

MLAs' plan to tour Oz, NZ sharpens Siddaramaiah-Shivakumar faultlines

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bengaluru: A proposed overseas tour by a group of Congress MLAs has deepened divisions in the party, with camps led by chief minister Siddaramaiah and his deputy DK Shivakumar sparring over the issue amid an ongoing tussle over the CM post.

Former minister and Chamarajanagar MLA C Puttaranga Shetty revealed some 25-35 MLAs and family members are planning a trip to Australia and New Zealand between Feb 16 and March 3. The animal husbandry department is said to be underwriting the trip. Shetty said 13 MLAs, including animal husbandry and sericulture minister K Venkatesh, had sought no-objection certificates (NOC) from the secretary of the legislative assembly to obtain visas.

"It is a routine procedure. We have issued NOCs to those who applied," MK Vishalakshi, assembly secretary, said.

The proposed trip has led to intense speculation that Shivakumar is stepping up pressure on the party high command to honour a reported pact that he would take over as CM halfway through the govt's five-year term. Some say he is planning to take a large group of MLAs abroad to demonstrate his clout. However, those seen to be in CM's camp say MLAs aligned with Siddaramaiah are also part of the group.



ALL FRIENDS: Ministers G Parameshwara and Dinesh Gundu Rao with council chairman Basavaraj Horatti at an event on Wednesday

Shivakumar's supporters also say central party brass refused permission for the tour and that AICC general secretary Randeep Surjewala had even warned against it.

DK Suresh, Shivakumar's brother and former MP, rejected suggestions that the deputy CM was involved. "Who is going? Why unnecessarily blame Shivakumar for this? I can only clarify that Shivakumar has nothing to do with it," he said.

Meanwhile, critics allege that the trip could amount to a junket funded by taxpayers' money. Siddaramaiah also sought to play down the tour, saying: "If MLAs and MLCs plan to go on a foreign trip at their own expense, can we say no?" However, asked if he was aware of the tour, he said, "No, I'm not aware of it."

AS Ponnanna, MLA and Siddaramaiah's legal adviser also sought to downplay the row, saying the trip was a "personal affair". "MLAs are free to go on a trip with their families, and it is their personal affair. It is not proper to drag the CM into it," he said.

To a query on the state budget, Siddaramaiah said, "I will announce the presentation date after Shivaratri (Feb 15)." He is currently holding a series of pre-budget meetings with departments.

Speculation about a possible change of CM began after the govt crossed the halfway mark of its five-year term on Nov 20 last year. It has intensified since, with reports suggesting it could take place after Siddaramaiah presents his record 17th budget in the first week of March.

DK brothers meet Kharge, Venugopal

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Bengaluru/New Delhi: Deputy chief minister DK Shivakumar and his brother and former MP DK Suresh, held late-night meetings with AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge and organisational general secretary KC Venugopal in Delhi, developments that have drawn attention amid renewed speculation over a possible change of CM.

Shivakumar was in Delhi to attend a strategy meeting to attend a strategy meeting on Assam assembly polls but stayed back after that meeting on Tuesday and met Kharge and Venugopal separately on Wednesday. He did not meet Rahul Gandhi, Lok Sabha LoP.

Sources say brothers told party brass that delays in implementing the reported power-sharing pact — under which CM Siddaramaiah was expected to hand over the post to Shivakumar — were affecting the party's image and could hurt its prospects in upcoming local body polls and Bagalkot and Davanagere South assembly bypolls.

"They also objected to the high command's failure to restrain Siddaramaiah's son,

Yathindra, who made public remarks against the party's interests," a source said.

Sources said Kharge and Venugopal did not commit to any timeline on a possible transition, stating that the issue required a collective decision. Shivakumar and Suresh did not speak on the meeting.

'Keep your word'

Earlier, Suresh had urged Siddaramaiah to "keep his word". "Even today, I hope that, though delayed, he (Siddaramaiah) will keep his word," Suresh said when asked about his earlier remarks on an alleged pact that Shivakumar will take over as CM at the govt's halfway mark.

Asked about his brother's comments Wednesday, Shivakumar in Delhi said: "I have all along said time will answer. I have also said that only we know what we discussed." Asked when that time would come, he said, "I will tell you at an appropriate time."

Reacting to Suresh's remarks, Siddaramaiah said central brass were aware of the issue and reiterated that both he and Shivakumar will abide by their decision.

