



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Rise and Fall of Dual Leadership: The Trajectory of Leadership Struggle in the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) since 2017

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Abstract

Political parties are essential organizations for democracy. Political parties are organized on ideological framework to ascertain certain demands for the people. Frictions, factions, splits and proliferation of parties are continuous process. Ideology, leadership and people aspirations seem to be the major causes for such developments. This paper examines these issues in the AIADMK, a major political party in Tamil Nadu. It specifically examines these issues after 2016. Party leadership was dependent on single and dominant leadership from 1972 to 2016. A collaboration in the form of dual leadership emerged in 2017. However, the condition is not stable as the demand for a single leader is emphasized for various reasons. Pressures from competing groups and leaders are also visible. These issues would affect the electoral alliance the loyalty of the party members greatly. It seems the new leadership has consolidated the party keeping the forthcoming assembly election.

Keywords: Political party, AIADMK, leadership, electoral alliance, factions

Introduction

Political parties are subjected to factions, splits, and issue of ideology and leadership. Competing leadership is a common trend in most of the political parties. As political parties are essential organization for democratic system, political leadership provides sufficient thrust for political dynamics. In reality, political leadership in several countries seems to be a combination of de jure and de facto features. This system has both advantages and disadvantages in running the polity and in the day to day political process. Constitutions recommend the system of political leadership both by elections as well as by nomination embedded in rules and regulations. The United Kingdom has both the hereditary queen and the elected prime minister. India has de jure and de facto authorities as president and prime minister respectively. When the power and authority are shared between two leaders, problems would be imminent in the exercise and the legitimacy of such authority.

Parties, Factions and Splits in India

Several scholars studied the political parties in the western democracies.[1] Party system is generally classified as one-party, hegemonic, two-party, multi-party, moderate pluralism or polarized pluralism in political studies. Emerging democracies show their own peculiar features in building political parties.[2] Party building or institutionalization seems to have many dimensions. Few believed that it is valid only when it is reified in the public mind.[3] Some hold that the electoral continuity is the only dimension required for effective political party.[4]

In India, much of the discussion was about how parties and leaders build electoral support.[5] Intra-party issues are not new to India. As early in 1907, the Indian National Congress experienced a controversy over the plan of action. With the result, the moderates and extremists were emerged with the party. A major split occurred in 1969 due to leadership issue in Congress.[6] The Communist Party witnessed a split in 1964. Several parties were united to form the Janata Party against the Congress in 1977. Later, they gave up the unity. The Congress witnessed several factions and splits at state level as well.[7]

In Tamil Nadu, the Congress witnessed several factions and splits on the issue of electoral alliance and leadership. In Tamil Nadu Congress, factionalism has been very common since the time of Rajagopalachari. It is mostly based on the issue of leadership. Electoral alliance caused splits sometimes. G. K. Moopanar on 29 March 1996 broke away from the Congress and formed Tamil Manila Congress in 1996.[8] After the death of G. K. Moopanar, the party's officials chose G. K. Vasan, the son of the founder, to lead the party in 2002. The TMC (M) was merged with Indian National Congress from 2002 to 2014. The party was again formed after a split from INC in November 2014.

The DMK also witnessed splits. E.V.K. Sampath formed his Tamil Desiya Katchi in 1961 with the dissidents of the DMK.[9] M.G. Ramachandran, the popular DMK supporter and member, formed AIADMK in 1972 due to his friction with Karunanidhi.[10] In 1994, Vaiko was forced out of the DMK as he was seen as a threat to M.K. Stalin. Vaiko along with some district secretaries announced the decision to start a rival party named as the MDMK.[11] The AIADMK also witnessed splits after the death of M.G. Ramachandran. However, unity was achieved after two years. After the expulsion from the AIADMK, T. T. V. Dhinakaran formed Amma Munnetra Kazhagam in 2018.[12] Thus, the Congress, the DMK and the AIADMK witnessed several factions, splits on the issue of leadership. The leadership issue became more prominent in the AIADMK after the death of Jayalalithaa. It seems that Edappadi Palaniswami skillfully consolidated his position in the party.

Intra-Party Issues in AIADMK

The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) was formed by M.G. Ramachandran in 1972. The party won the assembly elections held in 1977, 1980 and 1984. M.G. Ramachandran he ruled Tamil Nadu from 1977 to 1987 with massive support till his death. He enjoyed complete control over his party largely based on his personal influence for 15 years from the formation to his death. The party was in turmoil after his death. The party was split into two factions and contested assembly elections in 1989 separately. Learning from the electoral defeat, the leaders of the two factions came close and merged their groups. After the tenure of M.G. Ramachandran, Jayalalitha emerged as dominant leader and consolidated her position. She controlled the party almost 30 years till her death in 2016.

Competing Leadership in the Party

Jayalalithaa promoted few individuals based on their loyalty during his tenure. After her death, few individuals began to claim authority over the party and the government. She won the assembly elections in 2016 with massive support. She fell ill after six months of her tenure. As her government has valid till 2021, the selection of a new leader was necessary. During her illness and treatment in the hospital, one of her loyal men Panneerselvam ran the government on her behalf. After her death, he was nominated as chief minister with the support of her team of loyalists. However, things became problematic when her close associate Sasikala was interested to become the chief minister. She began to organize support for her from his party members.

It was believed that he was able to get the support of the BJP to prevent her to take over the party and to become chief minister. Panneerselvam rebelled against her with peculiar style sitting in front of the Jayalalithaa memorial but failed miserably. Sasikala was able to organize more members on her side through certain tactics. Though she was imprisoned for corruption charges along with her team, she nominated Palaniswami to lead the government. When she was in prison, a compromise arrived between Panneerselvam and Palaniswami to alienate Sasikala completely with the advice of the BJP.

Beginning of the Trouble

When Panneerselvam was in the position of chief minister continued after the death of Jayalalithaa, a campaign was organized to bring Sasikala for the position of chief minister. It was the beginning of the trouble within the AIADMK in general and for Panneerselvam in particular. Senior leaders and a section of ministers openly launched the campaign for Sasikala. Panneerselvam was worried and his own position as chief minister was undermined. In the past he had held the position twice as an interim arrangement. There was no option for him except to go with the decision of the members supporting Sasikala.[13]

As things moved fast, the chief minister Panneerselvam proposed her name at a meeting of party MLAs in Chennai. Sasikala was unanimously elected leader of the legislature party. Besides, Sasikala was appointed as AIADMK general secretary through the resolution passed at general council implying that until the formal election process is completed, she will hold all powers that come with the post. However, it was believed that he was directed by the BJP to rebel against Sasikala. With a surprise he sat in the memorial of Jayalalitha seeking justice. The media clearly exposed the overtly conflict between the Sasikala and Panneerselvam on the issue of leading the government.[14] Things became upside down for Sasikala when the Supreme Court upheld the charges of disproportionate asset case and gave verdict to send her with her team to prison.[15]

The New Chief Minister

Amidst these circumstances, she managed to assemble her supporting members and appointed Edappadi K Palanisami as her nominee for the position of chief minister. Though Panneerselvam with his supporters opposed the decision he could not bring adequate support on his side to ascertain his position for chief minister. Amidst the scenario Dinakaran was appointed as deputy general secretary on 15 February 2017 just before Sasikala left to surrender herself in the Bengaluru court to serve the jail term in a disproportionate assets case. Edappadi K Palaniswami was sworn in as chief minister in on 16 February 2017 along with his cabinet ministers. His ministry took the floor test next day. His ministry won trust vote amidst the chaos created by the opposing members in the assembly. As the DMK and the Congress members walk-out, 11 members voted against and 122 members supported the confidence motion.[16] The Election Commission of India allotted separate party symbols to the two factions, namely, Panneerselvam's faction, known as AIADMK (Puratchi Thalaivi Amma), got the Electric Pole symbol, and Palaniswami's faction, known as AIADMK (Amma), got the Hat symbol.[17]

Merging of Factions and Dual Leadership

It was reported that the BJP tried in its own way to bring the two factions and to settle the issue keeping the electoral gains in mind. On 21 August 2017, both Panneerselvam and Palaniswami factions of the AIADMK merged, and Panneerselvam was sworn in as the deputy chief minister. A dual leadership system was amended in the constitution of the party by removing the designation of general secretary and constituting the new designations for the party's leadership. Panneerselvam and Palaniswami became the coordinator and joint coordinator of the AIADMK, respectively.[18] The merging of two factions effected the expulsion of Sasikala. Accordingly, the general council of the party decided to cancel Sasikala's appointment as acting general secretary and officially expel her from the party. The late J. Jayalalithaa was named the eternal general secretary of the AIADMK.[19]

After the merger of two AIADMK factions 19 MLAs owing allegiance to the ousted deputy general secretary T.T.V. Dinakaran submitted letters to the governor, expressing lack of confidence in chief minister Palaniswami and withdrawing support from the government.[20] 18 out of those 19 MLAs were disqualified from office by the Speaker of the legislative assembly upon recommendation from the AIADMK chief whip. The disqualified members appealed to the High Court. The Speaker's orders were upheld by the Madras High Court.

R.K. Nagar Bye Election

Following the death of Jayalalithaa bye-election was announced for the Dr. Radhakrishnan Nagar constituency. In the bye election held in December 2017 Dinakaran contested as an independent with the symbol of cooker. He defeated the AIADMK candidate Madhusudhanan with large margin. The AIADMK and the DMK came to second and third place respectively. It was a surprise for the people who began to believe that he attracted the vote bank of Jayalalithaa considerably. As he was forbidden to become a member of AIADMK again, he decided to launch a new party. Thus, the Amma Makkal Munnettra Kazagam (AMMK) was launched on 15 March 2018. He announced that Sasikala would be the general secretary while he would be the deputy general secretary. Later, he was elected as the general secretary of the AMMK.[21]

Controversies before the Assembly Elections

Though the two factions of the AIADMK merged, they were not at terms in several issues. Many believed that the unity would not go long. Before the announcement of assembly elections, an issue was raised over the chief ministerial candidate. In October 2020 Rajenthra Bhalaji expressed his opinion that the party should go for elections with Palanisami as the chief ministerial candidate. Earlier, Sellur K. Raju announced that the MLAs would elect the chief minister after the elections. These contradictory statements created confusion among the party men.[22] In order to settle the issue, Panneerselvam announced that Palaniswami would be the chief ministerial candidate.[23] Sasikala was released from jail after completion of her prison time in January 2021. She announced her intention to actively involve herself in the state's politics. Later, she announced her decision to quit politics.[24]

Assembly Elections 2021

The Election Commission of India announced the schedule for the elections to the 16th Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly on 26 February 2021. The Election was held on 6 April 2021. The DMK continued its Secular Progressive Alliance with the Indian National Congress, the Communist parties and others, and named Stalin as its candidate for the chief minister. The AIADMK joined the National Democratic Alliance of the Bharatiya Janata Party with Palanisami as its chief ministerial candidate. The DMK allies secured 159 seats, with the DMK alone winning in 133 constituencies. The AIADMK allies won 75 seats, out of which 66 were of the AIADMK.[25] The DMK formed the government for the sixth time. M.K. Stalin and his council of ministers were sworn in on 7 May 2021 reflecting the legacy of Dravidian politics.

Frictions in Dual Leadership

Though the two factions were merged and the two leaders were placed in the position of power, tensions between the two become unavoidable. After the elections the AIADMK became the opposition party. Panneerselvam wished to be the leader of the opposition in the assembly. But, majority of the members supported Palanisami. The results of the assembly elections further intensified the demand for single leadership. Majority of the party MLAs, district secretaries and the members of the general council were pressuring for single leadership and sided with Palanisami. On 14 June 2022, citing the party's troubles in the polls, AIADMK district secretaries and other senior party members spoke out to give up the dual leadership system. They began to speak openly to support a strong unitary leader to strengthen the organization. Supporters of Palaniswami pushed for the change in the party's leadership structure by staging a political coup against AIADMK coordinator Panneerselvam. From the beginning of the merger he seemed to be powerless within the party cadre. Of the 75 district secretaries, hardly 10 members supported him. Of the 66 MLAs, only three were reportedly on the side of Panneerselvam. Besides, the support of the general council was also less.[26]

Coordinator Expelled

The meeting of general council was held on 23 June 2022 and Thamizhmahan Hussain was unanimously elected as the Presidium Chairman of the party.[27] Hussain announced in the meeting that the next general council meeting of the party would be held on 11 July 2022.[28] After the meeting Palanisami and his associates were busy with bringing out a change in the office bearers of the party. After a week, Palaniswami wrote a letter to Panneerselvam on 30 June 2022 informing that he ceased to be the party coordinator as the amendments made to the party's bylaw in the December 2021 executive committee meeting were not recognized in the general council meeting held on 23 June 2022.[29] In the general council meeting held on 11 July 2022, a resolution was passed to expel

Panneerselvam, Vaithilingam, Manoj Pandian, and Prabhakar from their respective posts and primary membership in the party for anti-party activities.[30]

Palaniswami was unanimously elected as the interim general secretary of the party in the general council meeting itself held on 11 July 2022. With his assigned power, Palaniswami appointed Dindigul Sreenivasan as the treasurer of the party, replacing Panneerselvam. Further he appointed Udhayakumar as the deputy leader of the opposition replacing Panneerselvam.[31] Just before the general council meeting, there was violence at the party headquarters between the supporters of Palaniswami and Panneerselvam.[32] Following the incident the office was sealed. On 20 July 2022, the Madras High Court ordered to remove the seal and hand over the keys to the interim general secretary, Edappadi Palaniswami.[33] The party general council abolished the dual leadership model, empowered Edappadi Palaniswami as the party's interim general secretary, and called for organizational elections in 4 months. The general council meeting made 20 amendments to the party bylaws, including the removal of rule 20, which had described the former general secretary J. Jayalalithaa as the eternal general secretary; reviving the post of general secretary; transferring all the powers of the coordinator and joint coordinator to the general secretary; and abolishing the posts of coordinator and joint coordinator. These changes in the bylaws effectively ended the dual leadership of the party.[34]

The Legal Battle

Panneerselvam with his supporters continued to assert his rights. He relentlessly approached High Court and Supreme Court. The Madras High Court on 17 August 2022 ruled in favor of O. Panneerselvam and declared the AIADMK general council meeting held on 11 July 2022 which had abolished dual leadership as void ab initio. The court called for the restoration of the status quo as it existed on June 23 and has prevented the party from convening any meeting of the executive council or the general council of the party without joint consent from both Palaniswami and Panneerselvam, thus effectively restoring dual leadership. The court cited procedural lapses to declare the general council meeting held on July 11, invalid and found that there was no data to prove Palaniswami's claim that 95 percent of the 1.5 crore primary party members supported unitary leadership under him.[35] Palaniswami appealed the single-judge court order to a larger bench of judges. Following the order, Panneerselvam appealed for party unity, which included the splinter AMMK group. Palaniswami held Panneerselvam responsible for violence at the party headquarters.[36]

On 2 September 2022, a division bench of the Madras High Court upheld the decisions of the AIADMK general council meeting held on 11 July 2022, and set aside the previous court order of the single judge in the appeal case of Palaniswami, thus effectively restoring unitary leadership.[37] On 23 February 2023, the Supreme Court of India upheld the decisions of the AIADMK general council meeting held on 11 July 2022, and dismissed the petition of Panneerselvam challenging the previous order of the division bench, thus affirming unitary leadership under Palaniswami.[38] On 19 January 2024, the Supreme Court of India refused to stay the August 2023 order of the division bench of Madras High Court, which dismissed the petitions of Panneerselvam challenging resolutions passed by the general council held on 11 July 2022, that led to the expulsion of Panneerselvam and his supporters from the party.[39]

On 28 March 2023, the Madras High Court ruled in favour of Palaniswami and dismissed the petitions of Panneerselvam challenging the resolutions passed at the general council meeting held on 11 July 2022. On the same day, the electoral officers announced that Palaniswami was elected as the general secretary of the party.[40] On 20 April 2023, the Election Commission of India recognized Edappadi Palaniswami as the general secretary of the party, acknowledging the amendments to the party constitution and changes to the list of office-bearers.[41] On 10 July 2023, the Election Commission of India recognized the changes made in the party organization after the party's due election.[42] Currently, the BJP is trying to build coalition around the AIADMK for 2026 assembly elections.[43] Palanisami is again preparing his party with his leadership for new political alliance to defeat his opponents in the forthcoming elections. It seems that multiple centre of power in the party aligned with the leadership of Edappadi Palanisami to reinforce the party. However, the estranged factions may try opponents within the

Conclusion

Factions and leadership issues are not unusual in Indian political parties. Tamil Nadu had its own issues in building political parties right from the time of independent. National and regional interests played central role in the growth of political parties. Leadership remains a significance sphere both in the unity and the split of the parties. M.G. Ramachandran, the founder of the AIADMK strongly believed that a leader should be accepted not merely by a group of elites but by the subaltern class. In order to uphold such democratic element he incorporated a rule in the byelaw of the party that the top leader should be elected by its primary members. The political scenario of Tamil Nadu from 2017 to 2025 relating to the AIADMK is largely moved by the competing leadership immediately after the demise of Jayalalithaa. Three leaders continuously claimed their position despite several ruling of the courts. With the result, threat to party unity, electoral symbol and decline of grass root support are the major issues discussed in the media. As a general secretary elected by the general council, Edappadi Palanisami has to tackle the opposing groups and also to bring supportive alliance for electoral gains. In spite of all the troubles and confusions over the future of the party, Edappadi Palanisami skillfully steers his party with his democratic leadership heading for the unity of the party as well as for the future elections.

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