

Mass grief

as Indian political star buried



Indian supporters react



Indian supporters of Indian politician and actress Jayalalithaa Jayaraman, light candles

Chennai

Hundreds of thousands of mourners paid an emotional final farewell yesterday to Indian politician Jayalalithaa Jayaram as the former movie star who enjoyed god-like status was buried alongside her screen lover.

A day after the 68-year-old died following a massive weekend cardiac arrest, huge crowds lined the street of Chennai as Jayalalithaa's coffin was taken to its final resting place in India's main southern city.

Mourners clambered onto statues, trees and soft drinks stalls that lined the city's Marina beach, eager to view the cortege. Television put the number of mourners at around one million.

Despite being twice jailed over allegations of corruption, the woman known simply as Amma, or mother, was a revered figure in her fiefdom of Tamil Nadu state and one of India's most popular and successful politicians as a populist champion of the poor.

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi flew to Chennai to pay his own respects, streams of her supporters lined up outside a hall in the city centre where her casket was on display.

While the coffin was wrapped in an Indian flag, many of the mourners were wearing scarves with the red, white and black colours of Jayalalithaa's party.

Many of the women mourners screamed hysterically and wept, although there were no reports of serious unrest amid a large security presence. "It is a very sad day. She was an essential part of the state. She was meant for greatness," said Christina Paun, a 34-year-old university professor who was among

those queuing to pay their respects. "She had a very difficult life in a male-dominated society but she was always different. She was always great. She had perfect control over her emotions.

Famed for a vast sari collection that won her comparisons with Imelda Marcos, Jayalalithaa was also one of India's most polarising politicians, seen by some as an autocratic and secretive leader.

But nothing could dent her popularity in Tamil Nadu, where she was elected chief minister on four occasions in a period when it became one of India's most prosperous states.

Jayalalitha first made her name starring in movies alongside M. G. Ramachandran, who later became her political mentor before his death nearly 30 years ago.

Although most Hindus are cremated, Jayalalithaa had requested in her will that she be buried alongside her former co-star in his memorial building. As her coffin was lowered into the ground inside the mausoleum, thousands of petals were scattered on top.

Hundreds of devotees had kept a round-the-clock vigil outside the private hospital in Chennai -- the city formerly known as Madras -- since she was first admitted in September suffering from a fever.

When she first fell ill one supporter set himself on fire, while an elderly man suspended himself from a crane with steel hooks pierced through his skin. "The people are very depressed. We were expecting her to recover even yesterday. She is the bravest lady in the world," said Manohar, a businessman who was among the queue of mourners. (AFP)

Populist schemes

Jayalalithaa earned the loyalty of many voters with a series of populist schemes, including "Amma canteens" that provided lunch for just

three rupees (five cents) and vast election-time giveaways.

Several of her supporters resorted to self-harm

when she was briefly jailed in 2014 on charges of corruption.

Her conviction, later overturned on appeal,

sparked mass protests and even some reported suicides.

Jayalalithaa's death has plunged one of India's most

economically powerful states into a period of political uncertainty.

Her trusted cabinet aide, O Panneerselvam, was

sworn in as chief minister, but observers are uncertain whether a loyalist who lacks mass support will be able to rule smoothly.