

India court jails ex-film star politician for corruption

Indian court sentences former film star Jayalalithaa Jayaram, one of the country's most controversial politicians, to four years in jail after long-running corruption case



One of India's most powerful regional leaders, Jayalalithaa Jayaram Photo: AFP/GETTY

By Dean Nelson, New Delhi

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One of India's most powerful regional leaders was sentenced to four years in jail and fined £10 million after she was convicted of corruption on Saturday.

Jayalalithaa Jayaram's conviction brought a dramatic end to a career which began on screen as a popular teenage film actress and spanned four terms as chief minister of Tamil Nadu, one of India's most developed states.

She was found guilty along with three other aides, including her live-in partner, of having disproportionate assets she could not explain – a £6 million fortune including a portfolio of properties, 2,000 acres of land and 30 kilogrammes of gold. She also owns her own television channel, JJTV.

Her legions of supporters held protests in the state capital Chennai to condemn the verdict as a political conspiracy, but it was welcomed by anti-corruption campaigners as a boost for justice in the country.

The verdict highlights the scale of corruption throughout India and especially in Tamil Nadu where two leaders of her party's main regional rival, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, were charged in the '2G scandal' which tainted the last Congress-led government.

Its telecommunications minister A Raja and the party leader's daughter Kanimozhi were charged with corruption in the award of lucrative mobile phone spectrum licenses.

The last government's former railways minister, Lalu Prasad Yadav, was jailed in 2013 for his role in a £200 million fake subsidy scandal when he was chief minister for Bihar.

Jayalalithaa Jayaram had used her first term as chief minister to accumulate her sizeable fortune while her close aides acquired hospitals, colleges, marriage halls and sprawling residences. Throughout that period, from 1991 to 1996, she had drawn a monthly salary of just one rupee, the prosecution had said.

Commentators hailed Jayalalithaa's conviction as evidence that India's creaking justice system can still bring its corrupt politicians to account, despite long delays. It took 18 years from when she was first charged in 1996 to her conviction today.

Under Indian law, convicted politicians cannot stand for election for six years, which means she is unlikely to return to power - she will be 71 by the time she becomes eligible once again.

Her main accuser, the senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader and crusading anti-corruption lawyer Subramaniam Swamy said he felt "vindicated" by the verdict.

It was "heartening" that the court had given a guilty judgment "against a person who is powerfully situated. It is a good sign for fighting corruption in India", he told Business Standard.