Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Election set for 23 April

THE VIJAY EFFECT: CAN A 'MASS HERO' REDRAW TAMIL NADU POLITICS?

BY SULOCHANA RAMIAH MOHAN

In a high-voltage political climate, the upcoming Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Election is set to unfold in Tamil Nadu – Sri Lanka's closest southern neighbour – with potential political, cultural, and economic implications for Sri Lanka in the years ahead.

The election features key political figures, including Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, actor-turned-politician C. Joseph Vijay, and Seeman, among others.

Legislative Assembly Election is scheduled to be held on 23 April 2026 to elect all 234 members of the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly. The counting of votes will take place on 4 May 2026, when the results are expected to be officially declared.

Elections in Tamil Nadu have historically cast light beyond India's borders. This time, however, the political atmosphere is further intensified by the entry of a 'mass actor' Vijay into active politics, turning the competitive race into a dynamic and unpredictable contest.

The campaign has been marked by sharp rhetoric, aggressive mobilisation, and strategic positioning by both established parties and emerging players. With a massive fan base built over decades in Tamil cinema, Vijay is the centre of attraction, and he has translated his on-screen popularity into political traction. His party, Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), launched two years ago, has rapidly gained visibility and momentum, drawing large crowds across campaign stops.

Vijay has stepped away from his acting career – once a highly lucrative venture – stating that he is giving back to the people what they gave him. His political rise has drawn inevitable comparisons to the late M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), an iconic actor-politician who left a lasting imprint on Tamil Nadu's governance. MGR's influence also extended into Sri Lankan political discourse during the civil conflict era. Following his death in 1987, there were reports of extreme public grief, including instances of fans engaging in self-harm and self-immolation. The nostalgia associated with his welfare-driven, mass-oriented leadership appears to be resurfacing, particularly among voters seeking alternatives to traditional parties. In recent weeks, some youngsters in the Northern Province have expressed support for Vijay, holding TVK flags and parading on the streets of Jaffna with music.

The ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), led by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, remains a formidable force too, backed by governance experience and a strong party machinery. He is known to have strengthened Tamil Nadu's economic and social framework through structured governance and advisory systems.

The Opposition All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), despite internal challenges, continues to be a significant contender. Meanwhile, Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK), led by Seeman, still appeals to nationalist and youth segments, though its position appears increasingly vulnerable.

Vijay's entry has disrupted this balance, triggering criticism and resistance from established figures, including Stalin and senior AIADMK leader O. Panneerselvam. Many within the political establishment view his rise with caution, as it threatens to fragment traditional vote banks. Questions persist about whether a film star can transition into a credible political leader in a complex governance environment.

Jana Nayagan release disrupted for political reasons

Adding to the political tension is the controversy surrounding Vijay's last film, *Jana Nayagan*, which was scheduled for release during Pongal in January 2026, but was trapped by the censor board and never officially released. This move some interpret as politically victimising actor Vijay. It later surfaced online through an alleged leak, with viewers claiming it carried themes critical of the ruling establishment. The timing has fuelled speculation, though no claims have been verified.

The campaign has also been shaped by a tragic incident that briefly cast a shadow over Vijay's political ambitions. In September 2025, a stampede at a campaign rally in Karur, attended by crowds far exceeding permitted limits, resulted in over 40 deaths. The tragedy triggered criticism and raised concerns over crowd management. Personal controversies, including reports of marital issues, in which his Jaffna-born wife filed for a divorce, also circulated widely on social media, often amplified through memes and political messaging, though Vijay has largely remained silent on such matters.

In the aftermath of the Karur tragedy, Vijay withdrew from public engagements for nearly three months, reportedly a period of reflection. He later reached out privately to victims' families, meeting them without media attention or heavy security. These gestures were well received, with some families publicly acknowledging his support, helping to shift the narrative from criticism to empathy and restoring momentum to his campaign.

Vijay's entry is widely seen as a potential 'spoiler' in the upcoming election. A significant share of young and first-time voters is believed to be gravitating towards TVK. This recalls the 2016 Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Election, when fractured Opposition votes influenced the outcome. Current indicators suggest TVK may not dominate but could reshape results in key constituencies, possibly benefiting the DMK.

Among those most affected is NTK, which, despite growing from 1.16% in 2016 to 8.2% in the 2024 Indian general election, risks losing its youthful support base to Vijay's movement. TVK's positioning as a modern, tech-driven alternative appears to be resonating more strongly with younger voters.

Vijay's manifesto, on the other hand, is framed around "21st Century Good Governance." It emphasises digital transformation and artificial intelligence. Proposals include a Citizen Privilege Card, a Right to Service Act delivered through a "Vettri Tamil Nadu Super App," and a Real-Time Governance Dashboard for transparency. Plans for a Ministry of Artificial Intelligence and an 'AI City' aim to position Tamil Nadu as a digital innovation hub. While ambitious, these proposals have drawn both interest and scepticism regarding feasibility.

While Vijay has energised the electorate, governing a complex State requires policy depth and institutional expertise beyond public appeal. Known to be personally reserved off-screen but a tough nut on the silver screen, what is expected from his supporters is that he faces the test of translating this image into leadership.

If Vijay succeeds in converting popularity into political authority, it could significantly disrupt the existing order – not only in Tamil Nadu but potentially influencing regional political currents, including in Sri Lanka.

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