contemplation regarding the strengths, limitations, and future prospects of coalition politics within the context of the Indian federal system.
5. To disseminate key insights to the public, media, and policy stakeholders through proceedings, policy briefs, and outreach.

Workshop Sub-Themes

- Social Change and Democracy – Towards Modernity
Examining how social movements, education, and literacy have contributed to Kerala's democratic fabric and political participation.
- The 'Kerala Model' and Socio-Economic Development under Globalisation
Analysing the contradictions and challenges of sustaining the Kerala Model in the era of liberalisation and privatisation.
- Party System – Political Parties and Pressure Groups
Understanding the role of mainstream parties, caste-based and religious parties, and non-party formations in coalition dynamics.
- Trajectory of Coalition Politics in Kerala
A historical overview of coalition experiments, alliance formations, and the evolution of the LDF-UDF system.
- Trade Union Movements and Labour Politics
Assessing the role of organised labour in shaping political narratives and influencing policy-making.
- Grassroots Democracy, Decentralised Planning, and Women's Empowerment
Evaluating Kerala's unique experiments with local self-governance and gender inclusion.
- Politics of Identity – Caste, class and religious mobilisations in coalition making
Exploring how identity politics affects coalition formation, social cohesion, and voter mobilisation.

- Land Struggles and Environmental Movements
Investigating how environmental justice campaigns and agrarian issues intersect with electoral politics.
- Mass Media, Depoliticisation, and Emerging Political Culture
Analysing the impact of media, popular culture, and digital platforms on political engagement and ideological orientation.
- Political compromises and economic policies: Balancing leftist ideals and pragmatic governance.
- Comparative insights: Kerala and other Indian states with coalition governments
- Electoral behaviour and party alliances
- Political economy of budgetary decisions and resource allocation
- Any other related themes

Target Participants

- Academicians and researchers (political science, economics, sociology, history)
- Policy analysts and government officials
- Civil society representatives and activists
- Students and early career scholars
- Media professionals and political commentators

Expected Outcomes

- A deeper understanding of coalition politics in Kerala and its broader implications
- Academic papers and policy briefs published post-seminar
- Recommendations for enhancing inclusive and accountable coalition governance
- Engagement with the public through media, recordings, and outreach publications
- Strengthening networks among scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors