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## **50% women-quota: UDF struggling to find candidates**

**VR Jayaraj | Thrissur**

The 50 percent reservation provided for women in the local bodies in Kerala is proving to be huge burden for the Congress-led UDF Opposition. Front leader Congress and its second largest constituent Muslim League are finding it extremely difficult to find the large number of qualified women to field in the election to be held in October-end.

Reports from within the UDF indicate that the Muslim League, unable to find sufficient number of women candidates, has already requested the Congress to take over the women-reservation wards allotted to it and return general seats but the front leader has declined. "How can we do that?" asked a Congress leader. "Even we can't find enough women candidates," he said.

In the 2005 civic polls, the reservation for women was only 33 percent but even then the Congress and the Muslim League had found it difficult to find women candidates. The enhancement of the quota for women to 50 percent from 33 percent has complicated the matters for the UDF further and it has even led to difficulties in the process of seat-sharing among the constituents.

"The parties (in the UDF) do not want to take the wards reserved for women except those about which they are certain. They are asking us to keep the women's wards and allocate general wards to them. They do not understand that we ourselves are in the same difficulties they are in," said the Congress leader.

Congress sources said that the Muslim League particularly was reluctant in the first round of seat-sharing talks to accept the reserved wards which were additional to those allocated in the last election. However, the smaller constituents of the front were not very averse to accepting the wards reserved for women, they said.

With more than half of the wards in the local administration councils reserved for women, the number of women contesting the election this time is expected be over 12,000 in the State.

The Muslim League is struggling to find suitable women candidates to fill the additional reserved wards even in the Muslim-majority Malappuram District Panchayat. "Thirty percent of the total wards allotted to us are reserved. I shouldn't say this but the fact is that it is very difficult for us to find women to field in all of them," said a Malappuram district leader of the League.

The situation of the Congress is even worse. With intense battles for seats among the various groups already raging, the party is now worried that the 50 percent reservation for women will complicate the rebel threat. Earmarking 17 percent more wards than last time to women could mean that more men would file nominations in general wards as rebels, Congress leaders admit.

The Congress poll managers are struggling to find women active in day-to-day politics to be fielded as candidates. They say that most of the able women are more interested in getting candidature in the Assembly election than the civic polls. Critics say that the official leadership of the party is responsible for the situation as new batches of women workers are not coming to the party as the organizational elections are not properly held.

“Women with political skills and knowledge have not been able to come up in the party as the leadership (headed by president Ramesh Chennithala) is not willing to hold organizational election,” said a close aide of veteran leader K Karunakaran. “What will now happen is that this will enable the leaders to make their favourites candidates without regard for qualities,” she said.