

ISAS Brief

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Tamil Nadu Political Muddle: Much Ado about India's Presidential Election?

The unfolding political developments in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu have had much to do with the factional rivalries that broke out in the ruling party after the death of Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa in December 2016. However, there is much speculation that India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party may be orchestrating unity moves at the state level with an eye on the country's upcoming presidential election.

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The recent arrest of T T V Dhinakaran, nephew of V K Sasikala, General Secretary of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), has further muddled the political scene in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It may be recalled that, after the death of J Jayalalithaa, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, in December 2016, her long-time companion, Sasikala, took control of the party, got appointed as its General Secretary and ensured that her nominee, Edappadi Palaniswami, was appointed Chief Minister. In fact, she tried to get herself chosen as the Chief Minister but a judgment of the Supreme Court of India in a criminal case resulted

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in her being sentenced to jail for four years. She is currently in prison in Bengaluru, but she controls party affairs through Dhinakaran and Palaniswami, both her nominees.

O Panneerselvam of the AIADMK, who had stood in as Chief Minister on more than one occasion when Jayalalithaa was alive, has raised the banner of revolt against the Sasikala group, and a small number of Members of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and some Members of Parliament (MPs) belonging to the party at the national level have sided with him. Dhinakaran stood as a candidate for the election to the MLA seat rendered vacant by the passing away of Jayalalithaa, but the Election Commission, which conducts polls all over the country, countermanded the election on the ground of suspected corrupt practices when it was found that parties were resorting to cash inducements to woo the voters.

The party symbol for the AIADMK from the time of its founder, M G Ramachandran, was 'Two Leaves', a symbol that has resonated with the voters since 1972 when the party was formed. With two factions in the party now, one led by Panneerselvam and the other by Sasikala's group, there was a tussle over the ownership of the symbol. The Election Commission, in an interim order, decided to freeze the 'Two Leaves' symbol, allocating different symbols to the two different groups. It is alleged that Dhinakaran tried to bribe the Election Commission, through a middleman, to rule in his favour on the symbol issue. The Delhi police now say that it has an unassailable case against Dhinakaran and has, therefore, arrested him.

Media and political commentators, who have been tracking the course of these events, strongly allege that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the Centre is fishing in troubled waters in Tamil Nadu. Speculation is that the Supreme Court judgment that resulted in the prison term for Sasikala was timed so that she could not take over the government in Tamil Nadu, and that the revolt by Panneerselvam was orchestrated from the wings by the BJP. It is clear that the arrest of Dhinakaran has the blessings of New Delhi, for the link between the so-called broker who was in touch with Dhinakaran and the Election Commission is far from clear. It is not clear why Dhinakaran would promise to pay someone not directly in the Election Commission for a task that could be done only by the Election Commission. However, the arrest has taken place and Dhinakaran is in judicial custody.

Following this arrest, there is a move for the Panneerselvam and Palaniswami factions to come together. However, the demand by the Panneerselvam faction that Sasikala and Dhinakaran should resign has not been accepted by the other side.

Behind these machinations appears to be the concern of the ruling BJP, not just about the governance of the state, but also about the support of the state for major reforms that are being unrolled, including the Goods and Services Tax. Of immediate urgency is the election to the post of President of India, when the current incumbent demits office in July 2017. The election is a joint effort of the MPs and MLAs through a system of proportional representation. After its election victories in the states of Uttar Pradesh (UP), Goa, Manipur and Uttarakhand, the BJP is in a stronger position than before. However, it is still short of some votes to ensure that a candidate of its choice secures the post of President. It needs alliance parties to swing the vote in its favour. A total of 38 members of the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and 17 members of the Rajya Sabha (Council of States), belonging to the AIADMK, are crucial for the BJP's calculations to succeed. Having two factions of the AIADMK is like a sword hanging over the head of the BJP presidential candidate, and it is being argued that the isolation of Sasikala and Dhinakaran, and the attempt to bring the two factions together, are strategies with the narrow expectation of having a single bloc of votes that would support the BJP's presidential candidate.

The matter has assumed urgency after the UP state polls and the recent municipal elections in Delhi, as the entire opposition is concerned about the new inroads that the BJP is making into the national polity. Soon after the results of the Delhi municipal elections were announced, Sonia Gandhi, President of the Indian National Congress party, met all the opposition parties in an attempt to forge an alliance for a combined opposition candidate for the President. This would cause some concern for the ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). While this would take some doing, as different parties have different agendas, the BJP would be watching these developments very closely.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not disclosed the name of the candidate for the President from his side, and it is possible that he would do so only after he is sure about the views of all his NDA allies.

What then of the AIADMK? It is possible to argue that, once the Presidential election is done, and the support of the AIADMK secured, the BJP's interest in Tamil Nadu will wane, as Prime Minister Modi and his party focus on the larger task of securing their future at the 2019 national polls.

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