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## The AIADMK: A Party at the Crossroads

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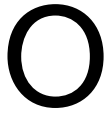
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The AIADMK's 'interim' general secretary V.K. Sasikala, former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam, and Chief Minister, Edappadi K. Palaniswami at a meeting at the party headquarters in Chennai. File photo: B. Jothi Ramalingam

[The Hindu](#)

*The demise of Chief Minister Jayalalithaa has placed Tamil Nadu's ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in a leadership crisis. Adding to the woes of the party - known for its dependence on the popularity of a single person, be it the founder, the late Chief Minister, M.G. Ramachandran or his successor, Jayalalithaa - is an internal split. As the two factions headed by a former Chief Minister, O. Panneerselvam, and an 'interim' general secretary, currently in prison serving a four-year sentence for corruption, carry out a no-holds-barred fight, Frontline's Associate Editor, **R.K. Radhakrishnan**, writes on the machinations within the ruling party.*



On February 18, 2017, when Chief Minister Edappadi Palaniswami won the vote of confidence in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly with a convincing margin, 122-11 [in a 234-member-strong Assembly], it marked the end of one more episode of 'Tamil Nadu in Crisis,' a problem brought about by a host of factors after the death of Chief Minister Jayalalithaa on December 5, 2016.

On the night of December 5, O. Panneerselvam, Jayalalithaa's chosen loyalist, who was made Chief Minister on two different occasions on her directions, was sworn in Chief Minister again. All the other Ministers of the Jayalalithaa Cabinet were sworn in too. On December 29, the AIADMK general council unanimously elected Jayalalithaa's close aide V.K. Sasikala, as its 'interim' general secretary.

Soon after Sasikala's elevation as 'interim' general secretary, a campaign began within the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) to make her the Chief Minister. A Minister in the Panneerselvam Cabinet, R.B. Udayakumar was the first to place the demand, because he said that that is how the AIADMK had functioned till then – with the head of the party also heading the government – and that this arrangement was in the best interests of the party and the State.

The Lok Sabha Deputy Speaker, M. Thambidurai, joined in, and added that it was best for the party not to have two power centres. Hence, the AIADMK general secretary should take charge of the government as well. Other Minister and leaders joined in too. It appeared that all the party seniors wanted the same thing: Unseat Panneerselvam, and give that chair to Sasikala.

They were all aware of that the Supreme Court was seized of the appeal in the Disproportionate Assets case (DA case) against Jayalalithaa (who was the first accused), Sasikala (the second accused) and others, and that the judgment had been reserved in the case. It could be delivered anytime soon.

Nonetheless, the campaign to make Sasikala Chief Minister went on within the party, even as Panneerselvam was steadily growing in popularity with the people of Tamil Nadu. Panneerselvam's handling of the events after the death of Jayalalithaa, including the selection of her final resting place, the fact that there was no violence in the State following her death, his on-hands approach during the December 13, 2016, Cyclone Vardah, his friendly approach towards the Opposition, his success in getting drinking water from Andhra Pradesh for Chennai, and his general affable behaviour, endeared him to the people. The only blemish in his two-month regime was the handling of the Jallikattu agitation in January. There too, he redeemed himself by first bringing in an Ordinance to allow holding of Jallikattu, and later enacted a law, by convening an urgent session of the State Legislative Assembly.

The 'Make Sasikala Chief Minister' campaign was muted during the Jallikattu agitation in January, when students and youth trooped into the streets of the State in massive numbers, seeking lifting of the ban on what they claimed was a "traditional sport" and was "part of the culture" of Tamil Nadu.

### **Sasikala elected leader**

But as soon as the agitation was brought to a violent close on January 23 across the State, the voices wanting Sasikala as Chief Minister began growing shriller. On February 5, Sasikala, was elected leader of the AIADMK Legislature party, paving the way for her to be made Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. However, the Governor, Ch. Vidyasagar Rao, who was holding additional charge of the State, seemed to have reservations about swearing in her as Chief Minister. This was because of the pending DA case in the Supreme Court. In fact, on February 6, responding to a polite query from the consul for the State of Karnataka (which had appealed the Karnataka High Court verdict acquitting Jayalalithaa and Sasikala in the DA case), the Supreme Court bench which heard the case,

said that the judgment in the DA case would be delivered in a week. This gave the Governor some space to manoeuvre, and not announce a decision.

Even as the Governor continued to stay away from Chennai, on February 7, Panneerselvam, broke ranks with Sasikala, and went his own way. After a 40-minute prayer at the Jayalalithaa Memorial on the Marina, in full glare of prime-time television, he said that he was forced to resign as Chief Minister, and that he was speaking up because he wanted to preserve the legacy of Jayalalithaa. As accusations flew thick and fast between the Sasikala camp and the Panneerselvam camp, AIADMK seniors were forced to take a stand.

The AIADMK's three-time Rajya Sabha MP, V. Maithreyan, was among the first to offer support to Panneerselvam. In fact, he visited the Chief Minister at his official residence, 'Thenpennai', the same night, and said that he was willing to stick it out with him. Panneerselvam managed to attract one of his Cabinet colleagues, K. Pandiarajan, who was the School Education Minister. No other Minister joined him. As many as 11 MPs, and about 10 MLAs broke ranks and offered support to Panneerselvam.

The Sasikala faction, quick on the uptake, managed to get in touch with MLAs the same night. Most of them agreed with the view that Sasikala was the legitimate heir of the AIADMK after Jayalalithaa – while the people of Tamil Nadu, many private, scientific polls showed, were with Panneerselvam. Sasikala was seen by the people as usurper, and someone who didn't protect Jayalalithaa. Going by the sentiment expressed by the rival AIADMK faction and sections of people across the State, Sasikala appears to be viewed with suspicion given the secrecy surrounding the developments that preceded Jayalalithaa's demise.

### **Multiple dramas**

Tamil Nadu was witness to multiple dramas as the days unfolded. One involved MLAs being taken to a place for safekeeping so that Panneerselvam would not be able to access them; the other involved trying to force the Governor's hand. As many 124 MLAs were aligned with Sasikala. They were all sequestered in beach resort in the outskirts of Chennai, which turned out to be their home for the next 10 days.

Two days after Panneerselvam made his displeasure clear over the direction in which the AIADMK was headed, the Governor reached Chennai. He held consultations with both factions of the AIADMK headed by Panneerselvam and Sasikala, and also met the Leader of the Opposition in the Tamil Nadu Assembly, M.K. Stalin. Sasikala, again staked claim to form the Government. The Governor remained non-committal.

The Supreme Court verdict in the DA case was supposed to tip the scales in favour of Panneerselvam. After all, if Sasikala is convicted, she loses control over the party: at least that was the thinking. In any case, she would be in a Bengaluru jail, and it is almost impossible to run a party from jail, unless the party loses its identity without that particular leader. This was true in the case of Jayalalithaa but not so with Sasikala: she was elected general secretary barely a month and a half before the conviction.

On February 14, the Supreme Court overturned the Karnataka High Court order acquitting Jayalalithaa and Sasikala, and two others, effectively restoring the orders of the lower court, which convicted them to simple imprisonment for four years. Jayalalithaa had to pay a fine of Rs.100 crore, and Sasikala, Rs.10 crore. Sasikala was asked to surrender in a court in Karnataka so that she could serve her four-year jail term.

The same day, under the supervision of Sasikala, the AIADMK Legislature party met at the beach resort outside Chennai city, in which most of the 124 MLAs were 'safeguarded', and elected former Minister Edappadi

Palaniswami, as head of the legislature party. Palaniswami, though No.2 in the Jayalalithaa government, was junior to many others in the party, such as K.A. Sengottaiyan and Dindigul Srinivasan.

The calculation by the Sasikala camp was two-fold: By merely going by the order in which Jayalalithaa had allotted the seniority among Ministers, they were remaining true to her memory. Second, Palaniswami is a Gounder, a community from which there has been no Chief Minister. The AIADMK draws considerable strength from this community, and in the last elections, nearly swept the Gounder-dominated western belt of Tamil Nadu. All 124 MLAs were present, and their signatures were taken and subsequently handed over to the Governor.

The unseen hand in all this clock-work like functioning of the AIADMK was Sasikala's nephew, T.T.V. Dhinakaran. Sasikala decided that it was time that he takes centre stage as she was leaving for prison. Unmindful of the fact that Jayalalithaa had thrown him and 11 other Sasikala's relatives out of the party in 2011, Sasikala inducted him and another relative, Dr. Venkatesh into the party. An announcement to this effect was made in the party organ, *Dr. Namadhu MGR* [sic], on February 15. A few hours before she was to leave for Bengaluru to serve her jail term, she elevated T.T.V. Dhinakaran as deputy general secretary, effectively leaving him in charge of the party.

### **Palaniswami stakes claim**

At 7-30 pm on February 14, Edappadi Palaniswami staked claim to form the government at Raj Bhavan. He handed over a list of 124 MLAs, with all their signatures affixed, to Governor Vidyasagar Rao, and left. About half an hour later, it was the turn of Panneerselvam, to meet the Governor to press for his claim. He too handed over a list of 124 MLAs; but the list had signatures of only less than 10 MLAs.

The Governor enquired with him about the discrepancy, as is the formality in such occasions. He wanted the signatures of all the members that Panneerselvam claimed were with him. "How can they sign when they are being held captive at Koovathur [the resort where the AIADMK MLAs were camped]," he asked the Governor.

The Governor was aware of the situation on the ground. He now had a genuine conflict in his hands. On one side, he had a paper which had all the signatures required for a majority, and the other side, which claimed that they had the support but were prevented from obtaining the signatures. Panneerselvam, thus, left with a lot of hope from the Raj Bhavan. He was certain that he would be called in to prove his strength.

What happened from around 8-30 p.m. to 11 a.m. the next day in the Governor's Chennai household is unclear. But at 11 a.m. Governor called Palaniswami to form the government. Until this point, it seemed as if the Governor was taking a stand that appeared to be help Panneerselvam: the delay in the Governor's arrival in Chennai despite the entire country focussing its attention in Chennai, the delay in calling in Sasikala, and later her nominee who was elected by majority of the AIADMK men, Palaniswami, and the undue delay in announcing a decision on the part of the Governor was advantage Panneerselvam.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is very clear that in the anxiety to occupy the high moral ground, Panneerselvam squandered a week. After the initial euphoria over his breaking ranks, the flow into the Panneerselvam camp was only a trickle. It appeared that he was expecting the MLAs and the party-men to come on their own, taking into consideration the people's sentiment, and Panneerselvam, though he was Chief Minister, was not using all the elements available at his disposal to force the issue. This proved detrimental to his camp, as Sasikala moved in, used all the resources at her disposal, and sealed all options for the MLAs.

The odds for Palaniswami seemed insurmountable despite having more than the required number of Members in the Legislative Assembly. His supporters felt that the Governor, Vidyasagar Rao, was delaying the swearing-in process inordinately. But finally, the Governor accepted the reality and asked Palaniswami to prove his majority on the floor of the Assembly. He was given two weeks for this.

### **Early vote**

Palaniswami did not want to take the whole two weeks, and hence the Legislative Assembly Speaker fixed February 18 as the day of the vote. Keeping the MLAs 'safe' was a major cause of worry. Already, a few had left: one MLA went back to his home town and declared that he didn't want to be part of the power struggle, another claimed that he had escaped by dressing up as a tourist in Bermudas, T-shirt, and goggles. Though the police did make extensive searches in the premises, and interviewed MLAs no other MLA wanted to leave.

On February 18, the MLAs were brought to the State Assembly in 27 Toyota Innova cars. Proceedings began at 11 am, and despite vociferous requests from the Panneerselvam camp, and from the main Opposition party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, for a secret ballot, Speaker P. Dhanapal, decided that he will go in for a division. While Panneerselvam appeared to have accepted the Speaker's ruling as inevitable, the DMK men refused to take the decision sitting down. Literally.

Violence is not new in the Tamil Nadu Assembly. But in the first incidence of violence in full view of the eight cameras that record proceedings, DMK men threw down the Speaker's table, and the Assembly Secretary was unseated. Even as the security staff, Watch and Ward, tried to whisk away the Speaker, a few DMK MLAs were seen pulling at his hand in a portion of the video released to the press. In other visuals, two DMK MLAs, Ku.Ka. Selvam and B. Renganathan, were seated in the Speaker's chair. In fact, Renganathan was also seen gesturing as if he was conducting a mock Assembly.

The Speaker adjourned the House twice, and later ordered that the DMK MLAs be evicted. The vote went on after the eviction of the DMK MLAs. The DMK MLAs later trooped to the Governor's residence to complain about the "murder of democracy," sat on an hour's protest on the Marina, and later even met the President to lodge a complaint. The party has also filed a writ in the Madras High Court. On February 27, the court issued notices to the Assembly Secretary, Speaker, Governor's Secretary, the Chief Minister, and the Chief Secretary. The Court wanted to view the recorded Assembly proceedings, and the case was posted to March 10.

### **Post-vote scene**

Palaniswami has concentrated his efforts to deliver on the promises made during the campaign ahead of the May 2016 Assembly elections. The broad directions for governance are given by Dhinakaran, and all Ministers have been following his orders. The new Chief Minister began his tenure by announcing a closure of 500 retail liquor vending outlets, which were located against local people's wishes in their locality, granting 50 per cent subsidy for the purchase of two wheelers for working women (a poll promise), and an enhancement of maternity period allowance.

He also met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 27, to press on him to abandon the Neduvasal hydrocarbon exploration. In fact, the Palaniswami administration has handled the snowballing agitation deftly, so far. It sent the local Minister to the agitation spot. He engaged with the people and announced that no project that the people oppose will go ahead in Tamil Nadu.

The main worry for the Palaniswami administration is the fact that this is the most unpopular government ever in the history of Tamil Nadu. People across the State have showered abuse on their MLAs, questioned them because they have stayed with the Palaniswami (Sasikala) camp, and reports from across the State indicate that most of the 91 MLAs (minus the 31 Ministers), have been received with a lot of ridicule and anger in their constituencies. So much so that most of the MLAs now have police protection. Even their MLA offices in the constituencies have police protection.

Senior Minister O.S. Manian explains that it was only natural that there will be people in any constituency who are against the MLA. "An MLA gets elected with 40 per cent or even lesser votes. Hence, 60 per cent or more people in that area are against him. It is easy to whip up passions if you are the Opposition party," he says. A senior Communist Party of India leader, C. Mahendran, views this from a slightly different prism: "It is very clear why the MLAs have stuck together. As far as I can see, this is about not facing another election soon. In this situation, there is no play for ideals or ideology. It is simply a cold calculation about what benefits accrue while in power."

Representatives of many political parties feel that the present *status quo* has far too many elements of instability to survive. Firstly, the people see the Sasikala faction as corrupt and illegitimate. Second, Sasikala being in prison will not be able to control the party with 'military discipline' – which is the bedrock of Jayalalithaa's success as AIADMK supremo. Third, too much depends on Dhinakaran, who has not run anything of this size for any period of time. Fourth, the Opposition parties, especially the DMK, is upping the ante and is organising a series of agitations across the State. Fifth, and lastly, Panneerselvam, who was chosen by Jayalalithaa twice to run the government in her absence, is seen as the legitimate successor to the post of Chief Minister.

For the first time since its formation just over 44 years ago, the AIADMK is in danger of disintegrating, ironically, triggered by a Supreme Court verdict in a corruption case involving its most beloved leader and four-time Chief Minister Jayalalithaa. Some might argue that the party was on the verge of demise after the passing away of its founder M.G. Ramachandran.

Not quite. Jayalalithaa was already a power centre by the time MGR passed away. When Jayalalithaa passed away, there were no visible, overt power centres, though Sasikala ran the party for over a year. Jayalalithaa also did not leave a second line capable of taking over in the event of anything happening to her. In many ways, the strategy of not believing in a succession, which was central to Jayalalithaa managing to capture the party in the late eighties, might as well end up being the reason for its disintegration.

*An error in the photo caption was corrected on March 6, 2017.*

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