

## **Election Alliances in Tamil Nadu – Focus on Caste Equations**

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### **Summary**

*The Bharatiya Janata Party unveiled its election strategy in Tamil Nadu by allying with regional parties with a strong caste-based support in an effort to meet the challenge of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and its allies, who are hoping to cash in on anti-incumbency sentiments.*

### **Introduction**

On 20 February 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced that it had formed an alliance with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) for the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Tamil Nadu. The AIADMK is the current ruling party in the state, though the current leadership has not been tested at the polls. Edappadi Palaniswami, the Chief Minister, took office after the death of J Jayalalithaa in 2016, and has tried to steer clear of controversies. The PMK has been extremely critical of both the AIADMK and the BJP but has decided to partner them in the polls. Its leader, S Ramadoss, announced that the party had set 10 conditions for the alliance which includes the introduction of prohibition, the release of prisoners accused of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's assassination and the restoration of the pension scheme for government employees, among others. Several of these would be very difficult to implement and perhaps could be diluted in favour of a ministerial berth at the centre.

### **Need for Alliances**

It has become important for the BJP to form alliances in the states as it is becoming quite clear that it would not be able to repeat its performance at the national elections in 2014. Regional parties are focusing on winning the polls on local and regional issues, and are likely to fragment the representation in the parliament. The Congress party hopes that this fragmentation would lead to the parties asking it to lead an alliance of anti-BJP parties at the centre. The strategy of the BJP appears to be to stitch up alliances with regional parties to counter this. Increasingly, therefore, this election does not appear to be one that is about national issues, but rather about regional and local matters.

### **Nature of the Tamil Nadu Alliance**

This alliance with the AIADMK and the PMK focuses on caste equations. The BJP, on its own, does not have a significant voter base in Tamil Nadu, and its footprint is limited to a few of the southern districts and to Coimbatore in the west.

Palaniswami hails from the agrarian Gounder community, a powerful, closely-knit clan that spreads across the western districts to the north of Tamil Nadu – Salem, Coimbatore, Dharmapuri, Erode and Namakkal. This is a very caste conscious region and comprises the prosperous and hardworking Gounders who are engaged in business, trading, agriculture and manufacturing. The textile belt of exports falls in this region. Palaniswami and his colleagues have been nurturing these constituencies in the last two years and are reasonably confident of converting their efforts into electoral success.

The PMK is important as it represents the agrarian Vanniyar community which accounts for over 18 per cent of Tamil Nadu's population, and is concentrated in the North Arcot, Cuddalore, Chingleput and Villupuram districts.

The other dominant caste in Tamil Nadu is the Thevar group which accounts for around 19 per cent of the population in the state. It is concentrated in the southern districts of Dindigul, Madurai, Theni, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Ramanathapuram and Sivaganga. The dominant leader in the community is T T V Dinakaran, the nephew of V K Sasikala, a one-time companion of Jayalalithaa. She is now in jail in Bengaluru. Dinakaran has not been able to attract any parties to his fold and appears to be isolated at the moment.

The BJP's strategy appears to be to ally with the dominant castes in their strongholds, isolate Dinakaran and his community, and hope that caste equations would drive voters to its fold. The opposition, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), would have to match these alliances with caste candidates of its own. The Congress does not have a voter or caste base in Tamil Nadu. The DMK leadership does not represent any dominant caste and has been representative of marginalised communities in the state. It would possibly have the Dalits or Scheduled Castes with it this time. In the western and northern districts, the DMK would have to put up candidates from the dominant castes to counter the BJP's alliance, and the BJP is hoping that this would be a weak response. The Congress has been allocated nine seats, and the BJP alliance would be focusing on these seats to ensure that the Congress numbers are kept low in the parliament.

The BJP has also tied up with the Siva Sena in Maharashtra, a regional far-right party, again in an effort to counter the Congress.

## Conclusion

It appears clear that the BJP is not working towards a single majority in the parliament but for a coalition of parties to counter the Congress and its allies. This points to the likelihood of a fragmented parliament.

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