

Tamil Nadu Elections 2021: Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam back in the Driver's Seat

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Summary

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, led by M K Stalin, is set to form the government in Tamil Nadu. However, the road ahead is fraught with challenges. These include tackling the raging COVID-19 pandemic and creating investment and job opportunities.

The results for the state assembly polls in Tamil Nadu were in line with predictions, with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) alliance, led by M K Stalin, son of M Karunanidhi, securing 158 seats out of a total of 234 seats. The DMK alone won 133 seats, giving it the required majority to form a government on its own. Though a comfortable victory, it was not the sweep expected in poll predictions, and the current ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), along with its allies, led by Edappady Palanisamy, won 76 seats, with the party getting 69 seats on its own. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in a maiden entry into the assembly, won four seats. The results appeared to indicate that it was not a complete rejection of the ruling alliance and a large swing in favour of the DMK, but a more balanced assessment by the electorate of the several considerations before it.

Stalin waited a long time for this; he is now 68 years old. In his twenties, he was jailed and treated harshly when Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency in 1975. He then formed and led the youth wing of the DMK, which gathered political acceptance over the years. In 1996, he became Mayor of Chennai (then Madras), then a minister in his father's cabinet in 2006 and subsequently Deputy Chief Minister. The AIADMK had swept the 2016 polls under J Jayalalithaa, but after her demise in September that year, there was an opportunity for Stalin to disrupt the government. Instead, he chose not to dislodge the government and preferred to bide his time.

Tamil Nadu has a history of choosing decisively between the two Dravidian parties. Thus, after 10 years of the AIADMK's rule, a change in favour of the DMK was to be expected. The hard Hindutva agenda propagated by the BJP, its alliance with the ruling AIADMK and the core argument of the hurt to Tamil pride as a result of these actions, certainly contributed to the swing to the DMK. Three issues were at play in Tamil Nadu. One, the religious fundamentalism espoused by the BJP did not go down well with the people. Two, there was the strong issue of Tamil identity, especially espoused by some Tamil nationalist parties which the BJP-AIADMK alliance was not able to counter. Finally, there was demand from the intermediate caste groups and Dalits who were anxious about developmental mobility.

The narrative was also against the erosion of state autonomy which has been a core ideal of Dravidian politics since its formation. Mamata Banerjee's victory in West Bengal and the Left Democratic Front's win in Kerala are likely to have a significant impact on the revival of the state's demands for more autonomy and protection of core ideals enshrined in the Indian

Constitution. However, there are several obstacles to this. Constitutional powers, including fiscal powers, are heavily biased in favour of the central government. In order to attract more capital and entrepreneurs, there is need to adopt a more cosmopolitan approach towards investment and labour. In recent years, the Centre has legislated on a number of areas that are in the remit of state management – education, agriculture and direct benefit transfers, to name a few. These erode into the space available for the states to identify state-specific opportunities.

The DMK has 27 members of parliament (MP) in the Lok Sabha, having won all the seats it contested in 2019. They sit in the opposition, but several of the MPs are former ministers who have held important portfolios and would certainly want to be part of the action. The state needs the Centre for programme grants, and certain changes in education and health policies. It is not inconceivable that some working arrangement between the DMK and the BJP at the Centre may develop. Back channels may get busy. However, if there is a realignment of forces opposing the BJP, then Stalin, Mamata and P Vijayan (Kerala), could form the core around which this happens, and regional parties, having lost hope in the Congress, may well think of this alternative. The federal structure of the Constitution is likely to be tested in the remaining three years of BJP rule at the Centre, and Tamil Nadu will be at the forefront with its demands.

Quite apart from this, the new government faces a number of challenges. The raging COVID-19 pandemic needs to be contained. Health infrastructure is close to breaking down, though it is still better managed here than several other states. A decision on a complete lockdown for a period of time will affect its economic activity. State finances are in a poor shape with a huge debt and interest burden. Tamil Nadu needs to regain its position as an investment destination and attract industries and services that are finding Pune, Hyderabad and Bangaluru as attractive alternatives. Most importantly, there is the need to provide employment for its large number of educated youth. Access to higher education has ensured that 58 per cent of those above 18 years attend tertiary institutions. This large college-going population has employment and economic mobility aspirations. The various electoral promises that are essentially subsidies and giveaways could put a further strain on the government's fiscal resources. There is also the need to provide transparent and clean governance, which requires reigning in party cadres as well as lower administration from indulging in rent seeking. The first few weeks will indicate the decisiveness of the new DMK administration.

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