

ASIA PACIFIC

# Death of Tamil Nadu's Leader Leaves Power Vacuum in Southern India

By ELLEN BARRY DEC. 5, 2016

NEW DELHI — A paroxysm of grief began rippling through the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on Monday when its longtime leader, an imperious former starlet known by her followers as Amma, or Mother, was pronounced dead.

Jayalalithaa Jayaram, 68, who was serving her fifth term as chief minister, suffered a cardiac arrest Sunday night.

Dramatic displays of emotion are not unusual in southern Indian politics, and Ms. Jayaram, with her queenly manner and numerous subsidies for the poor, had inspired an especially passionate following.

Many in Tamil Nadu began to brace for civil unrest, stockpiling food and gasoline or rushing away from the capital, Chennai, for safety.

A crowd gathered outside the hospital where Ms. Jayaram was being treated, and when rumors spread that she had died, they exploded, tearing down food stalls and surging toward the hospital gates in powerful waves.

“There is almost a sense of madness, a sense of frenzy, as her supporters are beginning to confront the unthinkable,” said a journalist, Sreenivasan Jain, reporting from outside the hospital for the cable news station NDTV.

Her death ushers in an uncertain period for the roughly 78 million people in Tamil Nadu, in part because it is unclear who will succeed her as leader of her party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.

Her longtime lieutenant and loyalist, O. Panneerselvam, was named chief minister. He stepped in to take his mentor's place twice in previous years, but was so carefully submissive to her that he avoided sitting at her desk.

Ms. Jayaram had built a system that did not allow anyone to compete with her, said A. R. Venkatachalapathy, a historian, who compared her to a mythical Greek king who, to teach his subjects a political lesson, cut off any plant that rose above the others.

“Over the last 25 years, what Jayalalithaa has done is ensured that there was no second line, no third line, no fourth line, that there was not a single leader who had his own support base,” Mr. Venkatachalapathy said. “She ensured that everyone in her party was dependent on her and her alone.”

Chennai, formerly Madras, a city of more than four million people, is likely to be paralyzed for several days. The last time a leader of Ms. Jayaram's stature died, it was her mentor and predecessor, a former matinee idol named Maruthur Gopala Ramachandran. After his death in 1987, mourners looted shops and set buses on fire, and the police fired on the crowds with tear gas and live ammunition.

Enormous crowds of mourners are expected to converge on Chennai from different parts of the state to view Ms. Jayaram's remains.

Some of the public grieving has a political purpose, as would-be political successors try to demonstrate their loyalty by commanding the largest convoy of vehicles.

Ms. Jayaram's autocratic style in no way diminished her popularity, and may have enhanced it, especially among the poor, lower-caste women who were her most devoted followers. She expected slavish displays of devotion from top bureaucrats and party functionaries, watching coolly as they lay full-length at her feet and pressed their faces to the floor.

“She not only made men fall at her feet, she made it a spectacle,” Mr. Venkatachalapathy said. “Women really liked that.”

Ms. Jayaram clawed her way to the top of a male-dominated political system — in one instance, literally.

She was in her 30s when Mr. Ramachandran, her cinematic co-star and political guide, died. Though his wife was in line to inherit control of the governing party, Ms. Jayaram staked her claim as his legitimate successor. Donning the white sari traditional for widows, she climbed up onto the gun carriage that carried his body to be cremated, a signal that she was his political heir. One of his nephews dragged her off, a scene that was captured by television cameras, vastly increasing sympathy for her.

Three years later, she had wrested control of the party from Mr. Ramachandran’s widow, and she maintained it until her death.

She presided over a well-run state, with high literacy rates and low child mortality. She started numerous programs tailored to the poor, many of them named after herself, with healthy meals available for pennies at “Amma canteens” and subsidized medicines at “Amma pharmacies.”

It was no secret that she enriched herself in office. In 1995, during a period when she claimed to earn a salary of 1 rupee per month (about three American cents at the time), she staged an opulent waterfront wedding for her foster son that included 40,000 guests and a formal sit-down dinner for 12,800. In 2014, a judge found her guilty of illegally accumulating around \$10 million in tributes during her first term.

She served brief jail terms for corruption in 1996 and 2014.

Even then, her followers came to her defense. Giant posters went up in Chennai, showing Ms. Jayaram’s face, asking, “How can a human being punish a god?”

For decades, when neither of India’s two largest parties could muster a parliamentary majority, she was a mercurial — but indispensable — coalition partner.

In 1999, feeling neglected by the governing party, she brought its parliamentary coalition crashing down, announcing the act by inviting Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the opposition, for a cup of tea.

An American diplomatic cable, written in 2009 and released by WikiLeaks, said that Ms. Jayaram's "ruthlessness, including her willingness to sanction violence in pursuit of her goals, eventually reversed the traditional view of gender roles, leading the public to see Jayalalithaa as the toughest person in Tamil Nadu politics."

Her autocratic style gave rise to a political environment in which party members competed in public to display their obedience, reserving their criticism of Ms. Jayaram for private conversations, said A. S. Panneerselvan, a newspaper editor.

"There would be one narrative on the record and a totally different narrative off the record," Mr. Panneerselvan said. "When I looked at my notes I used to go completely mad. I would ask myself, 'Am I writing fiction?'"

While the state's political elite may have had mixed feelings about their leader, that ambivalence did not extend to the general populace, in particular women, who have enjoyed "the vicarious pleasure of seeing a woman completely in control," said Badri Seshadri, a political analyst based in Chennai. The next few days, he said, will be "very intense and very, very difficult" in Tamil Nadu.

"The intense emotion that people on the street feel, that's real, it's not put up, it's not for television," he said. "For the next 60 years they will commemorate her birthday and the day of her death." For 60 years at least. Joyously and solemnly."

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