

ISAS Brief

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Rajnikanth's Entry into Party Politics: Implications for Tamil Nadu

Movie-star Rajnikanth's decision to enter party politics has created much hype as well as hope for political change in Tamil Nadu. The State is in political chaos, with widespread corruption at the political and bureaucratic levels. However, despite Rajnikanth's fame and popularity among the people of South India, this paper contends that he will face a tough challenge in taking on seasoned political players and in turning things around in Tamil Nadu.

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Actor Rajnikanth announced his entry into politics in Tamil Nadu on 31 December 2017 and mentioned that Tamil Nadu needed clean politics. He also said that his would be an 'Anmika' party, which can loosely be translated as "devout" or 'God fearing', much to the anger of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), whose original plank had been anti-religion and atheist. He also visited and sought the blessings of the chief sage at the Ramakrishna Math² in Chennai, further incensing the DMK. Immediately thereafter, Rajnikanth started reaching out to his fan clubs and creating

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² Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, is the first branch centre of the Ramakrishna Order in Southern India. It was started in 1897 by Swami Ramakrishnananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. For details, see <http://www.chennai.math.org/>.

outreach initiatives through social media and digital messages, signifying his seriousness in the new initiative.

Rajnikanth's entry into politics has been welcomed, albeit cautiously. This is due to the fact that he has been talking about it for more than a decade now. There have also been occasions when national parties have tried to persuade him to take the leap. Somehow, he seemed unwilling. There could be several reasons for his decision to take enter politics now.

First, the recent by-elections in R K Nagar in Chennai were won by an independent candidate, T T V Dhinakaran, a nephew of V K Sasikala,³ by an enormous margin. The media attributed it to a well-organised cash-for-vote campaign. However, it is now clear that the Sasikala group, whatever the allegations against them, has reasonable clout and following. The ruling AIADMK duo of Edappadi K Palaniswami and O Panneerselvam are quite anxious to keep their flock together. The party finished second in the R K Nagar by-elections. The DMK, which finished a dismal third in the by-elections, seems to have lost out in terms of public appeal. Stalin, the DMK leader, has not been able to offer a credible alternative. There is a real vacuum of leadership among the Dravidian parties and the emergence of Dhinakaran cannot be ruled out. This could be the best opportunity for Rajnikanth to announce his political arrival, as the electorate would be keen on an alternative.

The BJP would also welcome his arrival since the rise of Dhinakaran and Sasikala would be unacceptable to it, especially after the sentencing of Sasikala, her relatives, and, later, her husband. There has been a series of Income Tax raids on the properties of Sasikala's family, clearly at the behest of the central government. The by-election results are a setback to the efforts of bringing the AIADMK groups closer to the BJP. The arrival of Rajnikanth offers a new option to the BJP. However, Rajnikanth has not indicated, in any way, that he would be looking at other parties. Rather, he has said that his party would contest all seats in the assembly elections in 2021.

³ V K Sasikala was a close aide of former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, J Jayalalithaa, who was leader of the AIADMK. When Jayalalithaa died in 2016, Sasikala was appointed the interim Secretary-General of the AIADMK. In February last year, Sasikala was arrested in a disproportionate-assets case and was sentenced to four years in jail.

Second, Rajnikanth's career as a cine-star is clearly waning. He is starring in two mega movies which would be released this year. At his age – he is 68 years old – there are unlikely to be many more movies for him. The jump from film to politics is one that Tamil Nadu has been used to for more than 50 years, and he would be banking on his fans to see him through to a new career.

Third, another actor, Kamal Hassan, has also announced his interest in entering politics. The two actors recently made a joint appearance in Malaysia for a fund-raising event for the construction of a new building for the South Indian Film Artistes Association. Immediately, there was talk of a possible tie-up between the two actors. While Kamal Hassan does not enjoy the cult figure status as Rajnikanth, he would be an unwelcome competition. Rajnikanth's move preempts Kamal Hassan's entry into politics.

The political picture in Tamil Nadu remains murky. Definitely, Dhinakaran and his supporters are going to flex their muscles and try to wean away legislators from the AIADMK. This would put the AIADMK on the back foot. The DMK looks like a disorganised ship and it is not unlikely that Stalin would be pushed into action, or there would be changes in that party. The Congress party is nowhere to be seen, but it is adept at hanging on to the coattails of the winner, so far as Tamil Nadu is concerned.

The elections to the local bodies are expected to take place soon. The AIADMK fears that Dhinakaran's group could make greater headway, thereby weakening the Tamil Nadu government even more. Also, Rajnikanth's proposed contest of the assembly elections 2021 is far away and there are parliamentary elections to be fought in 2019.

Finally, it appears that the BJP has not got its act together. There is little evidence of the party outside Chennai, and among the public, it is still relatively unknown. The Hindutva agenda is unlikely to sway Tamil Nadu. With over 30,000 temples in the State, the Tamilian already frequents temples and participates vigorously in Hindu religious festivals in Tamil Nadu, as well as overseas in Malaysia and Singapore. The Muslim and Christian populations make up less than 10 per cent each in the State. There is no new message that the BJP can convey in such a predominantly temple-going, Hindu-majority State.

For the BJP, this is a worry – Tamil Nadu has 39 seats in the Lok Sabha which would be crucial in deciding the winner in the next elections in 2019. The Congress would be willing to tie up with whoever is the winner. However, the BJP would find it difficult to do so.

Rajnikanth is, as yet, an untested entity, His age, past vacillations and inexperience in politics all work against him. There is also significant corruption in the State, not just at the political level, but also at the level of the bureaucracy. Cleaning governance appears to be a Herculean task even for a mega movie-star.

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