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Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections: Mapping Electoral Alliances and their Strategies

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Abstract

Even days after the process of filing nominations for the April 13 Assembly polls had begun, the political alliances in Tamil Nadu were in a state of flux. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) had differences regarding identification of constituencies, while the Vaiko (Vai. Gopalsamy)-led Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) pulled out of its alliance with the AIADMK and decided to boycott the elections. The incumbent Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) government, on the other hand, has finalised seat-sharing agreements with its allies. However, the negotiations between the DMK and Congress had proven difficult, as discussions were held against the perceived weakness of the regional party in the 2G scam controversy and the resolve of the Congress to reposition itself in the state. In what is likely to be a close and contested election, the DMK and the AIADMK are relying on traditional populist strategies such as promising freebies and relying on the film industry to mobilise the voters, apart from electoral arithmetic. This paper attempts to map the two major electoral alliances in Tamil Nadu, the factors which have gone into shaping them and to examine the electoral strategies of the two political coalitions while identifying issues which may influence the outcome.

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The seven-year old partnership between the DMK and the Congress survived a near collapse during seat sharing talks in March 2011, which threatened to topple the alliance with its gamut of caste-based parties. Talks reached an impasse after the Congress raised its demand from 60 to 63 seats, apart from asking for a choice of constituencies and power sharing. The DMK walked out of the alliance and threatened to pull out of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition at the centre.

According to some political commentators, talks collapsed as the Congress could not make a commitment to prevent or slow down the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) from going after the family members of the DMK. The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Muthuvel Karunanidhi, walked out of the DMK-Congress partnership so that he could possibly paint future raids as a form of vengeance.² It is likely that one of the reasons the DMK gave in was because it needed some backing at the centre, with the arrest of the then Minister of Communication and Technology, A. Raja and with the CBI raiding of Kailaignar TV. The Kailaignar TV is part owned by Rajya Sabha member Kanimozhi and Karunanidhi's second wife, Dayalu Ammal. This was also vital to its arithmetic against the AIADMK and DMDK alliance. Congress, on the other hand, which has not won an election since 1967, bargained hard for a choice of seats and power sharing, as the party wants to strengthen its standing in the state. It has been reported that Rahul Gandhi, prominent Congress Party leader and General Secretary of the party, is in favour of building the party up from grassroots and reclaiming its pre-eminent position.³

The ruling DMK will contest 119 seats; Congress will contest 63 seats; and Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) whose vote base is the Vanniyar community, will contest 30 seats. Other parties in the group are the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), headed by Thol Thirumavalan, which is expected to bring in the Dalit vote and has been allotted 10 seats; Kongunadu Munnetra Kazhagam, with its voter base in the Kongu region has been allotted seven seats; three have gone to Indian Union Muslim League and one each to Moovendar Munnetra Kazhagam and Perunthalivar Makkal Katchi.⁴

The AIADMK has released its list of 160 candidates. However, it was unable to finalise the seat sharing with some of its members. Parties in the coalition were upset with the AIADMK's announcement of contesting 160 seats including constituencies of its sitting allies without consultations. The DMDK at one point was holding consultations to start a third collaboration.⁵ In an uncharacteristic move, J. Jayalalitha sought to iron out differences

² Cho Ramaswamy, 'Reactions over DMK-Congress split', *CNN-IBN* (5 March 2011), <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/reactions-over-the-dmkcong-split/145072-37.html>. Accessed 10 March 2011.

³ Sabha Naqvi, 'Worth the three seats?', *Outlook India* (21 March 2011), www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?270838. Accessed on 29 March 2011.

⁴ T.S. Subramanian, 'Troubled Alliances', *Frontline*, Vol 28, Issue 7 (26 March-8 April 2011), www.frontline.in/stories/20110408280712600.htm. Accessed on 20 March 2011.

⁵ 'Allies Team Up Against Jayalalitha', *Indian Express* (18 March 2011),

with her allies. However, the Ahila India Naadalum Makkal Katchi (AINMK) pulled out of the alliance followed by the MDMK whose voter base is made up of supporters for the Tamil Eelam. Vaiko decided to boycott the elections calling the AIADMK 'arrogant' for offering the MDMK, what he considered an inadequate number of seats.⁶

J. Jayalalitha's AIADMK has teamed up with film stars who have used their influence to start their own parties. Actors Joseph Vijay Chandrasekhar (popularly known as Vijay), whose recent film was rumoured to have been blocked by the ruling DMK party, and Sarath Kumar, who left the DMK due to differences with the party's ruling family and then started the All India Samathuva Makkal Katchi, are both in alliance with the AIADMK.

Polls are predicting a win for the AIADMK and DMDK alliance, which can affect the polling in 65 constituencies.⁷ The DMDK received over ten per cent of the votes in the last Assembly elections and has been allotted 41 seats this time around.⁸ Christening himself the 'Black M.G. Ramachandran (MGR)' after the former actor turned politician who went on to become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Vijayakanth is positioning himself as a champion of the poor and women. However, DMDK has fashioned itself as the third alliance and cashed in on the anti-DMK and anti-AIADMK votes in previous elections. The other parties of this alliance include left wing parties with ten seats for Communist Party of India (CPI), 12 for the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-M) and one seat for the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB). Manithaneya Makkal Katchi (MMK), which has its base in the Muslim community will contest three seats; Puthiya Tamizhagam (PT), a Dalit party will contest two seats; and one seat has gone to the Republican Party of India representing the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

The DMK is using populist strategies to woo the voters, by offering an array of freebies including blenders, grinders, laptops and continuing free distribution of colour television sets.⁹ J. Jayalalitha, the AIADMK leader is relying on the support from the film industry to translate into votes. She has teamed up with movie stars who have floated political parties – a strategy which has worked in the past for her mentor and founder of the AIADMK, MGR. She has also announced a similar list of freebies, and actually added to the list announced by the DMK. Most importantly, J. Jayalalitha has promised improvement in the law and order situation in Tamil Nadu, a promise that would appeal to the urban dwellers of the region.

www.indianexpress.com/news/allies-team-up-against-jayalaithaa/764114/0. Accessed on 18 March 2011.

⁶ 'Vaiko's MDMK to boycott polls', *Times of India* (21 March 2011), http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-21/chennai/29171149_1_vaiko-s-mdmk-aiadmk-senior-mdmk-leader. Accessed on 21 March 2011.

⁷ Coomi Kapoor, 'It's not just corruption', *Indian Express* (4 March 2011), www.indianexpress.com/news/its-not-just-corruption/757615/2. Accessed on 15 March 2011.

⁸ 'DMDK gets 41 seats in poll pact with AIADMK', *The Hindu* (4 March 2011), www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Chennai/article1510097.ece. Accessed on 12 March 2011.

⁹ 'Freebies Galore in DMK manifesto', *Outlook* (11 March 2011), <http://news.outlookindia.com/item.aspx?715691>. Accessed on 15 March 2011.

While the popular opinion seems to indicate a win for the AIADMK-DMDK alliance there are a number of unforeseen factors, which can influence the outcome of the elections. Firstly, the DMDK has been touted as the game changer in these elections and has contested independently in previous elections. Vijayakanth's DMDK party might lose about 40 per cent of its voter base after joining alliance with the AIADMK.¹⁰ The other factor to take into consideration is the trend of 'cash and sops' for votes. The recent WikiLeaks of India cables have revealed that political parties offer bribes to undecided voters to sway votes in their favour. Many parties in Tamil Nadu distribute cash to the voters or make donations towards amenities for their community or village.¹¹

The upcoming elections will be a closely contested one. The DMK is keen to retain power, especially in the light of the corruption charges, which is bound to multiply if J. Jayalalitha becomes Chief Minister. It is an important election for the AIADMK as their leader is keen to recapture power as this could be the last election she might be able to contest, with her age as it is.

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¹⁰ Interview with Dr Illango Nallarasu, Associate Professor, Department of Tamil Studies, Madras Christian College, Tambaram (28 February 2011).

¹¹ '206688: cash for votes in South India', *The Hindu* (16 March 2011), www.thehindu.com/news/the-india-cables/article1541385.ece. Accessed on 16 March 2011.