

Future of Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka after the NPC Election

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Introduction

The thumping victory of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in Sri Lanka's Northern Provincial Council (NPC) election held on September 21, 2013, has to be viewed in the post-Eelam War political setting. It was conducted after electoral politics was set free from the stranglehold of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of nearly three decades. The election is a watershed in Sri Lankan Tamil history as it marks the return of Tamil nationalism to the political platform after a tortuous journey to extremism and insurgency. This makes the election a truly democratic exercise. The huge 68 percent voter turnout in the election showed the people's enthusiastic acceptance of the shift in leadership from the insurgents to the political parties.

The TNA won 30 seats, including two bonus seats in the 38-member council, while the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) secured seven seats and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) won one seat. The TNA secured a record 78.5 percent of the votes polled. Such a huge mandate is an uncommon occurrence in the dual vote system of elections in Sri Lanka.¹ The people of the Northern Province, with their strong support to the TNA, have sent a message to President Mahinda Rajapaksa that they expect the TNA to keep Tamil nationalism alive despite the failure of the Tamil insurgency.²

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President Rajapaksa called the last war against the LTTE a “humanitarian war,” waged to free the Tamils from the oppression of the Tamil Tigers. When the episodic war against the LTTE ended in May 2009, with the elimination of its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and the entire leadership, many rejoiced at the prospect of ushering in permanent peace. They expected President Rajapaksa to kick-start the political process to meet Tamil aspirations and put an end to the prospect of renewed Tamil insurgency once and for all.

However, these expectations have been belied. President Rajapaksa has used the military victory to strengthen his hold and emerge as the all-powerful arbiter of Sri Lanka’s future. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) Mrs Navaneetham Pillay cautioned during her August 2013 visit that Sri Lanka was “increasingly heading in an authoritarian direction.”³ Militarism is gaining an upper hand in general and in the Northern Province in particular. The only redeeming feature is that the Tamil insurgency has ceased to be an existential threat to Sri Lanka.

During the last four years of peace, the state has failed to create an environment free of fear and suspicion among Tamils. The intrusive presence of the Army in Tamil areas has cramped the normal lives of the people. The Tamils’ suspicion and distrust in the government’s intentions were further aggravated when the President continued to dither on conducting the NPC election. Probably, he did not want the TNA, which had a suspect record of being an LTTE proxy during the last two decades, in any position of power. However, as pressure from India and the international community mounted, the President had to conduct the NPC election, despite objections from the influential Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa.⁴

Changing Environment of Tamil Nationalism

Tamil nationalism now has to reorient itself to the changes in the local and international environments during the last three decades. A whole generation of youth has been sacrificed in the years of active insurgency and four episodes of Eelam Wars. Thousands of families have been uprooted and scattered. There had been a huge exodus of the Tamil population from Sri Lanka to seek safer pastures abroad. The societal churning up has broken the caste-oriented conservative mould of Jaffna Tamil society. In Tamil areas, political parties have to build their

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grassroot structures and leadership if they want to be relevant to the people. On the positive side, during the two decades, the Sinhala population had not carried out any retaliatory attacks on the innocent Tamil population in their midst despite the LTTE's provocative suicide attacks in many parts of Sri Lanka. This indicates that the Sinhala population has greater awareness of Tamil aspirations.

The elimination of the LTTE and Prabhakaran has left the Tamils in dismay and disillusioned with insurgency as a favoured option to achieve their aims. However, as the demystification of Prabhakaran has not taken place so far, he has now found a place in the Tamil folklore. Rajapaksa's government has kept the threat of revival of LTTE insurgency alive to justify its reluctance to devolve more powers to the Tamils. This has suited the pro-LTTE elements abroad to rally reluctant supporters to keep the ember of separatism glowing.

India-Sri Lanka relations that had soured after the Indian intervention from 1987 to 1990 are stronger than ever before. They have become more broad-based with closer political security, trade and cultural relations. New Delhi's actions have been stilted to some extent due to Tamil Nadu's loud affirmation of political support to separatist elements which has deepened the suspicion about India's intentions in Sri Lanka. The strong anti-Rajapaksa stance of Tamil Nadu's political leaders has not helped matters. Despite New Delhi's generous support to Sri Lanka in its rehabilitation efforts for internally displaced people, India's vote for the UNHCHR resolutions has further deepened the fissures in its relationship with Sri Lanka. The TNA in power will have to cope with the intrusive impact of Tamil Nadu's amorphous links in Sri Lanka politics while dealing with Colombo as well as New Delhi. India's weakening influence has been exploited by China to enlarge its relations with Sri Lanka. This does not augur well for the Tamils as India's influence could diminish in the future.

Since the end of the Eelam War, international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the international media and the Tamil Diaspora have raised serious allegations of war crimes and custodial killings of Tamils by the Sri Lankan Army. Sri Lanka has been drawing a lot of flak from the international community due to its reluctance to impartially investigate the allegations. Two US sponsored resolutions passed at the UN Human Rights Council in March 2012 and 2013 have sought Sri Lanka's accountability on this count. The backlash to this has led to the rise of Sinhala nationalism and Buddhist fundamentalism

among sections of the population. This is likely to make the ethnic reconciliation process more difficult.

TNA's Image Problem

The TNA has to build bridges with the Sri Lankan government to fulfil some of its electoral promises to the people. However, the TNA's past association with the LTTE is probably the biggest obstacle to this process. The LTTE seized the leadership of the Tamil population through targeted assassination of senior political leaders of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) which had collectively represented Tamil political parties supporting the call for an independent Tamil Eelam. The Tamil Tigers also eliminated key leaders of other Tamil militant groups. This resulted in total disarray of the Tamil political scene.

The surviving leaders of the TULF along with the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) formed the TNA in 2001 in a bid to keep the Tamil political segment alive. Later, the ACTC and TULF quit the alliance; however, the TNA retained its identity with the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK), formed by a powerful splinter group of the TULF as the major partner.

In the process of its survival struggle, the TNA leaders had made large compromises in their beliefs and political role while dealing with the contending forces of the state and the Prabhakaran-led Tamil insurgency which kept them on a leash. The TNA accepted the LTTE's leadership as the national leadership of the Tamils and "the Liberation Tigers as the sole and authentic representatives of the Tamil people" as stated in the TNA manifesto for the parliamentary election in 2004. In the same manifesto, it appealed to the people to work under the leadership of the LTTE and devote their "full cooperation for the ideals of the Liberation Tigers' struggle with honesty and steadfastness."⁵

Even while contesting successive elections with the blessings of Prabhakaran, the TNA had struggled hard to retain its space in the national political mainstream. For many years now, the TNA had been the sole voice to talk about Tamil aspirations in the Parliament. So it is not surprising that despite its insufficient and, at times, contradictory articulation, the TNA has retained a strong following among Sri Lanka Tamils as shown in the NPC elections. However, this process has not taken place in national politics where the TNA's conduct is still viewed with suspicion.

The Tamil Diaspora had been a source of funds for the Sri Lanka Tamil parties. The Diaspora had fled their homeland in the wake of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom in Colombo and subsequently when Tamil insurgency flourished in Sri Lanka, they became its source of strength. With their help, the LTTE built a strong network in the Western world, notably in Canada, the UK, US, European Union and Australia. These international tentacles helped not only in fund raising but also to promote the Tamil cause and even lobby with the organs of the UN. With the exit of Prabhakaran from the scene, the LTTE's international organisation had been in disarray, particularly after the LTTE's arms procurer and former international representative, Kumaran Pathmanathan (alias KP), was apprehended by the Sri Lankan authorities after the war.

The TNA, caught in a political dead end after the elimination of the LTTE and insurgency politics, now has to reckon with President Rajapaksa who has emerged the unchallenged leader of Sri Lanka. The TNA is now trying to ensure that the taint of the Tamil Diaspora efforts to revive Tamil separatism does not stick to it. Moderate Tamil Diaspora elements have gained control of the Global Tamil Forum (GTF), an internationally networked Tamil Diaspora organisation. The GTF had closely worked to help the TNA's pursuit of the Tamil cause democratically within a united Sri Lanka. The TNA manifesto for the NPC election reflects this.⁶

Sri Lankan Tamil leaders have traditionally maintained strong links with India ever since the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom in Colombo drove a large number of Tamils to seek refuge in India. However, the TULF failed to fully accept the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement of 1987, presumably because India appeared to give greater importance to the Tamil militant groups. Moreover, India's well intentioned but ill conceived and partially executed military intervention from 1987 to 1990 left the Tamils stranded in a political half-way house after the creation of provincial councils. On top of it, the LTTE's assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi pushed the Sri Lanka Tamil cause to the political sidelines in India.

However, after the exit of the LTTE, India had been regularly bringing up the devolution issue with the Rajapaksa government and continues to insist on implementation of the 13th Amendment in full. The TNA will need India's political leverage to bring pressure on Sri Lanka, without appearing to be a tool of India. And, this is going to be a challenging task.

TNA's Leadership Problem

The TNA that contested the NPC election was composed of five parties: the EPRLE, People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), TELO, TULE, and ITAK. The TNA, dominated by the ITAK, contested the NPC election under the ITAK symbol of a hut. The component parties have different political ideologies and agendas. Their perceptions have been conditioned by their exposure to Tamil militancy and politics, notably on the acceptance of the LTTE's leadership. Many of them come from parties which were targeted by the LTTE in the past. Their record of participation in parliamentary politics also varies widely. As a result, leaders of these parties within the fold of the TNA have their own ambitions and aspirations. Their differences have been coming to the surface whenever the TNA has had to confront critical issues. These differences came up during the selection of candidates for the NPC election as well as in the allocation of five ministerial berths in the NPC.

However, the TNA leadership under P Sampanthan managed to weather these differences and put up a united front during the elections. This was achieved by naming an eminent apolitical personality – retired Sri Lanka Supreme Court Judge CV Wigneswaran – as the TNA's chief ministerial candidate. So far, the new Chief Minister and the TNA leaders have successfully managed to maintain unity without dissipating their energies in a leadership struggle. However, whether this 'unity in diversity' can be maintained when the TNA confronts contentious issues which defy solution is a moot point.

Implementing the Agenda

The TNA's election manifesto has tried to keep the historical continuity of the Tamil demands in the lengthy preamble.⁷ It is emphatic: "Sovereignty lies with the People and not with the State. It is not the government in Colombo that holds the right to govern the Tamil people, but the people themselves.... The sovereignty of the people is the principle that the authority of the government is created and sustained by the consent of its people, who are the source of all political power." In keeping with this, it rejects the 13th Amendment as flawed and maintains that "the nominated Governor who is appointed by the President is supreme when compared to the democratically elected Chief Minister."

More important is the TNA's call for an independent international investigation into the allegations of violations of human rights and humanitarian laws against both the government and the LTTE during the last stages of the war. This would be welcome to Sri Lanka politicians who have been wary of the TNA's

Eelam pedigree and fear revival of the separatist call. It is a bold step in the Tamil society which is yet to dispassionately analyse the role of Prabhakaran and the LTTE in the Tamil struggle.

The TNA manifesto has identified ten “matters of immediate concern to the Tamil people” many of which are “within the competence of the provincial council.” The issues include demilitarisation of troops from the north and east, removal of high security zones, release of persons detained without charges, and comprehensive programmes for generation of employment opportunities, speedy resettlement of displaced people in their original locations and uplift of war widows. The TNA has reiterated these issues which have already been articulated in Parliament as well as to the international community.

However, to achieve these long and short-term objectives, President Rajapaksa has to turn the tide positively and resume the political process. As a first step, implementation of the 13th Amendment in full is necessary for the NPC to exercise some powers. It can also create a conducive climate for the political process to commence. This is what India had been emphasising in its interactions with Sri Lanka. But as this has not been done so far, already the NPC appears to be on a collision course as it has started exercising its disputed powers.

Northern Province Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran's budget presented on December 10, 2013, proposed to establish Transport and Housing Departments. However, Governor Chandrasiri has held it as unconstitutional as the NPC “can only set up Authorities.” Similarly, the TNA has objected to the appointment of the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of police for the Northern Province without consulting the Chief Minister. Speaking in Parliament, TNA member M.A. Sumanthiran said, “A DIG has to be appointed with the concurrence of the Chief Minister. Similarly, even the provincial Chief Secretary has to be appointed with the same concurrence.” Similarly, the NPC Chief Minister's request for the removal of the Chief Secretary has not been answered for two months now.⁸

Conclusion

The TNA's sweeping victory in the NPC election is only a baby step in the much delayed political process to resolve the long-standing ethnic confrontation in the island nation. However, to make progress, the TNA will have to maintain unity among its component parties and shed its pro-separatist image of the past. Whether it can do so remains to be seen, particularly when it confronts

contentious issues while dealing with the government. The TNA can make meaningful progress only if President Rajapaksa cooperates with it and implements the 13th Amendment in full as a first step.

The present political environment indicates this may not come through in the near future. India's role in prodding Sri Lanka into positive action will be constricted due to the internal political preoccupations of New Delhi and the coalition compulsions of Tamil Nadu politics. This could become more pronounced when India nears the general election of 2014. Given these limitations, Sri Lanka is probably heading for a period of uneasy political relationship between the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government of Rajapaksa and the TNA. It is going to be big leadership challenge for the TNA to achieve success.

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Notes

1. Sri Lanka follows a Proportional Representation (PR) system (under the Hamilton Method) for voting. It was introduced recognising the need to give proper representation to ethnic minorities. In this system, the voter has the option to choose the party as well as the candidate within the party. People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), a Sri Lankan NGO. <http://www.paffrel.com>
2. For an interesting analysis of the election, see Dr Dayan Jayatilaka, "The TNA Tsunami: Re-balancing the Equation," September 22, 2013, www.dbsjeyaraj.com
3. Navi Pillay, press conference-video, August 31, 2013 <http://www.dailymirror.lk/video/34702-navi-pillay-press-conference-full-video.html>
4. Even Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the President's brother and influential Defence Secretary, objected to holding the NPC election. See "Gotabaya Opposes Holding of NPC Elections," *The Hindu*, May 25, 2013. www.thehindu.com
5. <http://tamilnation.co/selfdetermination/tamileelam/041013tna.htm>
6. For an analysis of the Tamil Diaspora efforts for the revival of LTTE separatism, see R Hariharan, "Leadership Impact on India-Sri Lanka Strategic Security Dynamics" in *CLAWS Scholar Warrior*, Spring 2013 issue.
7. For TNA manifesto, see <http://tnapolitics.org>
8. "TNA Disputes Appointment of DIG to North", December 13, 2013, www.dailymirror.lk