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# NEW ALIGNMENTS IN SOUTH INDIAN POLITICS

## *The 2001 Assembly Elections in Tamil Nadu*

\_\_\_\_\_ A. K. J. Wyatt  
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There has been a strong regional pattern to the politics of modern Tamil Nadu, intimately related to the caste stratification of Tamil society. In contrast to other parts of India, upper-caste brahmins constitute a very small proportion (approximately 3%) of the population of Tamil Nadu. Roughly two-thirds of the 62 million population belong to the middle group of “backward” castes. Though this umbrella term is widely used, it is somewhat misleading. Members of these castes do not enjoy high ritual status in the caste system, hence the term “backward,” but they occupy a wide variety of socioeconomic positions in Tamil society. For example, during the colonial period, some members of the backward castes were wealthy owners of land and businesses. These leading members of the backward castes resented brahmin dominance of politics and the professions under British colonial rule.<sup>1</sup> In particular, in the early 20th century, many considered the Indian National Congress to be an elitist and socially exclusive organization. E. V. Ramaswami Naicker asserted himself as a spokesman against brahmin he-

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1. Marguerite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 25–29.

gemony and was an outspoken critic of Congress. He formulated a Dravidian ideology that was frequently expressed in cultural terms and included rhetorical assaults on brahminical religion. This denigration of religious superstition was accompanied by calls for reform to mitigate the social inequities generated by this upper-caste version of Hinduism.

Critics of Congress also called for quotas in political representation and government employment, to redress the imbalance. The Dravidian movement was organizationally weak and did not pose a significant threat to Congress in the critical decade of the 1940s. The Dravidian movement split in 1949, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was formed as a political party to take the Dravidian ambitions into the formal political arena. Initially, the DMK called for a separate Tamil nation to be established. This demand was based on an ambiguous notion of Tamil identity. The precise boundaries of this social group shifted over time, but at its core was the majority backward-caste population of the Tamil-speaking area. This identity was pitted against that of north Indians and brahmins. However, leaders of the Dravidian movement demonstrated ambivalent attitudes toward untouchables and religious minorities.<sup>2</sup>

The DMK's Tamil nationalism posed a distinctive challenge to the electorally dominant Congress Party in the 1950s, though the DMK did not directly contest the 1952 assembly election and only captured a modest 12.8% of the vote in 1957. However, the DMK, led by the resourceful C. N. Annadurai, caught the public imagination in the 1960s. A number of DMK leaders also worked in the film industry and were able to insinuate their political ideas into the plotlines of films aimed at mainstream Tamil audiences. New voters were drawn into politics, and electoral politics became more competitive. The DMK proved especially popular among the backward castes in spite of the 1951 expansion of affirmative action programs for them at the instigation of backward-caste members of Congress. These programs took the form of quotas or "reservations" in government employment and educational institutions. They were made available by state governments, but the central government, ambivalent about using caste as a basis for policy, insisted that the schemes were for the "other backward classes" (OBCs). The DMK defeated the Congress Party in the 1967 assembly elections, and Congress has been out of office in the state ever since. The DMK abandoned its separatist ambitions in the early 1960s and made little progress in the area of social reform. The cultural aspect of its ideology, however, was reflected in the use of government office to promote Tamil language and culture. Madras

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2. Narendra Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 101–19.

State was renamed Tamil Nadu in 1968. The proportion of jobs and educational places reserved for the OBCs was also increased.<sup>3</sup>

M. Karunanidhi succeeded to the chief minister post following Annadurai's death in office in 1969, leading the party ever since. The charismatic film star-turned-politician, M. G. Ramachandran (referred to as "MGR"), challenged Karunanidhi's preeminence in 1972. MGR was expelled from the party and shortly afterward formed the All India Annadurai DMK (AIADMK). The new party went on to win the 1977, 1980, and 1984 state assembly elections under the leadership of MGR. The two Dravidian parties have dominated politics in the state of Tamil Nadu since 1967.

However, the reforming impulse that inspired the Dravidian movement has weakened in both parties. Each party has sought to cultivate a broad constituency with their own version of populist mobilization. The DMK has employed an empowerment or assertive populism that has tended to win support among a more upwardly mobile section of the electorate. In contrast, the AIADMK has gained stronger support among women and poorer voters, with its protection or paternalist populism.<sup>4</sup> In 1987 MGR died while in office, and his wife Janaki assumed the post of chief minister. However, MGR's political protégé, Jayalalitha Jeyaram, contested the succession, leading to a split in the AIADMK. This helped the DMK to defeat both wings of the AIADMK in assembly elections held in January 1989. After the election, Jayalalitha emerged as the leader of the reunited AIADMK. The alliance between Congress and the AIADMK was formed again before the national parliamentary elections, held in November 1989. In 1991, the DMK state government was dismissed by the central government in controversial circumstances. The minority national government, led by Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, was widely seen to be acting in a partisan fashion at the behest of Congress and the AIADMK. The AIADMK won the ensuing election with a large majority. The subsequent period in office was marked by a high degree of personalization as Jayalalitha asserted herself as chief minister and leader of the party. More importantly, the AIADMK also acquired a reputation for corruption between 1991 and 1996. The DMK played on the negative perceptions of the incumbent government and won landslide victories in both the assembly and the Lok Sabha (People's Assembly, one of the two houses of parliament) elections of 1996.

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3. *Ibid.*, pp. 204–10.

4. The use of populism has been analyzed in these terms by Arun Swamy and Narendra Subramanian, respectively. See Swamy, "Parties, Political Identities and the Absence of Mass Political Violence in South India," in Amrita Basu and Atul Kohli, *Community Conflicts and the State in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 109; and Subramanian, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization*, pp. 74–75.

The dominance of the two main Dravidian parties is not as assured as it once was. The Congress Party has declined further, and a number of new parties have emerged. Electoral politics in the state is now marked by fluid and unstable electoral alliances. This article will argue that important changes have taken place in the relationship between state and national politics in Tamil Nadu. The article will provide an account of the key developments in the party alignments in the state; assess how these changes shaped the outcome of the 2001 election; and then consider the longer-term implications of the results.

### A Growing Link between National Politics and State Politics

The relationship between the central government and the state has been a critical factor in the political development of Tamil Nadu. Traditionally, the Dravidian parties were able to cultivate the perception of the center as a distant but oppressive force. At various moments during the 1960s, the DMK organized vigorous public protests to protect the Tamil language against the encroachment of Hindi. The AIADMK, under the leadership of MGR, evolved a live-and-let-live arrangement whereby Congress (a significant third force in electoral politics) would abdicate its state-level ambitions in favor of its national aspirations. This "MGR formula" resulted in overlapping electoral alliances between the two parties. Under normal circumstances, Congress would contest two-thirds of the Lok Sabha seats and in return, the AIADMK would contest the majority of the state assembly seats. However, the national electoral decline of the Congress Party has given the regional parties a stake in politics at the center as well as in the state. In the early 1990s, the minority Congress government at the center relied on the support of the AIADMK. The further decline of Congress since 1996, and the failure of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to win a majority in the Lok Sabha, created a larger space for regional parties in national politics. Regional parties are now critical in the process of national coalition formation. Firstly, they held the balance of power between the two national parties, Congress and the BJP, in the Lok Sabha. Secondly, the regional parties are important electoral allies in states where the national parties are weak. The BJP in particular has reaped the rewards of this pragmatic alliance-building with a succession of regional parties across India. Thus, the party has been able to win seats in states where it cannot win on its own.

Regional parties from Tamil Nadu have been important players in this emerging process of national alliance-building. In 1996 the DMK was part of the governing United Front (UF) coalition at the center. However, this minority government was short-lived, and another general election was called in 1998. In Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha began the revival of the AIADMK's for-

tunes. A number of smaller parties were persuaded to ally with the AIADMK, and as a group they joined the national BJP-led electoral alliance. This alliance was successful at both the state and national level. The BJP alliance emerged as the largest bloc in the new parliament, and the AIADMK led a multi-party group of 28 members of parliament (MPs) into the governing coalition. As the new government was supported by a minority coalition in parliament, Jayalalitha hoped that the pivotal support offered by her party would oblige the BJP-dominated cabinet to concede to a number of controversial demands relating to the ambitions of the AIADMK at the state level. The foremost demand was that the central government would dismiss the DMK state government (as had happened in 1991). When the BJP leadership proved unwilling to oblige, Jayalalitha left the coalition in April 1999, precipitating another national general election. Though gaining power at the state level is clearly the priority for the Dravidian parties, the rewards of participating in national politics are not to be overlooked. At a minimum, leading members of the regional parties have been able to enjoy the perquisites of ministerial office at the center. Proximity to the central government allows regional allies to lobby on behalf of their states. Finally, as noted above, national politics is perceived as an important arena in which the contest for state power can be fought. When the AIADMK withdrew support from the BJP-led coalition, the DMK quickly offered its support to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Membership in the BJP coalition government was seen as an insurance policy against further attempts by the AIADMK to destabilize the DMK government.

The impact of national politics on state politics has altered in another way. The increased frequency of elections has increased the opportunities for new parties to participate in electoral politics. Until 1998, Tamil Nadu had been somewhat unusual in that its assembly elections had either been held at the same time as the general election or taken place a few months later. The 1996–2001 period was exceptional, as two national elections took place while the state assembly was in mid-term. This has given new parties an opportunity to test their strength in the run-up to the critical 2001 assembly election. It also provided plenty of opportunities for parties to forge and then refine competitive electoral alliances. The 2001 assembly elections were anticipated well in advance, and the competitors had two opportunities to test their electoral strategies.

### Changes in the State Party System

The frequent elections since 1996 have revealed shortcomings in the two Dravidian parties. Previously, the parties had demonstrated an impressive ability to mobilize voters. The DMK knocked Congress out of its leading place in the 1967 assembly elections, though the party remained an important

secondary player in the state.<sup>5</sup> The DMK under the leadership of Karunanidhi won another majority in 1971. Four years after its formation, the AIADMK defeated the DMK in the 1977 assembly elections. This impressive victory established Congress in third place behind the two leading parties. The AIADMK won large majorities again in 1980 and 1984. From 1989, rotation in office became the norm as the DMK won landslide victories in 1989 and 1996. The AIADMK won a massive majority in 1991.

Three important changes have taken place in the electoral politics of Tamil Nadu. Firstly, a number of new parties have emerged. Secondly, the Congress Party has declined so much that it is now a spent force in the state. Thirdly, the Dravidian parties are showing signs of enervation. As a consequence of these developments, electoral alliances have become much more important. Recent changes have been notable, but it is important not to overlook the evidence of continuity. Electoral alliances have long been a feature of the political history of the state. The party system has been subject to change ever since the first elections in 1952. Parties have formed, split, and declined. What is significant is that since 1989, a number of smaller parties have carved out a niche for themselves. They have gained representation in the Lok Sabha and the state assembly that they did not enjoy previously. The Congress Party was a key alliance partner in the 1970s and 1980s. However, it has been displaced by a series of smaller parties. These parties can now swing the outcome of elections. In 1998 these parties allied with the AIADMK and together they won the largest number of Lok Sabha seats in the state. Traditionally, there has been a space for a national party in the Tamil Nadu party system. Voters in Tamil Nadu are discerning, voting differentially in national and state elections. The Congress Party could attribute its electoral survival after 1967 to this tendency, and the party has remained a significant third force in the state. It reached a high point in 1989 when it contested the assembly elections, winning 20.2% of the vote and finishing a very close third behind Jayalalitha's faction of the AIADMK. The space for a national party has diminished with the national decline of Congress. All parties can now claim, with varying degrees of credibility, that they have the potential to join a national coalition government. The two main Dravidian parties have also demonstrated signs of weakness. The AIADMK has not recovered its popularity following the excesses of the 1991–96 period in government. The party leadership is painfully aware of the importance of alliance partners. The AIADMK has never been organizationally robust, and its dependence on a strong leader is a continuing weakness. The leadership of the DMK is aging and appears to be unable to maintain a strong party in the

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5. R. Manivannan, "1991 Tamil Nadu Elections—Issues, Strategies and Performance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 27:4 (1993), pp. 164–70.



face of important social and economic changes in Tamil society. Both parties have allied with the religious nationalist BJP since 1998, even though they have their roots in the rationalist and reformist Dravidian tradition. This has left both parties open to the criticism of opportunism and ideological lassitude.

In 1989 the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK, Toiling People's Party) was formed under the leadership of Dr. Ramadoss.<sup>6</sup> The party currently draws the majority of its support from the vanniar castes. This group has been identified as having low caste status, thus fitting into the most backward caste category. It is among the largest caste groups in the state. The origins of the PMK lie in protests in 1987 against the reservation system that established a quota of official posts that could only be filled by candidates from a list of disadvantaged castes. The organization representing the vanniars argued that they were overlooked in the allocation of benefits, and that the problem could only be solved by setting a quota for the disadvantaged vanniars within the larger quota. When the party was formed, the intention was to broaden its objectives and take up the cause of others disadvantaged by the caste system. However, the PMK gradually lost the image of a party representing a broad social base. It is now considered to be primarily a party that seeks to advance the interests of the vanniar community. Across the state, the party has routinely won around 5% of the vote since the 1989 assembly election. The PMK is electorally important because it has concentrated support in a number of northern districts in Tamil Nadu. The emergence of the PMK is significant because it has demonstrated the renewed importance of direct caste-based mobilization in Tamil politics. This type of mobilization was a feature of electoral politics in the state in the 1950s and 1960s, but the rise of Dravidian nationalism, with its broader ideological vision of a Tamil community, eclipsed more particular appeals for political support.

In late 1993, a senior DMK leader, V. Gopalsamy, popularly known as "Vaiko," was expelled from the DMK because he expressed his discontent with the dominance of Karunanidhi's family within the DMK. In 1994 Vaiko, with the support of a number of middle-ranking DMK party officials, launched a new party: the "renaissance" DMK (MDMK). The MDMK claims to represent the original spirit of the DMK, and as such, appeals to voters sympathetic to the DMK but unhappy with its apparent dynastic turn. Unlike the PMK, the MDMK has not been able to concentrate its electoral support in a particular region, and it wins votes fairly evenly across the state. In the 1996 assembly elections, the MDMK contested 178 seats and won 5.8% of the vote. The party made its electoral breakthrough in 1998 when, as part of the AIADMK-led alliance, it succeeded in winning five Lok Sabha

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6. V. Suresh, "The DMK Debacle: Causes and Portents," *ibid.*, 27:42 (1992), pp. 2316–17.

seats. The AIADMK has also experienced tensions over the issue of leadership. A number of senior party leaders were expelled from the party during the 1990s. One leader, S. Thirunavukkarasu, formed a new party, that is, the MGR-AIADMK. One of his leading objectives was to contest Jayalalitha's claim to inherit the mantle of the AIADMK's legendary leader, MGR. Thirunavukkarasu dissolved his party and rejoined the AIADMK shortly before the 1996 elections. However, he was expelled again not long afterward, and re-formed his own party. The party had a localized following and is centered on its leader, but the DMK cultivated this junior ally in the hope of undermining the legitimacy of the AIADMK's connection with MGR.

In 1996 the Congress Prime Minister Narasimha Rao decided to form an electoral alliance with the AIADMK to fight the imminent elections in Tamil Nadu. This decision was made against the wishes of many within the state unit of Congress. It was felt that it was unwise to ally with the AIADMK. The AIADMK had an extremely poor image after five years running the state government and was considered to be an electoral liability. A large section of the Congress Party split away and formed the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC) under the leadership of G. K. Moopanar. The TMC has had difficulty creating a distinct identity for itself. It is now a regional party, though its origins had been as part of a national party. Hence, it lacks the unique appeal of the national Congress Party. The TMC has continued to ally itself with the Dravidian parties and this prevents it from emerging as a distinctive alternative. Furthermore, the TMC leadership has done nothing to discourage the incessant speculation that the party will rejoin its parent party at some unspecified point in the future.

Nevertheless, the party maintains a following scattered across the state and is regarded as an important ally. The Congress Party in the state lost most of its organizational infrastructure after the 1996 split, but the rump of the party holds onto its name and links to the national party. As such, it continues to contest elections but is no longer a viable party outside of an alliance. It allied with the AIADMK in the elections of 1996, 1999, and 2001. The decline of Congress is a defining factor in the new pattern of alliance politics. Congress held onto the support of about 20% of the electorate for a long period after its defeat in 1967. This contributed to a stable pattern of party competition in the state. The two Dravidian parties were able to secure more than 70% of the vote, but Congress remained a crucial alliance partner. In many instances, the alliance with Congress was a critical factor in deciding the outcome of the election. The central leadership of the Congress Party ignored the possibilities of coalition government in the state and instead used the alliances with the Dravidian parties to secure a large number of national parliamentary seats.

However, during the late 1990s Congress lost a great deal of its following in Tamil Nadu. Congress had contested the 1989 state assembly elections without allying with either of the Dravidian parties, securing 20.2% of the vote. In 1998, Congress contested the Lok Sabha elections without a major alliance partner and gained a meager 4.8% of the vote. This result is hardly surprising, given that the party no longer dominates the national political scene. Furthermore, following the party split in 1996, what little that remains of the party organization has been riven by public displays of personal rivalry and disunity. It is difficult to sustain the argument that the combination of the TMC and Congress shares the loyalty of a large bloc of voters. In the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the TMC, without its senior ally the DMK, gained a mere 7.2% of the vote. The AIADMK leadership, recognizing the sparseness of the Congress vote, marginalized both parties in the alliance negotiations that are discussed below. The death in August 2001 of the TMC's respected leader Moopanar creates a further problem, as leadership is a key asset when mobilizing voters in Tamil Nadu.<sup>7</sup> In summary, the absence of a significant third party, such as Congress, able to deliver the plurality of the vote, has contributed to the emergence of a more plural and uncertain electoral arena.

An important development during the late 1990s was the emergence of a number of parties seeking independent representation for the Scheduled Castes (former untouchables) in the state. The 1991 census recorded the Scheduled Castes to be 19.2% of the total population of the state. These castes have not formed a homogeneous group and, in fact, there are significant tensions between them. The mobilization in Tamil Nadu is part of a national trend toward social and political activism on the part of the former untouchables. The term "dalit" is increasingly used to refer to groups that are oppressed by and excluded from the caste system. In Tamil Nadu and elsewhere, social and economic change have encouraged more assertive attitudes, especially on the part of younger educated dalits. Established social hierarchies are increasingly brought into question. This has had consequences for electoral politics. In north India, the Bahujan Samaj Party claims to represent dalit interests, and its leaders have achieved national prominence. A number of dalit parties in Tamil Nadu are seeking to emulate this achievement. Dalit activists in the state argue that the major parties have not significantly alleviated their backward social condition. Furthermore, they argue that the dalits have faithfully supported existing parties while they remain excluded from positions of political leadership and are overlooked in the allocation of devel-

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7. The leadership of the party passed to Moopanar's son, G. K. Vasan, who led the TMC into a merger with the national Congress Party during August 2002. Following the electoral decline of both parties in the state since 1996, it remains uncertain whether this will be enough to put the newly merged party on a path toward recovery.

opment resources. The Pudhiya Thamizhagam (PT) was formed just before the 1998 election. Its leader, Dr. K. Krishnaswamy, made use of a reputation established by his organizational work among the Pallars in southern Tamil Nadu. He argues for the creation of a "New Tamil Nadu" in which dalits will not suffer the oppression of the upper castes. Krishnaswamy won the Otapidaram assembly seat in the 1996 state assembly elections, on a Janata Party ticket. He launched his own party shortly afterward. The PT contested 15 seats in the 1998 Lok Sabha election. Though the PT did not win any seats, it garnered enough votes to spoil the chances of a number of sitting MPs and to establish itself as a potential alliance partner in future elections.

Events leading up to the 1999 Lok Sabha elections encouraged further dalit involvement in electoral politics. The TMC lost its partner, the DMK, to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The TMC was wary of allying with the AIADMK, and decided instead to look for alternative allies. Noting the political restiveness of the dalits, the TMC leadership decided to form an alliance that would include these groups. This alliance would be positioned between the AIADMK (still sullied by allegations of corruption) and the DMK (tainted by association with the Hindu nationalist BJP). Thus, the TMC allied with the PT, the Republican Party of India, and the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI). The latter organization had concentrated, to this point, on social mobilization. However, the 1999 election presented an opportunity for the movement to broaden the range of methods it used for mobilizing support. The DPI is strongest in the northern half of the state. The participation of the DPI elicited a strong response from representatives of the dominant vanniar caste in a number of constituencies. The violence in the Chidambaram constituency was particularly intense, sparked by the vigorous campaign of Thirumavalavan, the charismatic leader of the DPI. The DPI failed to capture the seat from the PMK, but the TMC alliance recorded its best result in Chidambaram. The 1999 election demonstrated the ability of dalit parties to mobilize a significant following. Conversely, the election revealed the faltering appeal of the Dravidian parties among dalit voters. The TMC front did not win any seats in the 1999 election, though the importance of the dalit vote was emphasized. The election also indicated to some commentators the exciting possibility of a realignment in state politics around an independent third front.

The BJP, and its predecessor the Jan Sangh, have long been active in the state, with the latter fielding candidates in the 1952 assembly elections. The BJP share of the vote has slowly been increasing since the 1980s, but it was still only able to win 1.8% of the vote in 1996, when it fielded 145 candidates in the assembly election. In 1998, the BJP allied with the AIADMK and won its first Lok Sabha election in Tamil Nadu. In 1999, the party allied with the DMK and increased the number of its MPs from the state from 3 to 4. The

alliances with the Dravidian parties have clearly enabled the BJP to extend its reach, but it would be a mistake to assume that the BJP is not making progress on its own. The BJP and its affiliates, including the Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Hindu Munnani, have been very active in the state. These organizations have done much to integrate their political ambitions with the resilient popular religiosity of Tamil society. It was long assumed that the rationalist ideology of the Dravidian movement would be an insurmountable obstacle to the Hindu nationalist movement in the state. However, Chief Minister Jayalalitha's indulgent attitude toward positions taken by the BJP between 1991 and 1996 gave Hindu nationalist ideas certain respectability in the state. This has been reinforced by the formal alliances between the BJP and both the AIADMK and DMK, respectively. Congress was traditionally the party of the upper-caste elite in the state, but with the party's decline, the BJP is well placed to gain support from this small but influential community. The BJP has also gained credibility from its status as the national party in government. Under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the BJP added a new dimension to electoral alliances in the state. In the national elections of 1998 and 1999, voters could cast their vote for an alliance that included a party led by a strong candidate for prime minister, which had a respectable chance of forming a national government. With the lackluster performance of Congress, the only other national party in the state, the BJP would like to fill the important third position that was occupied by a national party between 1977 and 1991. It is still too early to predict that the BJP will achieve this objective. Many commentators see this as a fanciful ambition. However, the background conditions in the state are changing in ways that give the BJP some grounds for optimism.

In the 1960s, parties of the left experienced an early decline in Tamil Nadu, with support falling away at the same time that the DMK displaced Congress as the leading party in the state. However, both the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]) have maintained a following in certain pockets of the state. Both parties have accommodated themselves to altered circumstances and entered electoral alliances, usually with the DMK, in order to maintain a slender presence in the state assembly and among the state's Lok Sabha MPs.

Shortly before the 2001 election, a number of new parties were formed including the New Justice Party, the Makkal Tamil Desam Katchi, and the Kongu Nadu Makkal Katchi. These parties had an explicit caste base and were a response to the increased levels of caste-based mobilization in support of other parties.<sup>8</sup> The PMK, the PT, and the DPI have well-defined links with particular caste groups. Furthermore, the AIADMK has been happy to

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8. T. S. Subramanian, "The Caste of Characters," *Frontline*, March 2, 2001, pp. 46–48.

associate itself with the ambitions of the important thevar caste group. This backward caste group is numerically concentrated in the southern part of the state, with a long history of organizing collectively to engage in electoral politics. The formation of new caste-based parties reflects an anxiety that a small number of castes are cornering state benefits and slowing the progress of other groups at the same time. The New Justice Party, led by A. C. Shanmugam, is just such a party. Shanmugam claims to represent the interests of a number of mudaliar castes. He argued that vanniars, using the political vehicle of the PMK, have exploited their electoral strength to get an excessive level of OBC benefits and political representation for themselves. Other castes, Shanmugam argues, have lost out as a consequence. Whatever the merits of such claims, they are consistent with a political culture in the state that is hospitable to movements spurred on by a sense of relative group disadvantage. Ironically, these new parties are also a symptom and a cause of party fragmentation. Events in the national parliament since 1991 have demonstrated how small parties or individual independents can gain important benefits in the process of coalition formation. It cannot have escaped the imagination of the leaders of these small parties that significant advantages would flow to them in a hung legislature. In short, the emergence of these new parties contributed further to the fragmentation of the party system and increased the number of contenders in the 2001 election. The absence of a dominant party meant that alliance formation would be a critical determinant of the election result in 2001.

### Alliances and Competitors

Speculation as to the composition of the alliances began shortly after the conclusion of the 1999 election. It was widely assumed that the election would be contested by at least two fronts—one led by the DMK and the other by the AIADMK. It was unclear if a third front would also emerge. The DMK led the Tamil Nadu section of the NDA alliance that secured a majority in the Lok Sabha elections in 1999, and that sustains the BJP-led coalition at the center. As the NDA supports a government, the alliance has more permanence than a simple electoral alliance, and the DMK looked set to lead a front into the 2001 election that included the BJP, the MDMK, the PMK, and the MGR-DMK. Such an NDA alliance would have been difficult to beat. The TMC was demoralized by the performance of its third front, and gave an early impression that it would join the AIADMK-led front. This was a source of unease for the dalit parties, which were an integral part of the TMC-led third front. In particular, the PT resented the close links between the AIADMK and the powerful thevar castes in the southern districts. Attempts to mobilize dalits in this area have met with a strong response from

various thevar organizations. In some cases, this has sparked violent clashes between the two groups.

In February 2001, the PMK left the NDA front and allied with the AIADMK. This decisive defection reshaped the alliances. The dalit parties, already uneasy about the AIADMK, refused to be led by the TMC into an alliance with the AIADMK. The PMK is portrayed by its opponents as virulently “casteist” and opposed to the dalits. The TMC leadership balked at the risky prospect of forming another third front. Consequently, the PT and then the DPI joined the DMK alliance. The CPI and the CPI(M) remained in alliance with the AIADMK because they wished to back a “secular” alliance opposed to the BJP. Congress was also anxious to be in a front opposed to its national rival. The PMK was an especially desirable partner for the AIADMK. The PMK has a concentrated following in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, where the AIADMK has traditionally been weak. The PMK has a particular appeal among voters from vanniar caste backgrounds, who would traditionally have voted for the DMK. The TMC was not entirely happy with the presence of the PMK in the AIADMK-led alliance, but the TMC’s Moopanar decided to ally with the AIADMK, and thus closed the door on the possibility of a viable third front. P. Chidambaram, a senior TMC leader and former union finance minister, protested the decision. He has been a long-standing critic of Jayalalitha and, along with a number of other dissidents, he campaigned on behalf of the DMK. The DMK front was further weakened when MDMK leader Vaiko decided that the party would contest a large number of seats independently of either alliance. The DMK attempted to compensate for its weakness by forming alliances with a number of small caste-based parties such as the New Justice Party. Alongside the MDMK, a number of smaller parties also contested separately from the two fronts. However, the majority of serious contestants for the 2001 assembly elections were inside one of the two fronts. A total of 47 parties recognized by the Election Commission contested the election, along with 977 independents. In fact, the number of parties contesting was slightly higher than this, as some smaller allies, including the DPI, fielded candidates under the symbol of the major partner in the alliance.

### The Campaign

A number of issues seemed set to arise during the campaign, including the record of the DMK in government, the leadership offered by both parties, secularism, and claims and counter-claims about corruption in government. The formal campaign opened in April 2001, with the AIADMK in a strong position owing to its alliance-building efforts. However, a number of questions remained unanswered about the status of the party leader. Jayalalitha had been convicted in two corruption cases relating to her period in office

between 1991 and 1996. One of the convictions carried a three-year prison term, though the sentence was not being served, as the case was subject to appeal. It was unclear under India's election laws whether Jayalalitha would be permitted to contest the election herself or be sworn in as chief minister in the event of her party getting a majority. The Election Commission had issued general advice to its returning officers not to accept nominations from candidates for parliamentary and assembly elections who were currently under legal convictions for terms of more than two years. The waters were further muddied when nominations were filed for Jayalalitha in four different assembly seats. The regulations permit nominations in only two seats. The local returning officers rejected all four nominations. Jayalalitha claimed that the returning officers were acting under orders from Chief Minister Karunanidhi, and that this was part of a wider vendetta against her. This theme was pursued throughout the campaign in the hope that voters would feel sympathy for Jayalalitha. The subtext that the AIADMK hoped to convey was that Jayalalitha had been punished by the voters in 1996, she had learned her lesson, and to pursue the matter through the courts and the nomination process amounted to harassment.

The DMK emphasized two key themes during the campaign: good government and corruption. Leadership is a central theme in Tamil political culture. Predictably, leadership became an issue during the campaign. The DMK projected its achievements in government since 1996. Karunanidhi was portrayed as the leader of a party interested in development and good government. Opinion poll evidence suggests that the development achievements of the DMK administration were widely accepted by the voters. The DMK picked up the campaign against Jayalalitha where they had left off in 1996. The corruption allegations were repeated, and voters were asked if they were ready to trust the AIADMK again. This issue remained in the public eye courtesy of the large number of corruption cases that had begun slowly working their way through the courts from 1996. In addition, a number of the cases were still in progress at the time of the election, and the DMK clearly hoped to benefit from this negative publicity.

Leadership proved an awkward issue for the DMK. Karunanidhi was the public face of the DMK in government. The party and its allies accorded him the respect one would expect of a leader of Karunanidhi's experience and prominence in Tamil Nadu. In spite of his age and rumored frailty, he traveled during the campaign, delivered a number of speeches, and provided audiences with a ready supply of his usual aphorisms and pointed asides. In view of his advanced years, Karunanidhi acknowledged that this was likely to be the last campaign he contested. This immediately begged the question of who would succeed him and if the succession would take place during Karunanidhi's next term in office if the DMK won the election. M. K. Stalin,



Karunanidhi's son and the mayor of the state capital Chennai, was given important responsibilities before the election and during the campaign. The expectation is that Stalin will succeed to the post of party leader in due course, and Karunanidhi hinted as much during the campaign. This was an unfortunate moment to make such an announcement. It raised an ambiguity in the mind of the voters over the issue of leadership. Were voters being asked to reinstate Karunanidhi or to vote additionally for a new DMK chief minister? In addition, the issue of dynastic succession is a sensitive one inside a party that still prides itself on having a well-defined organizational structure.

The AIADMK seized on the issue and Jayalalitha mocked the DMK for having succumbed to "family rule," accusing Karunanidhi of preparing to hand over power to his son Stalin. This is also a sensitive issue for the DMK's erstwhile ally, the MDMK. Karunanidhi was obliged to take a defensive position, insisting that Stalin had the ability to lead the party but that the DMK would vote on the matter when it became necessary. In contrast, Jayalalitha is the key leadership asset of the AIADMK. She towers above other leaders within the party to the extent that it is unclear who would succeed her should the party need a new leader. This point was emphasized early in 2000, when a number of senior leaders were relieved of their responsibilities and effectively expelled from the party. Jayalalitha's public presence and experience as chief minister meant that the AIADMK could make a credible claim to be able to provide strong leadership in government. Jayalalitha is an impressive campaigner and was able to complete a heavy schedule of public appearances before the election. Her speeches asked for sympathy from the voters and esteemed their judgement. In response to the corruption cases filed against her, Jayalalitha asked: "Do you not think I should get justice? I have come here to you for justice. The people's court is the real and true court for justice."<sup>9</sup> The AIADMK has a long-standing advantage over the DMK among women voters. Jayalalitha continued to play to this strength, and alleged that Karunanidhi's personal attacks on her were "an insult to women in general."<sup>10</sup> The AIADMK contested the DMK's claims to have provided good government by alleging large-scale corruption during the period since 1996.<sup>11</sup>

The campaigns conducted by the two alliances were disjointed. The clash between the two main Dravidian parties was the main object of interest, but the alliance partners identified different enemies and issues. The AIADMK,

9. Swati Das, "Jaya Now Banks on Emotions," *Times of India*, April 26, 2001, <<http://www.indiatimes.com/news/260401toi/26mche1.htm>>.

10. K. V. Prasad, "Karunanidhi Desperate: Jayalalitha," *The Hindu*, April 29, 2001, <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/04/29/stories/15294012.htm>>.

11. S. Dorairaj, "People's Verdict Supreme: Jayalalitha," *ibid.*, April 24, 2001, <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/04/24/stories/04242237.htm>>.

for example, did not criticize the BJP in its campaign. This fed speculation that Jayalalitha was unwilling to rule out joining the BJP-led NDA at a future date. Yet, a number of the allies justified their presence in the AIADMK alliance because it was the secular choice. The decision to ally with the AIADMK, tainted by the corruption of the 1991–96 period in government, was difficult. This was certainly the case with the TMC. The justification offered for allying with the AIADMK was the threat to secularism posed by the BJP. The TMC was reluctant to criticize the DMK and did not make corruption an issue in its party manifesto. Instead, it promised to fight the “fundamentalist forces which create a communal divide in society.”<sup>12</sup> The different themes highlighted in the campaign exposed some of the disjunctures in the alliances, demonstrating the politically expedient positions taken by the parties. The AIADMK, at the head of the so-called secular alliance, did not appear at all interested in the issue. The PT and the DPI have a strong antipathy toward the BJP because they view the party as committed to Hindu nationalism and the dominance of the upper castes. Yet, both dalit parties justified their presence in the local NDA in terms of opposing their local opponents (the AIADMK and the PMK) in the struggle against caste inequality. These manifest contradictions raised the question of why a more-principled third front genuinely committed to secularism and opposed to caste oppression was not formed.<sup>13</sup>

## Results

Following the serious violence in the Chidambaram constituency at the time of the 1999 Lok Sabha election, it was widely predicted that the 2001 elections would see further violence and polling irregularities. However, in the event, the campaign and the polling were largely peaceful. The campaign closed on May 9, and the state went to the polls the next day. The use of electronic voting machines drastically reduced the number of wasted votes, and enabled a prompt declaration of the results on the 13th (see Table 1). The AIADMK alliance won a huge majority, with 195 of the 234 seats in the assembly. The AIADMK won an impressive 132 of the 141 seats it contested, and so did not need support from alliance partners in order to form a government. Some of the minor parties had hoped that a coalition government might be formed. They were to be disappointed, as Jayalalitha stuck to her earlier assertion that the AIADMK would rule alone. Candidates sup-

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12. Instead, it concentrated its attacks on the BJP, promising to fight the “fundamentalist forces which create a communal divide in society.” Radha Venkatesan, “TMC Goal Is Secular Governance,” *ibid.*, April 29, 2001, <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/04/29/stories/04292234.htm>>.

13. M. S. S. Pandian, “The ‘Secular’ Conceit,” *ibid.*, March 20, 2001, <<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/03/20/stories/05202523.htm>>.

TABLE 1 *Tamil Nadu Assembly Election 2001: Seats Won by Parties*

Party	Seats		Votes Won (%)
	Contested	Won	
AIADMK Alliance			
AIADMK	141	132	31.4
TMC	32	23	6.7
PMK	27	20	5.6
Congress	17	7	2.5
CPI	7	5	1.5
CPM	8	6	1.7
Independents	2	2	0.4
DMK Alliance			
DMK	183	31	30.9
BJP	21	4	3.2
MGR-AIADMK	3	2	0.5
PT	10	0	1.3
Others			
MDMK	211	0	4.7
Forward Bloc	1	1	0.1
Independents	n.a.	1	5.7
Totals		234	96.2

SOURCE: Calculated from results notified by the Election Commission, <<http://www.eci.gov.in/>>.

ported by one or another of the two alliances won all but two of the seats. The only exceptions were the seats won by independents supported by the AIADMK in the seats where Jayalalitha's nominations were rejected. Junior members of parties allied to the AIADMK complained bitterly that Jayalalitha had selected the best seats for her own party. In retrospect, the party leader can be satisfied that her shrewd judgement paid off.

The MDMK, contesting alone, won 4.7% of the vote, and did not win a single seat. However, the decision of the MDMK to part company with the DMK did have an impact on the outcome. Opinion poll evidence revealed that voters in general were happy to follow the alliance preferences of their preferred party and transfer their vote accordingly.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it can be inferred that the MDMK deprived the DMK alliance of the winning votes in a significant number of constituencies. However, the MDMK was not a critical factor in allowing the AIADMK to win a majority in the assembly. The AIADMK only won 14 seats by a margin smaller than the votes won by the MDMK. The canny alliance-building and the allocation of seats enabled the AMDK to win more than 50% of the vote in 93 seats.

14. Yogendra Yadav, "A Matter of Arithmetic," *Frontline*, June 8, 2001, p. 116.

The proportion of votes cast was a modest 59.1%. This reflects a general trend toward falling voter turnout in the state. There were numerous complaints that registered voters were turned away from polling booths owing to inadequate lists. However, a number of other factors were at work. There was evidence of middle-class disaffection with the state of party politics. The DMK was also out of step with some of its traditional constituencies. Ideologically committed voters and religious minorities were less than impressed with the alliance with the BJP. It was unsurprising, therefore, that turnout was especially low in the state capital Chennai, which has a large middle class population and has long been a DMK stronghold.

The AIADMK did well in the south and the west, where it is traditionally strong. The alliance with the PMK meant that the AIADMK did well in the northern districts. The DMK lost heavily everywhere outside of Chennai. The dalit parties did not do well from their alliance with the DMK. There were numerous reports that DMK cadres refused to cooperate with dalit candidates. Dr. Khrishnaswamy of the PT lost both of the seats he contested. Only Thirumavalvan of the DPI won a seat in the new assembly.

The dalit parties are divided by their affiliation with different dalit caste groups. The DPI has its strongest following among the paraiyars in the northern part of the state, and the PT jealously projects itself as the holder of the pallar votebank. The third-largest group of dalits, the arunthathiyars, have not been mobilized by either the PT or the DPI. These parties are more likely to be supported by the younger and more assertive dalits. These factors help to explain why the AIADMK has continued to enjoy support among dalit voters in the state. Clearly, the dalit mobilization in Tamil Nadu is far from complete. Other junior partners fared better. The BJP increased the seats it held to four and the PMK increased its tally to a respectable 20 seats. The TMC dropped from the 39 seats won in 1996 to 23. However, it held onto enough seats to leave it well placed in elections to the Rajya Sabha, the Council of States that is the other house in Parliament. In terms of gender, the obviously significant outcome was the enhanced status of Jayalalitha as leader of the largest party. However, the proportion of women nominated for seats remained small. The TMC did especially poorly in this regard. It promised to support 33% reservation of seats for women in the state legislature in its manifesto, while failing to nominate any women at all for the assembly elections.<sup>15</sup>

### Impact of the Elections

As the largest party with a majority, the AIADMK formed the government. Prior to the election uncertainty occurred about Jayalalitha's eligibility to

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15. Radha Venkatesan, "TMC Goal."

hold office. However, AIADMK had made it very clear that Jayalalitha was the party's candidate for chief minister, and the party won a clear majority. In the face of such a solid majority, the governor, to the consternation of the opposition parties, took the politically expedient decision to allow Jayalalitha to be sworn in as the new chief minister and assemble a cabinet. The political contest then moved to the courts. The AIADMK moved to appeal the convictions against Jayalalitha. In the meantime, the legality of her holding office after having been convicted was tested in the courts. The Supreme Court ruled against the chief minister, and she resigned from office in September. Shortly afterward the High Court appeals in the corruption cases went in Jayalalitha's favor. She then successfully contested a by-election in February 2002 and returned to the chief minister post.

The impact of the 1996 election defeat was still evident when the AIADMK government assumed office. In 2001, there was clearly a concern to prove that the AIADMK was capable of providing good government. Insufficient time has passed to permit a considered opinion to be formed. Nevertheless, the new government has not neglected public relations possibilities. Two ministers were sacked for non-performance within weeks of their appointments. Jayalalitha has been personally involved in a number of high-profile welfare initiatives, and the water shortages in Chennai have received the attention of the state government. Less encouragingly, the sweeping transfer of civil servants after the election appears to have been driven more by political motives than administrative requirements. A number of investigations were opened that involved members of former Chief Minister Karunanidhi's family. In a dramatic development, several of those under investigation, including Karunanidhi and his son Stalin, were arrested. Though the accused were released on bail shortly afterward, the circumstances suggested the opening of a new chapter in a continuing political vendetta.

## Conclusions

The superior resources of the two main Dravidian parties give them an important advantage and mean they are likely to remain the leading parties in the state. Some of these resources are tangible, such as funding, and access to television and the print media. The electoral system is another structural factor. The "first past the post" electoral system also gives the largest parties (and the PMK) an important advantage. Contesting an election outside of an alliance with a large party makes it unlikely that a smaller party will win seats. The only exception to this is where a smaller party, such as the PMK, has a regional concentration of votes. So far, the two main parties have exploited this fear and bullied the smaller parties into accepting seats they are less likely to win. The AIADMK and the DMK have allocated seats to ensure majorities for themselves. This has prevented the emergence of coalitions.

tion governments in the state so far. The electoral system also influences electoral behavior in favor of the major parties. Conventional wisdom on the electoral politics of the state has long held that voters value credibility and are unlikely to waste their vote on a party that does not have a realistic prospect of winning.

The AIADMK and the DMK are also able to draw on intangible resources. Some would argue that this includes the structural advantage derived from the dominance of Dravidian ideology in the state.<sup>16</sup> It is argued that the regional aspirations and cultural ambitions of the Dravidian parties are now accepted as the “normal” way of conducting politics in Tamil Nadu. Thus, the everyday vocabulary of politics is biased toward Dravidian parties. The AIADMK and the DMK can also represent themselves as natural parties of government, as they alone have been able to rule the state with a democratic mandate since 1967. This is particularly important where voters esteem the prospect of winning when deciding how to cast their vote. However, it is in the area of intangible resources, hard won though they were, that the Dravidian parties are most vulnerable. The ideological discipline of the parties has, for a number of reasons, been brought into question. The willingness of both parties to ally with the BJP does not reflect well on their rationalist background. Both parties have demonstrated a tendency toward personalized rule and gained a reputation for corruption. Finally, the commitment to broad Tamil nationalist mobilization has been undermined by the countenance of narrower, caste-based interests. The deepening of electoral alliances undermines the credibility of the two main parties as being strong parties capable of winning power on their own. At the same time, the credibility of the smaller parties is enhanced as they have demonstrated staying power through a series of elections. Some of the smaller parties, such as the DPI and the BJP, have also demonstrated that they have ideological resources of their own that they can use to mobilize their own constituencies. Other parties have co-opted Dravidian rhetoric and ideology for their own purposes. Thus, the PMK argues for the cause of the Tamil language at the same time as it seeks to advance the interests of the vanniar community. This position, and others such as support for a separate homeland for the Sri Lanka Tamils, seeks to align the PMK with the broad national community of Tamils evoked by earlier Dravidianists, while the party remains solidly committed to promoting the interests of a much narrower segment of Tamil society.

The AIADMK and the DMK face other challenges too. The conventional wisdom on voting behavior in the state appears less convincing. The credi-

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16. S. V. Rajadurai and V. Geetha, “DMK Hegemony: The Cultural Limits to Political Consensus,” in T. V. Sathyamurthy, *Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

bility derived from the perceived ability of a party to win an election is becoming less important. New forms of partisanship are coming into play. Small parties are increasingly attracting votes, even though they are unlikely to form a government. These parties have developed strong partisan links with their followers. A notable feature of the 2001 election is that the DMK lost the election in spite of a successful period in office. Voters followed their partisan instincts and voted according to the alliance patterns agreed upon by their respective parties. The advantages of financial and media dominance are also losing their importance in the face of important social change in the state. The increased emphasis on the importance of caste identity runs contrary to the broad populist mobilization favored by the two main parties. During the late 1990s, the DMK appeared ineffectual in the face of rising caste violence in the state. The AIADMK, with its links to the thevars, has been more adept at riding this trend. Even this tactic is counterproductive, as it encourages countermobilization among caste groups opposed to the thevars. The political culture that determined alliance formation in the past is beginning to change. It was traditionally assumed that the larger parties would dictate terms to the smaller parties. This is becoming more difficult. The PMK is keenly aware of its importance as an alliance partner and has demonstrated an opportunistic willingness to change sides to suit its ambitions. The DPI and the PT are—for ideological reasons—less willing to be seen as acquiescent junior partners of the AIADMK and the DMK. The tidy alliance formation of the 2001 election may not be repeated in the future, as the smaller parties become more confident of their support and frustrated at being kept out of government.

The AIADMK succeeded in winning an absolute majority in the state assembly in May 2001, and for the time being, the dominance of the Dravidian parties has been preserved. This should not distract attention from important changes taking place in the state party system. Contributing to this is an important process of social change. In the period prior to the finalization of the electoral alliances, a coalition government in Tamil Nadu seemed a distinct possibility in the context of these changes. The AIADMK succeeded in confounding these developments with its superior alliance-building strategy. However, it should not be assumed that such a strategy would succeed in future. The possibility of a viable third front emerging cannot be ignored. The central importance of leadership also introduces an element of uncertainty into the politics of the state. The timing and nature of Karunanidhi's succession may have important consequences for the DMK as an organization. The 2001 elections can be read as a temporary reprieve for the AIADMK and the DMK. The prospect of alternative alliances and coalition government in the state cannot be ruled out.