

Indian elections: Rival right-wing parties in Tamil Nadu make populist promises

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The southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which has 50 million electors and 39 seats in the popularly-elected lower house of India's parliament, went to the polls on April 24 in the sixth phase of India's nine-phase national election. The votes from Tamil Nadu, as those from across the country, are to be tallied on May 16.

All the parties and fronts that contested the elections in Tamil Nadu—the ruling Congress Party, the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the twin Stalinist Communist Parties, and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) and its regional allies—sought to win votes with rosy promises of good-paying jobs and increased social support.

In reality, all are committed to continuing and accelerating the socially incendiary economic “reforms” demanded by foreign investors and Indian big business. All, without exception, also make appeals to Tamil nationalism with the aim of diverting along reactionary lines the growing social frustration and anger that has been produced by mounting social inequality and economic insecurity. While the elite boasts about India's “rise”, the vast majority of the population must struggle to survive on less than \$2 per day and do so amidst double-digit price rises and mounting unemployment.

For the past three decades, two rival regional parties, the AIADMK—which currently forms the state government—and the DMK, have dominated electoral politics in the state.

They are again expected to capture the lion's share of Tamil Nadu's 39 seats.

Both have spent the election campaign boasting about their efforts to make Tamil Nadu attractive to foreign investors through generous offers of land, water, electricity and tax concessions and the setting up of Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

Over the past two decades, leading global auto companies, including Ford, BMW, Hyundai, Daimler, Renault-Nissan, and Mitsubishi have set up shop in Chennai and the nearby Oragadam and Sriperumbudur SEZs.

They have been attracted not only by the state government's lucrative concessions, but also by its readiness, under DMK and AIADMK Chief Ministers alike, to ruthlessly suppress working class opposition.

In 2003, during her previous term as the head of the state

government, AIADMK leader Jayalalithaa used mass arrests and mass sackings to break a strike of over 200,000 state government employees. The current AIADMK government deployed state security forces earlier this year to break up protests by workers at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) and villagers in Neyveli against the killing of a worker by the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) and last year police ruthlessly suppressed protests against the opening of a nuclear power plant in Kudankulam.

For its part, the DMK, when in power in 2010, used state police forces against striking BYD and Foxconn workers.

On the national level, the DMK and AIADMK have played an important role in the imposition of the Indian bourgeoisie's neo-liberal agenda of privatization, deregulation, price-subsidy and social-spending cuts, and tax cuts for big business. The AIADMK helped bring the BJP to power in 1998. When the AIADMK quit the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition in 1999, the DMK took its place in the NDA. With the approach of the 2004 national election, the two parties again switched sides, the AIADMK resuming its alliance with the BJP and the DMK aligning with the Congress Party.

From 2004 to 2013, the DMK was an important partner in a Congress-led national government that pressed forward with neo-liberal policies and forged an Indo-US strategic partnership. In 2013, the DMK withdrew its support for the UPA ostensibly because it wasn't doing enough to support the Sri Lankan Tamils. However, relations between the DMK and Congress had already long soured. This was because the DMK felt that the Congress leadership wasn't doing enough to protect it from the fallout from the 2-G Telecom scandal, which involved the selling off of telecom spectrum at fire-sale prices.

Both the AIADMK and DMK have signaled that they would be willing to entertain offers to rejoin the NDA should the BJP emerge from the elections with a strong plurality of seats. Jayalalithaa has spoken frequently about her friendship with, and admiration for, BJP prime ministerial candidate and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. The AIADMK has frequently joined the BJP in its communal campaigns, including supporting the 1992 agitation that culminated in the razing of *Babri Masjid* in Ayodhya. More recently, the AIADMK has lent support to the Hindu communalist campaign

against the Sethusamudram deep-water channel project, claiming that it will destroy a mythical bridge linking southern India and neighboring Sri Lanka mentioned in the ancient Hindu epic the *Ramayana*.

The two Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—have long subordinated the working class to the big business DMK and AIADMK. For years, they have bounced between allying with these rival parties of the Tamil bourgeoisie and alternately hailed them as “secular” parties that can be pressured into pursuing “pro-people” policies.

The Stalinists formed an electoral alliance with the AIADMK in the 2009 national elections and helped it return to power at the state level in 2011. They fully expected to forge a similar bloc with Jayalalithaa and her AIADMK for the current election. Toward that end, they repeatedly gave the AIADMK pride of place in public discussion of their prospective anti-BJP, anti-Congress “secular” and “democratic” platform and even suggested that Jayalalithaa could emerge as the “Third Front’s” candidate for prime minister. (See: “Indian Stalinists promote fraud of “secular,” “pro-people” Third Front”).

In early February, the CPM and CPI duly announced that they would be standing in the elections as partners of the AIADMK. But only weeks later, Jayalalithaa’s AIADMK repudiated the alliance, announcing that it would contest all 39 seats in Tamil Nadu, as well as the seat in the predominantly Tamil-speaking Union Territory of Puducherry (Pondicherry).

Jayalalithaa clearly decided that she didn’t need the Stalinists—having already basked in their endorsement of her “progressive” policies—and that she could maximize the AIADMK’s bargaining power in the post-election, government-formation horse-trading by contesting all 40 seats. No doubt, she also calculated that if ever there were any prospect of a Third Front government, the Stalinists would welcome her back with open arms.

For close to two weeks after Jayalalithaa broke her alliance with them, the Stalinists said next to nothing. No doubt behind the scenes they were maneuvering to see if they could patch something up with her and her AIADMK.

Then in a statement that is an implicit confession of their own political bankruptcy and complicity, the Stalinists were forced to accuse Jayalalithaa of preparing for a possible post-poll linkup with the BJP.

“Both DMK and AIADMK are not reliable,” complained CPM state president G. Ramakrishnan. “They have adopted contradictory stands vis-a-vis the BJP since 2003.”

CPI Tamil Nadu state leader D. Pandian, for his part, lamented Jayalalithaa had squandered the opportunity to become India’s first-ever Tamil prime minister. After addressing an election meeting in support of the CPM candidate in Tutucorin, Pandian told reporters: “In Tamil Nadu, a few parties which were supporting the Tamils’ cause have become anti-Tamil for reasons best known to them. Even the possibility

of becoming prime minister, which fell in the lap of a Tamil, has been neglected due to some strategic mistakes.”

Pandian, it should be added, has enjoyed a close political and personal relationship with the AIADMK chief. He is also notorious for his promotion of reactionary Tamil nationalism, invoking it in support of joint campaigns not only with the various regional Tamil bourgeois parties but also with the BJP.

All the parties in the state compete with each other in whipping up Tamil chauvinism over the state’s disputes over water allocation with Karnataka and Kerala and in electorally exploiting popular sympathy for the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Similarly, the entire Tamil political elite has seized on the frequent harassment and killings of Tamil Nadu fishermen by the Sri Lankan Navy to fan Tamil communalism.

Significantly, five smaller Tamil nationalist parties have chosen to align with the Hindu supremacist BJP in the current election. These include Vaiko’s Marumalarchi Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam (MDMK), the caste-ist Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) led by Ramados, and actor Vijay Kant’s Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK).

The BJP has never had a strong presence in Tamil Nadu, but the smaller Tamil regionalist parties are calculating that Modi’s claims to incarnate “change” and “development” will strike a chord among a population squeezed by stagflation.

The Congress Party was forced to contest the elections in Tamil Nadu alone and is generally considered to be an also-ran. So bleak were the party’s prospects both nationally and in Tamil Nadu, Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, far and away the state’s most prominent Congress politician, declined to stand for re-election.



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