

# 41 people crushed to death at Tamil Nadu political rally

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**3 October 2025**

On the evening of September 27, at least 41 people—including ten children and 16 women—were killed and more than 100 injured in a horrific human-crushing, asphyxiation event at a political rally in Karur, a city in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The rally was organized by the Tamizhaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK, or Tamil Victory Association), a party founded last year by the Tamil film star Vijay, who enjoys a large popular following, especially among youth.

The Karur rally was part of the actor's bid to become Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister when state assembly elections are held next April.

The 51-year-old Vijay, often called “Thalapathy” (Commander) by his fans, is one of the most popular actors in Tamil-language cinema. Over nearly three decades, he has acted in more than 65 films, usually portraying a heroic figure who defends the helpless poor and defeats corrupt elites. His movies consistently rank among the highest grossing in South India.

The site chosen for the September 27 rally, Velusampuram, is a densely built-up market area on the Karur–Erode road. With barely 1,000 square feet of usable space, it was wholly inadequate for the more than 25,000 people who converged on it for Vijay's September 27 rally.

Anxious to see their idol, people started congregating as of 10 am, but Vijay and his convoy only arrived in the evening, more than seven hours late. When the film-star-turned-politician ascended on his tour bus to address the crowd, it was well past 7.00 pm.

By then, it was already apparent that a medical emergency was unfolding.

Many in the large, densely packed crowd had been exposed for hours to hot weather conditions without adequate food, water and basic amenities. By 6pm an ambulance rescue mission had been launched to assist rally attendees who had collapsed from exhaustion and dehydration.

There are multiple, conflicting narratives about what precisely triggered the acute stage of the crowd-crush, but there is no question that this was a disaster that could have been foretold and prevented.

Tamil Nadu's DMK government has appointed a one-woman commission to investigate the incident. The TVK, for its part, is calling for an investigation to be conducted by the BJP central government-controlled Central Bureau of Investigation or CBI.

Some news sources claim that the breaking of a tree branch that

had been scaled by the actor's supporters triggered rally participants to surge, further aggravating the situation.

In video footage, the crowd can be seen swaying forwards and backwards, with many holding their smartphones in the air with both hands to record Vijay as he spoke from atop his tour bus.

Five minutes into Vijay's speech, cries can be heard as two ambulances strive to cut through the dense crowd. As the ambulances slowly proceed, police mount a lathi (baton) charge to clear them a path.

Watching this unfold, Vijay nonchalantly noted the ambulance's presence but otherwise continued his speech unfazed. Here and there, desperate cries can be heard from the suffocating crowd, with rally participants pleading with the actor to notice those collapsing around them and begging for water.

He responds by casually hurling a few water bottles into the mass, a gesture that only added to the commotion. Even in the midst of this mounting chaos, Vijay's sole concern was to deliver his speech. After a perfunctory adjustment of his microphone, he resumed speaking as if nothing had happened.

Barely a minute later, cries for help again reverberate. Ambulance sirens wail and more suffocating people can be seen to collapse. Yet the actor is indifferent and oblivious to the unfolding tragedy.

Finally, he exhorts the jam-packed crowd to make way for the ambulances, but this is impossible because the venue is packed well beyond capacity. Still Vijay persists with his speech, rather than issuing instructions to the crowd to carry out an orderly evacuation.

His speech concluded, Vijay fled the scene for Trichy airport, from whence by private jet he flew to Chennai, utterly indifferent to the dozens who had died or been critically injured during a crowd-crushing incident that unfolded before his eyes over the course of the better part of an hour.

Tamil Nadu's DMK government has accused the rally organisers of flagrant violations of safety guidelines. Police have charged several senior TVK leaders, including Vijay's close aide N. Anand and the party's joint general secretary, Nirmal Sekar, with culpable homicide not amounting to murder, along with violations of public safety laws. On September 30, similar charges were laid against Karur West District TVK secretary Mathiyazhagan.

The TVK, meanwhile, has tried to shift blame onto the DMK. Initially, they complained that there were not enough police

personnel to control the crowd. Party supporters have subsequently accused a local DMK politician, Senthil Balaji, whom Vijay has attacked for corruption, of triggering the crowd crush by instructing police to attack the crowd when it sang along with Vijay to a song satirizing Balaji's corruption.

Completely ignored in these claims are the limited size of the venue, the failure to provide relief to people forced to wait hours under trying conditions for Vijay's arrival, and the decision to continue the rally amid the unfolding tragedy.

As for the police, indications are that they acted as they typically do in India with wanton brutality, even when, as here, it was a question of trying to clear a path for ambulances through a peaceful rally.

After a two-day culpable silence, Vijay issued a nearly five-minute-long video, expressing his condolences and appealing to the DMK Chief Minister, M.K. Stalin, to arrest him directly, and not hold his party's office bearers responsible. In this video he asks, "Why did this happen only in Karur?" referring to his previous mass gatherings and suggesting that the September 27 tragedy must have been the outcome of a DMK conspiracy.

According to the police, the TVK had originally sought permission for a smaller venue, claiming only 10,000 attendees were expected. It is common practice across the subcontinent for capitalist politicians to organize mass rallies in limited spaces, so as to give the impression of overflow crowds and to make supporters wait hours until their leaders' arrival amid boisterous applause to highlight the strength and devotion of their popular following.

At Karur and in previous events, Vijay succeeded in attracting large crowds. While his superstardom undoubtedly played a role, the flocking of large numbers of youth, including unemployed graduates, to his rallies reflects Tamil Nadu's deep social crisis—joblessness, soaring prices, and precarious contract labour.

For nearly six decades, control over Tamil Nadu's state government has alternated between the DMK (Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam) and its offshoot the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam). Both are steeped in Tamil (Dravidian) ethno-nationalism; have for decades pursued pro-investor policies on behalf of Indian and foreign capital; uphold the Indian bourgeoisie's "global strategic partnership" with US imperialism; and have at various times allied with the Congress Party, till recently the ruling class's preferred party of national government, or the Hindu supremacist BJP of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Tamil Nadu's unemployed youth and contract workers, many from indebted agrarian families, have time and again seen their hopes and aspirations dashed by the traditional ruling parties, whose names are increasingly popularly viewed as synonymous with corruption.

If many of them have turned to the film-star cum demagogue Vijay, it is out of desperation, hoping his "heroism" on screen fighting for the poor against corrupt elites can be transformed into real life.

Those principally responsible for this political confusion and desperation are the Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and

their allied trade unions, who posture as left, while systematically suppressing the class struggle.

Tamil Nadu has in recent decades experienced an explosive growth in the size and social power of the working class, propelling it into the front ranks across India for the number of strikes and social protests. Yet in Tamil Nadu, as across India, the Stalinists have confined workers to isolated collective bargaining struggles, invariably urging them to make futile appeals to the courts and government in the face of corporate intransigence, while politically subordinating it to the capitalist parties.

At the national level, this has meant time and again allying with the big business Congress Party in the name of fighting the far-right BJP. In Tamil Nadu, the CPM and CPI are close allies of the DMK government, even as it breaks strikes, and presses forward with privatization. This includes boosting the DMK's claims to be a party of "social justice," based on its roots in the Non-Brahmin movement, which in the first decades of the 20th century challenged a local elite, while collaborating with the British colonial authorities in opposing the Indian National Congress and subsequently developed the politically retrograde concept of Dravidian nationalism.

TVK presents itself as an anti-corruption, "pro-Tamil" alternative. Vijay denounces the DMK for its failure to fulfil its phony promises of increased social support and alleviating poverty and economic insecurity through capitalist development, while also railing against the BJP and AIADMK, which he supported during the 2011 assembly election.

Like the DMK and AIDMK, Vijay tries to give himself "progressive" colours by invoking the non-Non-Brahmin/Dravidian tradition and its initial and premier exponent, Periyar, and like them he promotes Tamil chauvinism and pursues right-wing capitalist politics. This includes demanding exclusivist Tamil job quotas at the expense of north Indian and other migrants; and championing Tamil nationalist claims for Indian/Tamil Nadu sovereignty over the Sri Lankan held Kachchativu Island and for the lion's share of the waters of the Kaveri (Cauvery) River.

The Karur tragedy has underscored the utterly fraudulent character of the TVK and its efforts, using the make-believe hero Vijay, to present itself as an advocate for Tamil Nadu's workers and toilers.



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