

Policy Spotlight.

Cinema, Populism, and the Making of Political Authority: Tamil Nadu State Election 2026

Zacky Fouz

2026

Issue No. 1



Cinema, Populism, and the Making of Political Authority:

Tamil Nadu State Election 2026

Zacky Fouz¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the 2026 Tamil Nadu election, actor-turned-politician Joseph Vijay led Tamizhaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) to become the largest party with 108 seats. Though short of a majority, he formed a coalition government and became Chief Minister, marking a major disruption of the long-standing DMK–AIADMK political dominance.
- Vijay’s rise in the 2026 Tamil Nadu election reflects the continued influence of cinema in politics. TVK’s victory ended the exclusive dominance of DMK and AIADMK since 1967. His success was driven by mass popularity, youth support, and fan networks, reinforcing cinema’s role in shaping political leadership.
- Vijay’s victory reflects the rise of personality-driven populism in Tamil Nadu, emphasising anti-corruption, good governance, and welfare over ideological positioning. Regionally, it aligns with South Asia’s broader anti-incumbency trends and an emerging youth-led political realignment.

¹ Zacky Fouz is Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and Madani Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

INTRODUCTION

The results of the latest Tamil Nadu state election in India, announced on 5 May 2026, produced one of the most remarkable electoral upsets in the recent history of the state's politics. Defying most pre-election surveys, which had predicted victory for the incumbent Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) or Dravida Progressive Front, actor-turned-politician Joseph Vijay (b. 1974) led his newly established Tamizhaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) or Tamil Victory Federation, to an unprecedented success, winning 108 seats in the 234-member State Legislative Assembly (Election Commission of India, 2026). Although the party fell 10 seats short of the 118 required to secure an outright majority and form a government on its own, TVK emerged as the single largest party in the Assembly. J. Vijay was subsequently appointed as the 13th Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu after securing the support of several parties that had previously been allied with the DMK government during the 2021-2026 period, including the National Congress Party, the Indian Union Muslim League, and a number of smaller regional caste-based parties (The Hindu, 2026).

Vijay's rise and the electoral victory of Tamizhaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) have been widely interpreted as one of the most significant political developments in Tamil Nadu's history. Since 1967, the state's politics has been dominated by two highly institutionalised Dravidian parties: the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), both rooted in regional Tamil cultural and Dravidian identity. Despite numerous political challenges and shifts, these two parties have alternated in power for nearly six decades (Nilakantan, 2026). Prior to 1967, Tamil Nadu was governed by the Indian National Congress (Congress Party), a pan-Indian political party that had ruled independent India continuously for nearly two decades. However, the DMK's victory in the 1967 state elections marked a watershed moment in Tamil Nadu's political history. Since then, no national party has won a state election or held the office of Chief Minister, with the state's political landscape remaining firmly dominated by regional Dravidian parties. Against this backdrop of enduring Dravidian dominance, the emergence and victory of TVK in 2026 raise questions about the nature and direction of political change in the state. What does this victory signify? Does it represent an ideological rupture in Tamil Nadu politics, or should it instead be understood as a reconfiguration within the existing Dravidian political framework? More broadly, how should TVK's success be interpreted?

Although interpretations of TVK's victory vary, political analysts and observers of South Indian politics generally agree that one of the key factors behind Vijay's rise and the success of his party is his immense popularity as one of the most successful actors in the Tamil film industry. His cinematic fame enabled him to attract a broad support base, particularly among younger voters and Generation Z (Venkataraghavan, 2026). More significantly, Vijay's ascent highlights the enduring relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu. In this respect, he became the sixth Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu to successfully convert cinematic popularity into electoral success, following a distinctive tradition in the state's politics established by five of his predecessors: C. N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, M. G. Ramachandran, V. N. Janaki Ramachandran, and J. Jayalalithaa. His victory thus reinforces a long-standing pattern in which

the appeal and charisma cultivated through Tamil cinema served as important political resources within the state's democratic politics.

Recent scholarship explains the close relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu through the concept of cinematic populism, whereby films construct certain actors and narratives as embodiments of “the people” in opposition to dominant social forces (Karinkurayil, 2024, pp. 66–69). This process enables film stars to transform their screen personas into political legitimacy and authority. Vijay's political rise must therefore be understood within this longstanding. His electoral success reflects not only personal popularity but also the enduring capacity of Tamil cinema to shape collective identities, mobilise public sentiment, and generate charismatic leadership.

TRACING THE ORIGIN OF THE CINEMA–POLITICS NEXUS IN TAMIL NADU

Understanding the relationship between cinema and politics in Tamil Nadu requires tracing its roots to the emergence of Dravidian ideology and the broader Dravidian movement, which shaped the state's socio-political landscape throughout much of the twentieth century. Its intellectual foundations are closely associated with Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (Periyar), who, through the Self-Respect Movement, challenged caste hierarchies and Brahmin dominance (Hardgrave, 1964). He argued that social inequalities were sustained by religious doctrines and mythologies that legitimised caste distinctions and regarded them as incompatible with the principles of social justice, human reason, and equality. Periyar also viewed Indian as well as Hindu nationalism as projects that advanced the interests of dominant Brahmin groups while marginalising lower-caste communities (M. Vijayabaskar, 2025, p. 230). Central to his thought was the claim that South Indians possessed a distinct linguistic and cultural identity and that caste hierarchies and their accompanying religious traditions had been introduced through northern Aryan influences. Consequently, he advocated the liberation of South Indian society from these traditions (Wyatt, 2009, p. 19). Periyar's ideas provided the ideological foundations of Dravidianism, which had become the dominant framework shaping Tamil Nadu's socio-political order by the 1960s.

One of the key factors that enabled Dravidian ideology and the broader movement to shape the political imagination of Tamil Nadu was its strategic deployment of cultural and aesthetic forms, particularly travelling theatre, stage drama, and later cinema. These media foregrounded themes of caste oppression, social inequality, and the dominance of religious elites over ordinary people. Many individuals involved in these cultural activities subsequently emerged as prominent public figures and political leaders associated with the movement (Hardgrave, 1973, p. 290). Following the establishment of the DMK in 1949—the first political party to emerge from Dravidian ideology in post-independence India—several influential figures who had previously participated in theatrical productions associated with Periyar, including C. N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, M. G. Ramachandran (MGR), and Sivaji Ganesan, became closely associated with the party. Drawing on their experience in writing, acting, and public performance, these figures increasingly turned to cinema as the medium gained popularity in the 1940s to communicate and popularise Dravidian political ideas.

THE FORMATION OF THE ACTOR–POLITICIAN PHENOMENON IN TAMIL NADU POLITICS

As film emerged as a crucial vehicle through which the DMK disseminated its political discourse and expanded its appeal among the Tamil-speaking population, it increasingly integrated ideological messages into popular entertainment. Cinema enabled the party to cultivate a broad social base and establish an enduring connection between popular culture and electoral politics in Tamil Nadu. In the history of the DMK's engagement with political cinema, one of its most influential films was *Parasakthi* (1952), which became a major commercial success and is widely regarded as a landmark in Tamil cinematic history. The film starred Sivaji Ganesan, while its script was written by M. Karunanidhi; both were prominent members of the DMK at the time. *Parasakthi* conveyed key themes of Dravidian ideology, particularly its opposition to caste hierarchies and social discrimination, and played a significant role in popularising these ideas among the Tamil public (Hardgrave, 1973, p. 292).

In the 1960s and 1970s, another prominent figure emerged who further consolidated the nexus between Tamil cinema and politics: Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran (MGR). He rose to prominence as a leading actor and a central figure within the DMK, starring in numerous films that consistently portrayed him as a champion of the poor, the vulnerable, and women's empowerment, as well as a moral figure fighting for uprightness in society (Dickey, 1993, p. 169). As his films achieved widespread commercial success, the DMK increasingly leveraged its institutional networks to promote MGR as a key political asset. However, MGR's growing popularity and the institutional consolidation of the DMK eventually came into conflict in the early 1970s, as the party leadership increasingly viewed his expanding mass appeal as a potential liability that could challenge and outgrow the authority of the party's established hierarchy, leading to his suspension and subsequent expulsion from the party (Prasad, 2013, p. 38).

Following his expulsion from the DMK, M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) founded the AIADMK in 1972. His strong cinematic appeal, cultivated through his portrayal of a champion of the poor, together with his immense popularity and devoted mass following, contributed significantly to his political success. He served as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1977 until his death in 1987, having won three consecutive assembly elections as leader of the AIADMK. After his death, leadership of the AIADMK eventually passed to Jayalalithaa, who had co-starred with MGR in several films and later emerged as a major political leader in her own right. From the 1990s to 2016, Tamil Nadu politics was largely dominated by two Dravidian parties led by prominent politicians shaped by the long-standing nexus between cinema and politics: the DMK under M. Karunanidhi and the AIADMK under J. Jayalalithaa (Prasad, 2013, p. 189).

In the early 2000s, a third political force emerged: the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDMK), or the "National Progressive Dravidian Federation." The party later rose to become the main opposition in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly during the 2011–2015 period. A notable feature of this development is that the party was once again founded by actor-

turned-politician Vijayakant (1952–2023). Prior to entering politics, Vijayakant was a widely popular film actor, particularly known for portraying characters in which Tamil protagonists resolved crises extending beyond the state context. These roles frequently framed Tamil identity as not merely regional or peripheral but as capable of engaging with and addressing broader national challenges. This cinematic construction of leadership was carried into his political project, including the symbolic framing embedded in the party's name, which invokes the idea of a national progressive Dravidian federation (Velayutham & Devadas, 2022). His party's central discourse was built on the claim that both the DMK and the AIADMK had failed to adequately serve the vulnerable and economically disadvantaged sections of society in a substantive manner. In contrast, he positioned himself as a direct and uncompromising representative of the people, promising to act as a 'servant of the public.' In this sense, his political narrative did not reject the dominant Dravidian political framework outright. Rather, it sought to intensify and reconfigure its welfare-oriented populism (Wyatt, 2009, p. 172).

From M. G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalithaa to Vijayakant, a significant factor contributing to their successful entry into politics was the institutional support of their fan club networks. These fan clubs were typically organised by ardent followers of the actors and functioned as informal but highly structured organisations dedicated to promoting the actor's public image. Over time, many of these fan club networks extended their activities beyond publicity functions to include community-oriented initiatives, often engaging in welfare and charitable work in the name of the actor. This helped cultivate a grassroots organisational base that could be mobilised for political purposes. In this way, fan clubs operated as an important bridge between cinematic popularity and electoral mobilisation (Dickey, 1993, pp. 158–165). This phenomenon became even more sophisticated with the arrival of social media networks, as fan groups and clubs circulated edited film clips and electoral speeches to actively campaign for actor politicians such as Vijay (Ethirajan, 2026).

THE RISE OF VIJAY

Vijay's electoral success should be understood within the broader cinified political condition of Tamil Nadu. In this context, cinema does not merely serve an instrumental role as a medium for political messaging; rather, it actively produces and reproduces political actors themselves. As Ramachandran and Mathew argue, the screen creates its own reality and speaks for itself (Ramachandran & Mathew, 2026). Vijay's rise to the highest office in the Tamil Nadu state assembly therefore owes less to the ideological foundations of his party than to the political capital generated by his cinematic persona and mass popularity (Nilakantan, 2026). His victory is thus not an anomaly but rather a continuation of a long-standing pattern in Tamil Nadu politics.

Vijay's cinematic career spans over three decades, beginning in the early 1990s. In his early years, his roles emphasised empathy, accessibility, moral integrity, and sacrifice. Between 2000 and 2010, his screen persona evolved into a more heroic figure who actively confronted criminals and gangsters, reinforcing his image as both compassionate and decisive. Since 2010, his films have increasingly focused on themes of governance, corruption, and elite exploitation,

portraying him as a champion of justice. These representations have contributed to a political image resonating with public discontent over governance and corruption (Venkataraghavan, 2026).

Significantly, when Vijay announced his retirement from cinema to enter politics, his final film *Jananayagan* (The Democrat) further consolidated this emerging political image. Although the film remained unreleased at the time, its audio launch in Malaysia attracted considerable attention and symbolically underscored the role of the Tamil diaspora in sustaining and expanding the Tamil film industry beyond India. In particular, Malaysia is widely recognised as home to one of Vijay's largest and most active fan bases outside Tamil Nadu. For many Malaysian Tamils, Tamil cinema functions as a vital cultural medium through which language, tradition, and heritage are continuously reconnected and reimagined within a multicultural setting (Ravindran, 2008). The film's narrative, centring on an ordinary citizen who rises against a corrupt political system to become a popular leader, closely mirrors Vijay's own political trajectory. *Jananayagan* marks the culmination of a long process through which his cinematic persona has gradually been translated into political legitimacy.

TAMIL NADU AND THE NEW POLITICS OF SOUTH ASIA

In the aftermath of Vijay's electoral victory over Tamil Nadu's long-established political heavyweights, the DMK and the AIADMK, considerable debate has emerged regarding the broader implications of his success for the state's political trajectory. This discussion has largely centred on scrutiny of his campaign rhetoric, public discourse, and political style. Some analysts have characterised Vijay's electoral discourse and manifesto as a form of 'valence populism': a mode of populist politics that is not firmly anchored in either left- or right-wing ideological positions but instead foregrounds broadly resonant and electorally attractive themes such as anti-corruption, good governance, and anti-elitism. Such a style prioritises mass appeal and emotional resonance over ideological coherence and detailed programmatic commitments. In Vijay's case, his discourse has notably emphasised anti-corruption narratives alongside welfare-oriented promises directed at women and youth.

Viewed from this perspective, his emergence may signal a gradual dilution of the ideological progressivism historically associated with Tamil Nadu politics (Ramachandran & Mathew, 2026). Traditionally, although cinematic personalities have exercised significant influence in the political arena, the state's political landscape has been shaped by sustained contestations over redistribution, social justice, recognition of marginalised communities, and regional autonomy. The rise of a more personality-driven and media-mediated form of populism raises important questions about whether these long-standing ideological cleavages are being displaced by a more personalised and, potentially, depoliticised form of democratic competition. This development warrants close observation in the coming years, particularly in relation to Vijay's tenure in office and the policy direction adopted by his government.

In a broader comparative perspective, Vijay's electoral victory can also be situated within wider developments across South Asia, particularly the rise of anti-incumbency politics and a

new generational political culture shaped by younger voters, including Gen Z. Across countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, these political shifts have reflected growing disillusionment with established elites and entrenched party systems alongside increasing demands for accountability and more responsive governance. Against this backdrop, Vijay's success has been interpreted by some as symbolically resonant with regional transformations, reflecting broader patterns of political realignment across the region.

References

- Dickey, S. (1993). *Cinema and the urban poor in South India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Election Commission of India. (2026). *Party-wise results: Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections (S22)*. <https://results.eci.gov.in/ResultAcGenMay2026/partywiseresult-S22.htm>
- Ethirajan, A. (2026, May 10). *How social media turned Indian film star Vijay into a political force*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj4pn1z8x45o>
- Hardgrave, R. L., Jr. (1964). The DMK and the politics of Tamil nationalism. *Pacific Affairs*, 37(4), 396–411.
- Hardgrave, R. L., Jr. (1973). Politics and the film in Tamilnadu: The stars and the DMK. *Asian Survey*, 13(3), 288–305. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643038>
- Karinkurayil, M. S. (2024). Cinematic populism. In *Encyclopedia of new populism and responses in the 21st century* (pp. 66–69). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-7802-1_45
- Manoharan, K. R. (2026). Vijay and the reinvention of Dravidian politics. *Frontline*. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/vijay-tvk-upends-dmk-aiadmk-in-tamil-nadu/article70969537.ece>
- Nilakantan, R. S. (2026). Tamil Nadu election: Vijay's TVK and the crisis of Dravidian politics. *Frontline*. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/tamil-nadu-election-vijay-tvk-dravidian-politics-crisis/article71001934.ece>
- Prasad, M. M. (2013). *Cine-politics: Film stars and political existence in South India*. Orient BlackSwan.
- Ramachandran, A., & Mathew, K. (2026, February 7). The missing isms in Vijayism: Vijayism abandons ideology, programmes, and disagreement, leaning instead on consensus, charisma, and content-lite cinema. TVK's politics is anchored on star power rather than ideas. *Frontline*. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/vijay-content-light-politics-cinema-populism-tamil-nadu/article70582751.ece>
- Ravindran, G. (2008). Malaysian Tamils and transnational Tamil cinema: Diasporic identities, 'crisis heterotopia' and 'aura'. *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, 5, 99–118.
- The Hindu*. (2026, May 22). Tamil Nadu government formation: Know the TVK ministers in C. Joseph Vijay's cabinet. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tamil-nadu-government-formation-know-the-tvk-ministers-in-c-joseph-vijays-cabinet/article70961530.ece>
- Velayutham, S. (Ed.). (2008). *Tamil cinema: The cultural politics of India's other film industry*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203930373>
- Velayutham, S., & Devadas, V. (2022). Tamil Nadu politics and Tamil cinema: A symbiotic relationship? *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 8(1), 96–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23938617211054160>
- Venkataraghavan, S. (2026, May 5). From reel hero to political force: How Vijay's film persona powered his electoral win. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/from-reel-hero-to-political-force-how-vijay-s-film-persona-powered-his-electoral-win-101777954434862.html>

- Vijayabaskar, M. (2025). The social subsumes the economic: Periyar's reading of economic power in caste society. In A. R. Venkatachalapathy & K. Ram Manoharan (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Periyar* (pp. 217–233). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009605342.014>
- Wyatt, A. (2009). *Party system change in South India: Political entrepreneurs, patterns and processes*. Routledge.

