

# ISAS Brief

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## Tamil Nadu Polls:

### Populism and Political Reverberations

*Nearer the polling day, 16 May 2016, in the southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu, the outcome which looked a foregone conclusion at the start of the campaign period, looks far less certain on account of several factors in the ruling and opposition circles.*

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The Tamil Nadu Assembly elections in 2016 are a multi-cornered contest. The main contestants are the All India Anna DMK (AIADMK) which is the ruling party in the State under the Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa (or *Amma* as she is called) and the Darvida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) which is the main opposition party under the leadership of Karunanidhi (*Kalaignar*). Ever since 1989, the DMK and the AIADMK have been alternating every election in ruling the State. There is very little of ideology left in the original Dravidian agenda that brought these forces to the fore some fifty years ago. Both parties have focused on populist programmes and freebies during their respective regimes, and in the run-up to the elections, are continuing to promise ever more free gifts.

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Arrayed against them in the forthcoming polls are the national Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and an alliance of regional parties led by the MDMK under Vijayakanth.

In the Parliamentary elections in 2014, the AIADMK swept the polls, and 37 out of 39 Parliamentary seats were won by the party's candidates. The AIADMK would like to repeat this performance.

Polling is scheduled for 16 May 2016, and the results are due on 19 May. On the eve of these elections, there is some change in perceptions that is apparent. Early in the campaign, there were comments that a victory for the AIADMK was assured, and that *Amma* would remain as Chief Minister. It was reasoned that she had done a lot in terms of free distribution of goods to the poor, an assured availability of rice and essential commodities through the public distribution system, and that she had kept law and order and the land mafia under control. There was no anti-incumbency wave, it was said, and the main opposition, the DMK, was seen as being ridden with inner-party and family factions. The other competitors, whether the MDMK, DMKD or the PMK, were at best regarded as marginal players and, therefore, said to be unlikely to make any significant impact on the voting patterns.

Now, closer to the polling date, perceptions are slightly different, and for the first time there is a talk of the DMK-Congress combine posing a strong challenge to the AIADMK, and there is even some talk of a hung Assembly as the poll result. There are several reasons for this change.

First, there are murmurs about the selection of candidates in the AIADMK circles. This has been a non-transparent process, and after the initial list was released there have been many changes made by the high command. People who were dismissed from favour have been given the party ticket. Also heard are complaints that the candidates are new to their constituencies, and do not have adequate empathy with the voters. The changes in candidate-nominations appear to reflect an inner-party shift of power from Ms Jayalalithaa to her confidante and aide, Sasikala – a development that veterans in the party are wary about.

Secondly, the intense heat of the summer has turned audiences away. This has affected all campaigners. Rumours are that crowds are being paid cash of Rs 350, a packet of biriyani, and a cap to wear in the sun. *Amma's* speeches are lacking the punch that was there during the Parliament elections in 2014. During 2014, the campaign was against corruption in the DMK administration, the scams that the DMK ministers in the Central Government had been

involved in, and the inept management of the economy by the United Progressive Alliance-2 Government at the Centre. These issues have faded away from the public memory. The corruption cases are being investigated, and in some instances, trials are under way. There have been no fresh allegations against the DMK, which has been out of power at the Centre as well as the State. *Amma's* speeches rely more on what she has done for the State, and the freebies that she would continue to shower — now there is even a promise of subsidised motor scooters for girl students. In the past, Jayalalithaa had implemented a programme of free bicycles for girl students in rural areas, and the present promise is to upgrade these into mopeds.

Third, the DMK leader Stalin's campaign is more low- key and more people-oriented than before, and there is a gradual increase in his appeal to the voters. There is also popular disenchantment caused by the corruption complaints against the present government, and by the feeling that the relief measures after the Chennai floods of December 2015 were not handled properly.

The other parties are faring poorly, but may pick up 3000-5000 votes in a few constituencies, which may tilt the balance in those constituencies.

Cash handouts might come into play before the polling. In the past, all parties have accused each other of buying votes through cash handouts. Very innovative methods are used. If individuals have consumption borrowings/credit card dues or even loans against jewellery, these are quietly settled by the parties, and the securities returned to them. In some places, gift vouchers for the purchase of consumer durables or even monthly groceries are handed out. More directly, currency notes are slipped under the door along with the daily newspaper. For the voter, some of these goodies are anonymous, and he has no compunction receiving them. The party makes it known somehow — but the voter does not know the actual distributor, and happily keeps the money.

These time-tested methods are under strain in Tamil Nadu this time. The Election Commission and the income-tax authorities have been coming down heavily on the movement of unaccounted cash, and significant cash seizures have been made. In one case, a horde of cash intended for distribution was found and seized. The flow of cash has been interrupted, and it is to be seen whether the flow would restart before the polling day. Cash for votes has become a factor in the Tamil Nadu elections, and may decide the final polling figures.

Opinion polls are divided. Some polls indicate a close contest, with the possibility of a hung Assembly. Others give the AIADMK a clear majority, even though the winning margins may be very small in each seat.

At the national level, the emergence of the DMK-Congress combine may not be welcome for the BJP government, which would prefer the continuance of an AIADMK government, with all its limitations.

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