

Modi, Shah, Advani, Joshi, CMs present as Kovind files papers

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NDA's Ram Nath Kovind on Friday filed his nomination papers, surrounded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 15 chief ministers and many union ministers, as the BJP put up a formidable show of strength to mark the occasion.

With more than 60% of voters of the electoral college, which will elect President Pranab Mukherjee's successor, having already pledged their support to him, Kovind's election is virtually certain. But the BJP pulled out all the stops to make the occasion count.

This will be the first time that a BJP leader will occupy the Rashtrapati Bhawan — if all goes according to plan — as the party's previous victorious presidential candidate, A P J Abdul Kalam, did not have a party background.

Representatives of 28 parties were there, too, BJP sources said, but its ally Shiv Sena was absent.

While Sena claimed it was not invited, BJP leaders blamed it on a "miscommunication".

Sena leaders are among the proposers of Kovind's nomination.

BJP veterans L K Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi, both of whom were seen as probable candidates for the high profile post, were also present.

The two flanked Kovind as he walked to the Lok Sabha speaker general's office in Parliament House to file his papers.

The chief ministers of all the states ruled by the BJP and its allies, except Manohar Parrikar of Goa and Mehbooba Mufti of Jammu and Kashmir, were present.

Among the non-NDA chief ministers who have announced their party's support to the dalit leader from Uttar Pradesh — K Chandrashekar Rao (TRS) of Telangana and Edappadi K Palaniswami (AIADMK) of Tamil Nadu — were also there.



Ram Nath Kovind

BJD chief and Odisha chief minister Naveen Patnaik had sent a minister while nobody from the JD(U) and YSRCP, two parties supporting Kovind, was present.

JD(U) spokesperson K C Tyagi said it was an NDA event and there was no reason for his party's presence there. He said its support to Kovind was an "isolated" decision and should not be linked to party politics.

Three sets of nominations were filed in Kovind's support with Modi and Advani being among the 60 proposers in one.

One set in which Shah was among the proposers was in Hindi, which some BJP leaders said was a rare practice.

Top BJP allies Parkash Singh Badal of SAD and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister and TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu were among the proposers in the third set.

A fourth set will be filed on June 28, the last date of filing of nominations.

A group of opposition parties had on Thursday announced that former Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar, also a dalit leader, would be their joint candidate against Kovind.

The election is scheduled for July 17 and the counting of votes will take place on July 20.

The term of President Pranab Mukherjee ends on July 24.

Kovind, if elected — as he is likely to — will be the second dalit to occupy the highest constitutional office. The first was K R Narayanan, who was in the Rashtrapati Bhavan in 1997-2002.

A low-profile man who held various organisational positions in the BJP, Kovind, 71, was made the Bihar governor in 2015 after the NDA came to power in May 2014.

The name of the two-term Rajya Sabha member did not figure among the probabilities but his nomination by the BJP is now being seen by some as a "political masterstroke".

He enjoys a clean reputation and has steered clear of controversy in his over 26-year-old political career. His dalit background makes him a sound political choice for the saffron party working overtime to woo Dalits.

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