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Tamil Nadu Election Results: An Assessment

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Abstract

The Tamil Nadu election results are important not only for the significant mandate for change but also for indicating a distinct change in voter perception. There appears to be a strong antipathy to poor governance and nepotism, and an expectation that good governance would deliver more people friendly policies. Cash for votes or freebies do not appear to have swayed the electorate. This seems to be a sign in the right direction for democracy.

Table 1: Tamil Nadu Elections Party Wise Results

	Won	Leading	Total
Communist Party of India	9	0	9
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	10	0	10
Indian National Congress	5	0	5
All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)	150	0	150
All India Forward Bloc	1	0	1
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	23	0	23
Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK)	3	0	3
Others	33	0	33

Source: 'Assembly Elections May 2011', *Election Commission of India*, <http://eciresults.nic.in/Statewises2216.htm>. Accessed on 14 May 2011.

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The results of the Tamil Nadu assembly elections were announced on Friday the 13th, a day that brought bad news for the ruling DMK-Congress alliance in that state. The AIADMK alliance, led by Ms J. Jayalalitha has secured 203 seats in the 234-member assembly, leaving the DMK combine with the lowest performance in the last twenty years. The Congress Party that had allied with the DMK was able to win only five of the 63 seats that it contested, this being its poorest record in the state.

There have been expectations of an anti-incumbency sentiment, and the Tamil Nadu electorate has a history of voting for a change in government within the state every five years. However, the final tally of an overwhelming sweep for the AIADMK has been a surprise. Victories for the DMK candidates have been by only small margins, whereas the AIADMK candidates have by and large trounced their opponents with very large margins. This has been a decisive mandate for change and there have been several interesting aspects to this election.

First, governance issues have been at the forefront in these elections. The DMK-Congress alliance had calculated that the fallout of the 2G spectrum scam would not be felt in rural areas and would only affect the literate urban electorate. DMK stalwarts had moved away from urban constituencies to contest in rural areas but the results have proved otherwise. The focus of the AIADMK campaign was on the corruption in the DMK. Furthermore, the AIADMK had pointed out, the nepotism of the DMK chief, in governing through family based politics, with a number of family members given high political rewards. These members were also seen to be responsible for garnering a share of rentals in several sections of the economy. The argument that the DMK had distributed a number of freebies to the poor, including rice at `1 per kilo and free television sets, did not sway the electorate, which has decided that these represent only a small portion of the ill-gotten gains that has been distributed. Therefore, poor governance and corruption issues have moved the electorate significantly. This is a sign of a healthy trend.

Second, the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK), a new party formed in 2005 by cinema actor Vijaykanth, has emerged with significant vote bank in the state. This party appeals to younger generation, who has not been witness to the charismatic era of M.G. Ramachandran (popularly known as MGR), the film icon who founded the AIADMK. This greater appeal among the youth was manifest in an eight per cent vote starting in 2006 assembly elections and then again in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. Though the party did not win a single seat in 2009, its ability to draw away voters from the traditional DMK and AIADMK vote banks was evident. This time around, a strategic alliance with the AIADMK, though not without hiccups, has enabled it to win a substantial number of seats, even more than the DMK, making it the second largest block in the assembly. In short, this would be a party to watch in the future, with the DMK in decay.

Third, the caste and community based parties have recorded a poor showing. The PMK, which represents the Vanniyar community in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, has had its poorest showing with only three wins out of the 31 seats contested. This party had its heyday in the late eighties and nineties, and has had the ability to secure enough of a mandate to get two ministerial positions in the Government of India, but its lack of clear ideology, the opportunistic nature of its politics and a record of corruption has cost it dearly. Another new caste based party competed for six seats around Coimbatore, for the first time, and was unable to win even one. It perhaps indicates a maturing of the electorate that is better educated, more urban (Tamil Nadu is the most urbanised state in the country, with over 40 per cent of the population living in urban areas), that is looking beyond narrow caste and community considerations.

Fourth, the Sri Lankan Tamils issue, an emotive issue in Tamil Nadu, has failed to translate into votes. The Viduthalai Siruthai party, a strong Tamil Tigers supporter, has failed to garner even a single seat. It appears that the sympathy with the Sri Lankan Tamils is much more due to emotional bonding, than due to issues of governance. In short, the electorate has perhaps realised that there is very little that Tamil Nadu can do, without the Government of India's support, to help the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Fifth, the election commission was very vigilant during these elections. Strict enforcement of the law on election related expenditure, seizure of money in transit for payment to voters, and strict adherence to code of conduct for elections has resulted in this election being free from any untoward incident of intimidation or false voting. Even though all the cash meant for distribution could not be apprehended, it was reduced to a trickle. The voters have also decided that cash would not be a criterion for voting. A combination of transparent well managed elections and lack of cash incentives to sway the voter, were significant factors in these elections.

Sixth, the four state elections have demonstrated a maturing of the Indian electorate. Voter turnout has been the highest ever in almost all the states, indicating that the urban educated voter is prepared to go out into the streets to cast his vote. If this trend is maintained it would represent a turning point for the democratic process. No longer would political parties be content with relying on the uneducated poor for their victories – issues of governance and development would need to be addressed. This conclusion is further strengthened by the fact that in Assam, where there has been reasonable development under a benevolent government, the voters have been willing to vote this government back to power for a third term. By the same argument, in West Bengal, there has been an outcry against the poor governance by the left, inciting a wave for change.

Even in Pondicherry the electorate has voted for a new party that is a breakaway from the Congress, but headed by an individual who is seen to be transparent and people friendly.

In short, these elections are a call for all parties to listen to the people and their aspirations, rather than to focus on the narrow arithmetic of caste, religion and vote banks. The same phenomenon was visible in the Bihar elections last year, when the Janta Dal (United) of Nitish Kumar won a resounding victory based on good governance and development performance. In Gujarat, the electorate has done likewise. These are also trends towards a future of healthy democracy.

In terms of policies, the AIADMK government is not likely to differ significantly from the earlier government. Industry friendly policies of attracting new investments and foreign direct investment are likely to continue, as well as the social welfare programmes that have been the hallmark of Tamil Nadu since the days of MGR. Ms J. Jayalaitha has said that all election promises would be redeemed. The state is under fiscal stress, and the law and order situation needs to be corrected. In her maiden appearance, she has said that these two needs would be of her utmost her priority.

It is important that the victors learn a lesson from these results. So they may realise that the aspirations of the voters have changed, there is need to pay closer attention to their needs and expectations, and most importantly, that administering through a highly educated bureaucracy would not be a substitute for listening to the people.

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