The kidnapping of an actor puts the spotlight on India's bitter regional politics

Ram Kumar, Arun Kumar
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For over a month the kidnapping of veteran actor Rajkumar and three of his associates by the smuggler and bandit Veerappan has been a major issue in the Indian newspapers. The governments of two southern Indian states—Karnataka and Tamil Nadu—have been engaged in negotiations with Veerappan, who wants a substantial sum of money and has also made a series of political demands.

The kidnapping has highlighted the increasingly regional and parochial character of Indian politics in which the politicians and parties in each of the states are pressing the interest of "their" language group at the expense of their rivals. Rajkumar, a Kannada actor who has made more than 200 films and is idolised by millions, is widely known for his anti-Tamil sentiments. Veerappan is attempting to posture as a defender of Tamils and has made a series of pro-Tamil demands, including the release of detained members of armed Tamil separatist groups.

In the highly-charged atmosphere of regional politics whipped up by regional parties, the kidnapping of Rajkumar on July 30 was portrayed in the local media as "a war between Tamils and Kannadigas," setting off communal riots in Karnataka against Tamils living in the state. The actor's fans attacked the Tamil press and properties in the capital of Bangalore and other areas of the state. Educational institutions have been shut down and the film industry in Karnataka has been at a standstill for over a month.

Negotiations with Veerappan, through the intermediary of journalist Gopal, appeared to be at the point of achieving the release of the hostages when the Indian Supreme Court intervened on September 3 to block the release of detainees proposed by the state governments. The strident tone of the court's decision to indefinitely stay the release of 30 of Veerappan's associates by the Karnataka state government makes it clear that sections of the ruling class are clearly concerned at the precedent that would be set elsewhere in India.

Justice S.P. Bharucha who headed the three-judge bench said: "The present state government should quit to make room for another which can tackle him [Veerappan]. What have you done for the last eight years? What protection have you given to the people? This was an incident waiting to happen. Now you say that you can't do anything. If you can't, then quit and make way for somebody else who can do it."

The judge said it was "negligence" on the part of the Karnataka state government not to take steps to arrest the forest dacoit [bandit] and his colleagues, who have been accused of committing "heinous" offences. To release Veerappan's associates, he said, would be "compounding negligence upon negligence upon negligence" and "we will not be a party to this." The ruling also blocks the Tamil Nadu state government from releasing five Tamil separatists held in the state's jails—another of Veerappan's demands.

The Supreme Court order was made in response to a petition filed by a retired police deputy superintendent, Abdul Karim, challenging the decision made by a Mysore special judge on August 19 agreeing to an application by the Karnataka state government. The detainees had been accused of killing former police superintendent Hari Krishna and sub-inspector Shaheel Ahmed (the son of the petitioner) in August 1992 and faced charges under India's notorious TADA (Terrorism and Disruptive Prevention Act) that provided for lengthy detentions without trial and closed court hearings.

The *Hindu* newspaper drove home the message in an editorial on September 4 criticising the state governments for attempting "to subvert the rule of law and abandon the principles of justice while giving in to blackmail. Such questions would not have even been asked had the Tamil Nadu and Karnataka governments displayed a firm resolve to nab Veerappan. The real tragedy is how a conspicuous lack of political and administrative will has resulted in the inability to apprehend a brigand and his small and relatively ill-equipped gang for some many years."

The issue, however, is clearly an explosive one. Karnataka Solicitor General Harish Salve explained that the government's approach to the Rajkumar kidnapping was not a question of one person's liberty but involved the more sensitive issue of the actor's connection to the Kannada linguistic community. He warned that there might be civil unrest if the actor was harmed in any way. In Tamil Nadu, the state's politicians have also warned that "the failure to secure the release of actor Rajkumar would endanger the lives of Tamils living in the state of Karnataka".

Politicians from both states have created the parochial

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tensions that are now being exploited by Veerappan for his own purposes. He is an ivory and sandalwood smuggler who operates in forests on the border of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. By one estimate he has handled ivory worth 120 million rupees and sandalwood to the value of one billion rupees. Although his gang has been involved in kidnappings before, the latest is the first occasion in which political demands have been so vigorously advanced.

Veerappan has reportedly linked up with two armed groups—the Tamil National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Tamil National Retrieval Force (TNRF)—that are based on a mixture of Maoism and Tamil separatism. The TNLA calls for the "liberation" of Tamil Nadu from the Indian Union and has supported the demands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam for a separate state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. One of Veerappan's demands is for the release of five TNLA members held in Tamil Nadu prisons.

He has also called for the unconditional release of 121 people arrested by the Karnataka police under the TADA legislation, 51 of whom have been held in the Mysore central prison for more than seven years without trial. Other demands include the payment of compensation to the families of people killed and raped by police from the Special Task Force (STF) sent to capture him in the early 1990s. So notorious were these police operations that the National Human Rights Commission is investigating the police officers allegedly involved in the atrocities.

Veerappan has also called for a wage raise for Manjolai tea estate workers and for the Karnataka state government to release more water from the Cauvery River for Tamil rice farmers. The Cauvery dispute is a long-running and bitter conflict between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the use of the river that flows through both states. He has also demanded compensation be paid to the Tamil victims of communal riots sparked by the Cauvery issue in Karnataka in 1991.

In comments reported in the media, Veerappan stated: "I am fighting for six crores [60 million] people in Tamil Nadu". He is apparently styling himself as the Che Guevara of Tamil Nadu. He has called for the teaching of Tamil to be made compulsory in schools in Tamil Nadu up to grade 10, for Tamil to be given second language status in Karnataka and for the erection of a statue of the ancient Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar in Karnataka's capital Bangalore.

Veerappan's exact motives have been the subject of much speculation. In the past he has used the kidnappings to demand money and an amnesty for himself and his followers. It is conceivable that he now has in mind the transition from dacoit to popular politician made by the so-called Bandit Queen, Poolan Devi, who is currently a member of parliament in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

His promotion of Tamil chauvinism with the assistance and support of Maoist groupings has heightened tensions in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu where the local parties have fostered parochial linguistic divisions for years. Veerappan's ability to evade capture by police special forces for more than a decade is viewed in Karnataka as the result of covert support from Tamil Nadu politicians.

A former Karnataka STF police commander commented in the *Frontline* magazine: "Tamil Nadu politicians, especially those belonging to parties that hold sway over the Vanniya community, have given Veerappan a sort of cult status and are using his community credentials to make political gains."

At present the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu governments are collaborating in their negotiations with Veerappan and had acceded to most of his immediate demands. But the Supreme Court decision has cut across their plans and deepened the political crisis. Late last week the chief ministers of both states held a joint press conference announcing their intention to approach Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee after he returns from his visit to the US to try to break the deadlock.

The entire episode underscores the trajectory of Indian politics as a whole. Incapable of satisfying the needs and aspirations of the Indian masses, parties and politicians are increasingly resorting to the promotion of reactionary communal, regional and caste issues to divide the working class. In the case of the Cauvery water dispute, for instance, the major parties, including the state branches of the Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist), lined up on either side of the Karnataka-Tamil Nadu divide.

The longer the Rajkumar kidnapping is unresolved, the more Kannada-Tamil tensions will be stirred up. The *Hindustan Times* reported on Saturday: "Kannada organisations of all hues have chalked out programs to pressure the two governments to do 'something fast'." In Tamil Nadu, no doubt their Tamil counterparts are making similar demands.

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