

Clean Sweep

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Voters of Tamil Nadu give a massive mandate to the AIADMK-led alliance, rejecting outright the DMK and the Congress.

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IT was a stunning victory that stood psephologists' predictions on their heads. All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) general secretary J. Jayalalithaa's claim that her party would win a landslide victory was proved right in the end.

In the elections held on April 13 for the 234-member Tamil Nadu Assembly, the AIADMK-led alliance made a clean sweep of the various regions of the State. As counting began on May 13, it became clear that the tide was turning in district after district, especially in the southern hinterland, the western belt, the central region, and Chennai city.

The AIADMK won 147 of the 160 seats it contested with margins ranging from 10,000 to 73,000 votes. It has the majority to form the government on its own. Its important electoral allies, the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) founded by actor Vijayakant, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India (CPI), also registered resounding victories. The DMDK won 29 of the 41 seats it contested. Since Vijayakant has maintained that he will not ask the AIADMK to make his party a partner in the new government, the DMDK is all set to become the main Opposition party in the Assembly, relegating the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) to the back seat. The CPI(M) won 10 of the 12 seats it contested and the CPI nine out of 10. The AIADMK's minor allies, too, did well, with the Puthiya Tamizhagam and the Republican Party of India winning one seat each; the All India Samuthuva Makkal Katchi and the Manithaneyya Makkal Katchi winning two each; and the All India Forward Bloc and the Kongunadu Ilaiginar Pervai winning one each.

The DMK suffered an ignominious defeat; it won only 23 of the 119 seats it contested. Chief Minister and party president M. Karunanidhi and his son and Deputy Chief Minister M.K. Stalin were the prominent winners in the party. Eighteen Ministers, including Finance Minister and party general secretary K. Anbazhagan, veterans such as Veerapandi S. Arumugam, K.K.S.S.R. Ramachandran, S.N.M. Ubayadullah, K.N. Nehru and K. Ponmudy were humbled. Assembly Speaker R. Avudaiyappan and Deputy Speaker V.P. Duraisamy were also defeated.

Pathetic was the performance of the Congress, a major alliance partner of the DMK-led front. The

Congress, which wangled 63 seats from the DMK after a bitter feud, just won five seats, recording its worst performance in Assembly elections in the State. Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (TNCC) president K.V. Thangabalu, who provided tragicomic relief with his ham-handed actions, looked crestfallen after his defeat in Mylapore in Chennai. Thangabalu, against whom his own partymen rebelled in a big way, resigned as TNCC president on May 14, the day after the election results were announced.

The other allies of the DMK also suffered humiliating defeats. The Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), whose wont is to change its electoral partner after every Lok Sabha and Assembly election, won three of the 30 constituencies it contested. The Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), which has built a base among Dalits, lost in all the 10 constituencies where its candidates contested. The much-vaunted Kongu Nadu Munnetra Kazhagam (KNMK), which says it draws its support from the Vellala Gounder community in the western districts of Coimbatore, Salem, Erode, Tirupur, Namakkal and Krishnagiri, suffered the same fate in all the seven seats allotted to it. The alliance with the KNMK alienated Dalit, Vokkaliga Gounder and Naidu communities in the districts from the DMK.

Writing on the wall

Congress workers blame the party high command for failing to read the writing on the wall. The leadership perpetuated its alliance with the DMK in spite of the strained relationship between the two parties and the Congress workers' overwhelming opinion that the party should ally with the AIADMK or form a third front with the DMK and other parties. The top leadership had been warned that the continuation of the alliance with the DMK would be "suicidal" and lead to "a wash-out". And that is exactly what happened.

The AIADMK's victory has reinforced an emerging trend in the State's electoral history. Since 1991, the electorate has voted invariably for change. If the voters elected the AIADMK to power in 1991, they gave the DMK the mandate to rule in 1996. In 2001, they elected the AIADMK, and in 2006, the DMK was voted to power. Now, in 2011, the AIADMK has got a decisive mandate.

As news of the AIADMK's spectacular performance began to come out, hundreds of party supporters massed outside Jayalalithaa's residence and outside the party office in Chennai. Drumbeats and fireworks reverberated in the streets as music bands materialised, as if from nowhere, and AIADMK workers danced with abandon. The celebration reached a crescendo when Jayalalithaa appeared in the balcony of her home, in Poes Garden, and waved to the supporters. At the party office on Llyod's Road, an AIADMK worker, dressed in white, lit a piece of camphor placed on a coconut and prayed fervently before the statue of party founder M.G. Ramachandran in the compound. Another cadre joined him, holding aloft a big cut-out of 'two leaves' (the party symbol) and waving it with immense pride in front of the statue. Some hundred metres away, posters began to appear thanking Jayalalithaa, hailing "the victory of dharma" and "the defeat of the evil forces". Another poster praised the defeat of "an arrogant family that played ducks and drakes with the spectrum money". Impromptu processions of motorcyclists roared through the streets, with pillion riders waving oversized AIADMK flags.

In contrast, gloom fell on Anna Arivalayam, the DMK headquarters at Teynampet, where only some hundred party workers were present. They blamed the Election Commission's "restrictions" and the media for the party's defeat. Satyamurthi Bhavan, the TNCC headquarters, looked like a haunted house, with not a soul in sight.

Restoring FISCAL health

Jayalalithaa, who is set to become the Chief Minister for the third time, said her first priority would be to restore “the rule of law” which had “totally deteriorated” and fulfil the promises made in the party’s election manifesto within a time frame. Restoring the fiscal health of Tamil Nadu, which was in a state of ruin, was another top priority. She said that she was left again and again with the onerous task of rebuilding the State’s economy. She said it was akin to rebuilding a house that had been knocked down completely and the debris strewn all around. It would not suffice if a coat of paint was given and a few repairs were done here and there. “First the debris has to be cleared and then the house has to be rebuilt. It is not an easy task,” Jayalalithaa said.

She said she had restored the fiscal health of the State twice earlier, in 1991 and 2001, when she was handed a totally ruined economy. “This time around, the ruin that has been wrought, the havoc that has been wrought, in Tamil Nadu is beyond description,” she said. She expressed her profound gratitude to the voters for electing the AIADMK and had a word of appreciation for the Election Commission for “a fantastic job” of conducting a free and fair election.

G. Ramakrishnan, State secretary of the CPI(M), said the verdict was against the corruption and anti-people policies of the DMK. CPI State secretary D. Pandian called it a “historic verdict for retrieving democracy”.

Karunanidhi’s reaction was laconic. “People have given me rest. I congratulate them,” he said with a tinge of sarcasm.

Defining issues

While it was expected that the AIADMK-led alliance would canter to victory because voters everywhere in Tamil Nadu chanted for “a change” [of government], even the AIADMK cadre would not have imagined the victory to be so decisive. Among the major issues that led to the DMK’s debacle were the soaring prices of essential commodities and the three-year-long power crisis that affected spinning and textile mills, automobile industries and small and medium enterprises, hospitals and agriculture and made housewives angry.

Another issue that angered voters was corruption, from the micro-level, in the panchayats, to the macro-level, symbolised by the 2G spectrum scam. The enormity of the amount involved in the 2G spectrum scam disturbed the voters. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) arrested A. Raja of the DMK on February 2 and remanded him in judicial custody in Tihar Jail in New Delhi. On November 14, 2010, Raja had resigned as Union Minister for Communication and Information Technology. The CBI charge sheet has named Raja as the first accused in the case. On April 25 (after the Assembly elections were over), the CBI filed a supplementary charge sheet naming Kanimozhi, Karunanidhi’s daughter and Rajya Sabha member, as one of the accused in the 2G case.

Voters were also fed up with the overweening domination of Karunanidhi’s family members in various spheres – in politics, film distribution, television channels, print media, FM radio channels, textiles, furniture business, and so on. They were disenchanted with the unseemly sibling rivalry between M.K. Alagiri, Union Chemicals and Fertilizers Minister, and Stalin, Alagiri’s younger brother. Matters came to a head between Alagiri and Dayanidhi Maran, his close relative and Union Textiles Minister, in May 2007, resulting in an attack that claimed the lives of three employees of the Tamil newspaper Dinakaran, owned by Dayanidhi’s elder brother Kalanidhi Maran. So, over a period of time, aversion to the DMK had built up.

Bribing voters

The election results knocked out the belief of DMK leaders that they could win elections by bribing voters with cash. If cash for votes played an important role in the DMK candidates' victory in the byelections in the past five years, especially the byelection in Tirumangalam in January 2009, the Election Commission's proactive, no-nonsense attitude stemmed the flow of money to a large extent this time. From the four States and the Union Territory of Puducherry that went to the polls in April and May, Election Commission officials seized Rs.70 crore which was meant to be paid to voters as a blandishment. Of this, Tamil Nadu alone accounted for the largest share of Rs.60 crore. Amazing was the seizure on April 5 of Rs.5.11 crore hidden in five bags under a tarpaulin spread on the roof of a bus in Tiruchi town. K.N. Nehru, Transport Minister in the DMK government and a candidate in the Tiruchi West constituency, denied television news reports that the money belonged to his relatives.

Another important reason for the defeat of the DMK was the arrogance of several of its Ministers, who became satraps in their districts. There were serious allegations against them of grabbing land and property and of taking part in the illegal quarrying of sand from riverbeds and transporting it to Kerala. It is alleged that the situation came to such a pass that it became difficult to buy prime property in Madurai, Tiruchi, Salem and Erode without clearance from a Union Minister or State Ministers belonging to these towns. A scholar from Tiruvarur said, "If you want to buy prime property in Madurai or Tiruchi, the registering officer rings up a Union Minister or the State Minister and seeks their clearance for registering the property. People are seething with rage and craving a change." (Frontline, May 6, 2011).

In Ambasamudram constituency in Tirunelveli district, where Speaker Avudaiyappan lost, several thousand bullock-cart owners had risen in revolt against local DMK leaders. At Athazhanallur, a bullock-cart driver, transporting sand for a brick kiln, said, "Many of us have gone to jail because the DMK leaders want a monopoly over quarrying sand from riverbeds. They smuggle the sand to Kerala."

Added to this was corruption by DMK leaders at the grass-root level - in village panchayats, town panchayats and municipal corporations. "People have seen the growth of these ward councillors. They travel in a scooter before they get elected. Within three months of their getting elected, they gallivant round in SUVs [sports utility vehicles]. They become arrogant and ride roughshod over the people," a voter said.

However, the DMK leaders deluded themselves into believing that they could win the elections on the strength of their achievements in the past five years. They even predicted that the DMK and its allies would win about 125 seats. "Our achievements will knock on the doors of every voter," said S. Muthukrishnan, DMK town panchayat president of Kalakkad in Tirunelveli district, just before the elections.

Karunanidhi never tired of listing the achievements of his government. These included distribution of rice at Re.1 a kg, free distribution of television sets and liquefied petroleum gas stoves, waiver of cooperative agricultural loans for Rs.7,000 crore, reduction of interest on crop loans, distribution of free motor pumpsets to marginal and small farmers, grant of flood and drought relief totalling Rs.496 crore, regularisation of the services of 45,987 schoolteachers working on contract basis, appointment of 55,053 new teachers in schools, starting 12 new engineering colleges and a medical college in every district in the State, and providing employment to four lakh persons in the government between 2006 and 2011. Karunanidhi was proud of the introduction of a medical insurance scheme in his name, the availability of "108" ambulance service, and the scheme to

convert 21 lakh huts into concrete houses in six years. On March 27, Karunanidhi issued a long statement listing the achievements of his government and said, "We have listed our achievements. I am looking forward to the expression of gratitude from people who enjoy these benefits every day."

Leaders of the DMK were also confident that they would coast to victory on the strength of support from women's self-help groups and the money funnelled to voters. But the energetic team of Chief Electoral Officer Praveen Kumar and his deputies put paid to the plans of cash distribution. Much of the money could not reach the voters. Besides, local party leaders siphoned off part of the money given to them for distribution.

Strained relations

In addition, the DMK-Congress alliance had become strained after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh demanded and obtained Raja's resignation in November 2010 for his alleged involvement in the 2G scam. Congress workers warned their party leaders in New Delhi that it would be "suicidal" to continue the alliance with the DMK for the Assembly elections.

The high command, however, decided to continue the alliance because it was on from 2004 and the DMK, with 18 members in the Lok Sabha, proved to be a reliable ally. Congress leaders considered Jayalalithaa untrustworthy and ignored her offer of support of the nine AIADMK members in the Lok Sabha. Besides, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government led by the Congress at the Centre faced a threat from the MPs loyal to Jaganmohan Reddy in Andhra Pradesh and in Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. The Congress considered the survival of the UPA government more important than building the party in Tamil Nadu.

The relationship between the DMK and the Congress strained further after the arrest of Raja. Further, during the seat-sharing negotiations with the DMK, the Congress demanded 63 seats and insisted that it would choose the constituencies. This angered the DMK so much that it threatened to pull out its six members from the Union Council of Ministers and offer issue-based support to the UPA. The DMK ultimately capitulated and offered on a silver platter the 63 seats demanded by the Congress.

The short duration of a few weeks of campaign time allowed by the Election Commission's poll schedule was not enough to mend the ties. In many of the 63 constituencies where the Congress fielded its candidates, DMK men did not work with involvement. In both the DMK and the Congress, those who were denied the ticket contested as rebel candidates. Karunanidhi even appealed to the rebels to withdraw their candidature.

Revolt in Congress

The Congress presented a pathetic picture under Thangkabalu's leadership. Party men revolted when he got the Mylapore seat for his wife, Jayanthi, who is an upstart in politics. 'Karate' R. Thyagarajan, who was expecting to get the Congress ticket to contest from Mylapore, organised agitations with the help of his supporters against Thangkabalu and even stormed into Satyamurthi Bhavan, where they smashed glass panes and broke up the furniture.

Senior Congress leaders went on a fast demanding the removal of Thangkabalu from the post. Then it happened that Jayanthi's nomination papers were rejected because she forgot to sign some papers! Thus Thangkabalu, who had submitted his papers as a dummy Congress candidate, became the official candidate. Sivakami, a Congress rebel candidate, resolutely contested against him.

Thangkabalu sacked 12 rebel Congress candidates from the party. They included senior Congress leaders such as Walajah Hassein (Vellore), Palur Sampath (Ambur), M. Munirathinam (Sholinghur) and D. Kumaradoss (Killiyoor). He also sacked 19 Congress leaders including “Karate” Thyagarajan and several Youth Congress leaders. A “Congress reformation committee”, headed by veteran Congressman G.A. Vadivelu, was formed to show the door to Thangkabalu.

Moreover, the DMK and the Congress did not clarify their position on the Sri Lankan Tamil issue, especially after the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the death of its leader V. Prabhakaran in May 2009. Film director Seeman and a few organisations went to town on how the DMK government and the UPA were mere spectators when the Sri Lanka Army massacred more than 40,000 innocent Tamils in the last few weeks of the conflict in April/May 2009. The Congress and the DMK did nothing to counter Seeman’s campaign.

The killing of fishermen from Tamil Nadu by the Sri Lanka Navy even after the ethnic conflict had come to an end was a live, sensitive issue among several lakhs of coastal fishermen who saw the UPA and the DMK being unable to stop such killing.

The ceaseless highlighting of the 2G spectrum scam by the television channels and Raja’s alleged role in it damaged the DMK’s prospects. As a Congress leader acknowledged, voters suspected that “there was some link between the Congress and the DMK in the 2G spectrum scam”. Besides, he said, voters gave credence to the allegations made by Janata Party leader Subramanian Swamy that the Congress and the DMK were co-producers of the 2G scam.

Jayalalithaa’s virulent attacks during the election campaign on the domination of Karunanidhi’s family members in Tamil Nadu’s polity went home. Karunanidhi was trying to make his family, which was “already the richest in Asia”, “the richest in the world”, she alleged. The family controlled several major business enterprises, including airlines. “Should seven crore people suffer to ensure the prosperity of one family?” she asked. “This election is not merely to bring about a change in the regime but to liberate the people from slavery,” she said.

Other factors

The transfer of Dalit votes to the AIADMK-led alliance was another factor that propelled the alliance to such a massive victory. Dalits had a predilection for Vijayakant, and this helped the AIADMK and its allies to harvest their votes. Youth and first-time voters such as college students voted for the AIADMK because they felt the DMK was a party past its prime. Muslim youth owing allegiance to the Manithaneya Makkal Katchi worked for the success of the AIADMK and its allies. Young fans of actors Vijay and Rajnikant voted enthusiastically for the AIADMK-led alliance. The determination with which students and middle and upper middle-class people went to the polling booths led to the rout of the DMK.

The unprecedented voter turnout, with 78.80 per cent of the voters exercising their franchise compared with 70.82 per cent in the 2006 Lok Sabha election, had an impact on the results. Political analysts have called the victory of the AIADMK and its allies “a silent revolution” that was in the making from November 2010. They argue that it was a negative vote against the DMK and could not be considered a huge, positive mandate for the AIADMK.

“Our minuses became a big plus for the AIADMK,” a DMK leader said. But it is debatable whether it was “a silent revolution” because people everywhere were vocal about their craving for “a change” of government and whether it was a “negative vote” against the DMK and not a positive vote for the AIADMK.

P.S.

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