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The AIADMK's Squabbles and the Atrophying of Tamil Nadu's Politics

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Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami and his deputy O. Panneerselvam, who were at daggers drawn till recently, seemed to have buried the hatchet for now in order to keep the Mannargudi family led by V.K. Sasikala away from the AIADMK. This picture shows them holding up swords presented by party members during the birth centenary celebrations of former Chief Minister and party founder MGR in Vellore on September 09, 2017. Photo: C. Venkatachalapathy.

Tamil Nadu's politics today is a startling opposite of what it was nearly a year ago, since the death of Chief Minister Jayalalithaa on December 5, 2016. From a State that stood for its rights on several issues - the late Chief Minister's opposition to the Goods and Services Tax and the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), to cite just two - to one that has meekly fallen in line with the Union government on policy issues which it was staunchly opposed to for decades, Tamil Nadu is a pale shadow of its political past.

If the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) is faction ridden, the opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, in the absence of its President, M. Karunanidhi, is seen as diffident, reluctant as it is to plunge into the bustle of oppositional mobilisation politics. The national parties are still in an elusive search for relevance in a State that has been held by the two regional parties since 1967. R.K. Radhakrishnan Associate Editor, Frontline, writes on the political stasis in Tamil Nadu.

After a long drawn out battle that raged among multiple sides in the All India Anna DravidaMunnetraKazhagam (AIADMK), there are now only two main factions in the party: one led jointly by Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami (EPS) and former Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam (OPS), and the other led by a member of the Mannargudi clan, T.T.V. Dhinakaran. There is a third faction too, but this is barely active. It is led by J. Deepa, the late AIADMK supremo Jayalalithaa's niece.

Ever since Palaniswami and Panneerselvam joined hands on August 21, after much dilly-dallying and multiple meetings with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the stage was set for an all-out war for control of power of the mammoth party, which claims a membership of 1.75 crore. Realising the coming storm, Dhinakaran, who was anointed deputy general secretary of the party on the eve of general secretary Sasikala's incarceration in a jail in Bengaluru for graft on February 15, began expelling those in various levels of leadership who were with the EPS-OPS combine.

Dhinakaran's carrot-and-stick approach created some confusion in the minds of MLAs and some ministers. Ever since the merger, Dhinakaran, who has been trying to control both the party and the government, came to the conclusion that it might not be possible to do both; he might need to limit his ambition to one. Thus, in a meeting to commemorate the party's founder, M.G. Ramachandran, in Melur in Madurai, Dhinakaran, for the first time, gave an inkling of what was in store. His first priority, he declared, was to save the party. The same reiteration was also made in very different and direct words on September 11, when he declared that the AIADMK government needed to be pulled down.

The EPS-OPS combine, which was also running the government, was mired in a controversy over the conduct of medical entrance examinations via the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) route, which was opposed by the late Chief Minister and AIADMK supremo, Jayalalithaa ¹. The AIADMK government had barely recovered from the various administrative challenges, when the Dhinakaran onslaught began. But it was only a matter of time before the combine regrouped and struck back. On August 28, they announced that the general council of the party would be held on September 12. While many questions remain to be answered about the legality of calling for a general council, the fact is that the meeting went ahead. It was not lost on anyone that this general council was convened by the Chief Minister, and Panneerselvam, his baiter until not too long ago. The groups led by OPS and EPS joined hands under the express understanding that Jayalalithaa's friend Sasikala and her entire family, will be kept out of the party, which was a demand laid down by the former.

Drama ahead of meeting

As is always with the party founded by a former actor, the September 12 meeting was preceded by much drama. On the morning of September 11, the Madras High Court dismissed and imposed costs on an MLA who tried to get the general council stayed. This Dhinakaran-Sasikala loyalist, P.Vetrivel, was also pulled up for wasting the court's time, and directed to pay a fine of Rs. one lakh. Undeterred by this he approached a division bench of the same court.

The two-judge bench too declined to grant a stay against holding the general council, but said that any decision of the general council will be subject to judicial scrutiny in the on-going case. Independent of Vetrivel, another Dhinakaran loyalist, the Karnataka secretary of the party, Pugazhendi, approached a city court in Bangalore and got a stay against the conduct of the general council. Working with an efficiency unheard of in any pillar of governance, this court order reached the AIADMK's headquarters at Royapettah in Chennai early morning on the day the general council was scheduled to be held in a marriage hall in the outskirts of Chennai. But since no one wanted to receive the order, it was struck on the walls of the party headquarters.

It was very clear why the general council was called. Sasikala had to be unseated as general secretary. The best way to do this was to give life to the utterly fawning phrase used within Jayalalithaa's ear shot when she was alive: permanent general secretary of the AIADMK. The general council gave her this title – while no such formal position was accorded to the party's founder, M.G.Ramachandran.

As many as 14 resolutions have been adopted at the meeting, and the party's bye-laws were exhaustively amended. Resolution number 8 said, "The appointment of Sasikala as interim general secretary, soon after the shocking death of Puratchi Thalaivi Amma, has been annulled, along with the appointments that Sasikala has made."

"The appointments made by T.T.V. Dhinakaran, whose activities brought disrepute to Jayalalithaa's legacy and to the party, have been annulled," says Resolution 9 [2](#) .

A little later, Paneerselvam released a statement on Twitter. "No one can divide and rule the party cadre & our unity is shown by AIADMK General Council meeting. The party cadre and the functionaries will live upto the expectations of Puratchi thalaivi Amma. Puratchi thalaivar MGR and Puratchi thalaivi Amma had ensured AIADMK rule in Tamil Nadu for 27 years. I promise as a convenor I will discharge duties without any selfish motive," he said. With this battle, the EPS-OPS combine have certainly taken the upper hand in the fight for the party. Dhinakaran, who has already lost the government, will, most certainly, use all his resources to regain control over the party. True, the symbols of party power – the newspaper *Dr.Namadhu MGR*, the cable news television Jaya TV and related channels – are now with Dhinakaran. It is the AIADMK's lack of transparency of ownership of these entities that has clinched the deal for the Dhinakaran backers.

Dinakaran's choices

Now it becomes imperative for Dhinakaran to pull down the government. Each day that the EPS-OPS combine runs the government, Dhinakaran's stock will decline. This is because any person who runs a State is obviously powerful, and can make deals with Dhinakaran's current set of friends, followers and well-wishers. Dinakaran now has the support of 21 MLAs, and they have already handed over letters to the Governor, Ch. Vidyasagar Rao, saying that they had no confidence in the Chief Minister. The Governor, whose actions have been repeatedly been questioned by Opposition parties and independent observers, has so far not forced the EPS government to take a floor test in the State Assembly.

But it is very clear that the questions over the stability of government in Tamil Nadu, voiced intermittently since the death of Chief Minister Jayalalithaa in December last year, is growing louder by the day [3](#) . A meeting of party MLAs recently convened by the Chief Minister attracted 109 MLAs. In the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly, 117 is the half way mark.

The latest round of activity against the government began on September 10 after a delegation of Opposition parties called on the Governor Ch. Vidyasagar Rao at Raj Bhavan. They demanded that the AIADMK government should be asked to prove its majority in the State Legislative Assembly. After the meeting, the DMK's working president, M.K. Stalin, told presspersons that the AIADMK government had the support of only 114 MLAs. The majority were against the government headed by Edappadi K. Palaniswami.

A strongly-worded memorandum handed over to the Governor cast aspersions on his functioning: "The omission, so far, on the part of your good-self in not directing a floor test is breeding a grave suspicion as to the impartiality of your functioning... Under the Constitution, your good-self has taken an oath to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and the law. But, in the instant case, the action of your good-self has been more in defiance and variance of the Constitution and the laws of the land."

It quoted several Supreme Court judgments and provisions of the Constitution that mandated holding a floor test, and demanded that the Governor order a floor test. The Opposition team got no assurance from the Governor. One top political source said that at one point Stalin told Rao that he would be forced to approach the courts if the Governor did not act as per the Constitution. The Governor reportedly responded: "You may."

DMK goes to Court

On September 12, the DMK moved the court to order the government to seek a floor test. On September 14, the Madras High Court decided that there was no urgency to hold a floor test. It has given the government a six-day reprieve.

Since September 22 last year, after the Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister Jayalithaa was admitted to the Apollo hospitals in Chennai, the DMK has been waiting for the AIADMK government to implode. In fact, one senior leader predicted in the same month that the DMK government would be in office by January of 2017. But a well-wisher in the form of the Prime Minister, with whom both EPS and OPS met at least six times each in as many months – and his Bharatiya Janata Party have helped fend off some of the trouble for the combine.

But this has come at a very heavy price. The various agitations by farmers, residents opposing development projects, and the NEET have been put down with a heavy hand by the State government. The suicide of a student, Anitha, who could not make it to medicine because of the implementation of NEET, has been a rallying point for students and disgruntled sections across the State. Surprisingly, no political party has been able to make much capital of this mass resentment.

The DMK, the main opposition in Tamil Nadu, has been slow to pick up on the opportunities and has been extremely ineffective in people mobilisation and protests. A range of protests have seen little-known people and political parties take the lead. Even actors Kamal Hassan and Rajnikanth were looked up to for deliverance. In fact, a recent survey on choices for the candidate, while putting DMK's M.K.Stalin at the No.1 spot, had Rajnikanth at No. 2 and Kamal Hasan at the No.3 slot. The survey also pointed to the fact that former Union Minister Anbumani is more popular in Tamil Nadu than his party is.

The dawn of the 90s saw the birth of a new party in Tamil Nadu, the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK). Though its founder Vaiko has yet again made his peace with the DMK and its working president, M.K. Stalin, the MDMK is in tatters, as evident from the vote share of the party in recent elections. Soon after the turn of

the millennium, actor Vijaykant's Desiya Murpokku Dravidar Kazhagam (DMDK) became the most sought after party in the State. That, too, has run its course and the party is barely visible in Tamil Nadu now. The Dalit parties operate in their own regions of influence and have not been able to rise above them and create an impact in the State.

National parties in Tamil Nadu

Of the national parties, the Left parties are not much of a force in Tamil Nadu. Though they have been at the forefront of many agitations in Tamil Nadu, they have not been able to significantly expand their support base in the State.

The Congress is muted; and the BJP is more visible on Tamil Nadu's television screens than on the ground. The State BJP and its sister organisations have been consolidating their internal structures. Though the party has been trying hard to get senior leaders from the Dravidian parties, so far only a former AIADMK Minister, Nainar Nagendran, has crossed over to the BJP. Some lower-rung office bearers of the AIADMK, too, have crossed over. For now, it is very clear that the DMK is the strongest party in Tamil Nadu. But the lack of strategy is exposing the party to ridicule from various quarters. The AIADMK is disintegrating in its current form. The lack of a clear second line, Jayalalithaa's own reluctance to name a leader after her, has thrown the party and the government run by the party into total disarray.

The problem with the EPS-OPS combine is that the AIADMK cadre is not used to the concept of a collective leadership. Just as this combine has tried to usurp the party, its detractor, Dhinakaran, will now use all his might to bring down the government. Though he has maintained that DMK is the first enemy, it is very clear that if his aim is to bring down the government, then he has to join hands with the DMK.

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