

# High stakes in India's Tamil Nadu election

by Ramtanu Maitra

During the last 10 months, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has barnstormed through the southern state of Tamil Nadu seven times. The purpose is to bring his ruling Congress-I party back to power in the state assembly elections scheduled to be held on Jan. 21.

During these visits, most of which are dubbed "official tours," the prime minister and his entourage have gone through 216 of the 234 assembly constituencies at a breakneck speed. At the latest rally in Madras, the state's capital, Gandhi's speech drew 100,000—an indication of his party's growing capability to gather crowds in a state where it had long been relegated to second place.

Winning in Tamil Nadu is considered important for the Congress-I and Gandhi for a number of reasons. First, the death of former chief minister M.G. Ramachandran ("MGR") exposed the weakness of the then-ruling AIADMK and gave the Congress-I an opening. Second, the Congress-I lost all four southern states in the last state assembly elections, and has had to depend more and more on the northern states for a plurality of seats in the Parliament. An electoral victory in Tamil Nadu will not only snatch away a southern state from the regional hold, but will reassure voters nationwide that the Congress-I is back in good health. Third, Tamil Nadu is adjacent to Sri Lanka, separated by the 21-mile-wide Palk Strait. Some militant Tamils who have aspired for years to carve out an independent nation within Sri Lanka, and who are opposed by both New Delhi and Colombo, have consistently drawn support from the non-Congress-I parties in Tamil Nadu. A Congress-I victory will show that even the Tamils in Nadu endorse the New Delhi policy toward the Sri Lankan crisis, and the territorial integrity of both nations.

## Strategy of the Congress-I

Otherwise, Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress-I leaders are most eager to dash the opposition's hopes that the Congress-I, under Gandhi's leadership, has grown weaker and can be defeated. In Tamil Nadu, the strongest opponent of the Congress-I is the DMK, under the wily leader M. Karunanidhi. A former chief minister, Karunanidhi has been preparing an all-out effort to return to power, following MGR's death. The DMK has joined the National Front, set up as a combined opposition to the Congress-I for the December 1989 parliamentary elections. It is expected to bring the top opposition guns to fire at the Congress-I in Tamil Nadu between now and Jan. 21.

The death of MGR on Dec. 24 last year, led to a split within his party. The two factions—one led by his wife Jananki Ramachandran, and the other by his girlfriend Jayalalitha—fought bitterly, each claiming the mantle of the fallen leader, but only succeeding in breaking the party vertically. The ensuing chaos, which culminated in violent acts within the state assembly hall, led to the dissolution of the government in January 1988. Since then the state has been under the President's Rule, run by the governor, P.C. Alexander.

The Congress-I had been the dominating force in the state in the post-independence years, but lost control in 1967 to a regional party, the DMK. The DMK subsequently split and MGR carried his faction, the AIADMK, to power in 1977. With a populist style of administration and his charisma as a popular movie star, MGR became an institution. For a decade he remained chief minister of Tamil Nadu, in an alliance with Congress at the national level, until a couple of heart attacks ended his reign.

The present campaign is shaping up as a no-holds-barred electoral battle. During his recent visit to Madras, Gandhi said, referring to the DMK's association with the National Front, which is dominated by leaders from Hindu-speaking northern India, that he wonders how the Tamil chauvinists of yesterday have joined hands with the Hindi chauvinists of the North. "How can the Tamil heritage be safe in the hands of Hindi chauvinists?" he asked. This is a blatant appeal to the subterranean feeling of southern Indians, and Tamils especially, that India's affairs should not be in the hands of a clique representing Hindi-speaking northern India. In the 1950s, Tamil Nadu had resorted to violence to reject the imposition of Hindi as the national language.

On the other side, DMK leader Karunanidhi charged: "Rajiv Gandhi is misusing the state government's money for his visits. The state spends over Rs. 10 crore [\$7.5 million] on each of his visits. Poor Tamilians are going to pay for his extravagant tours. We will expose him." Karunanidhi said that his party would focus on three issues: a demand for more power for the state and a greater share in national resources; reinforcing the stand of the party against the imposition of the Hindi language; and the ills of the governor's rule.

It will, however, be very difficult for either the Congress-I or the DMK to secure an absolute majority Jan. 21. The Congress-I, had won 62 seats in the previous election and the DMK won only 20 seats. The factionally split AIADMK will lose a large number of the 120-plus seats that it had won in the last elections.

Political observers in New Delhi believe that the Tamil Nadu elections will be a definite indicator of the coming general elections. A resounding Congress-I victory would give the prime minister and his party a much-needed political boost. If the Congress-I fails to make any dent, however, the party bigwigs will have to re-evaluate the political scene and devise new strategies.