

Sri Lanka: Presidential election 2015 and the Tamil voter

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What is striking about the 2015 elections? It is the upsurge in the call for democracy and the call to put an end to aggression, arbitrary actions. Significantly, it has opened up spaces for the minority community, the minority voter, to once again find a voice within the politics of the state.

My writing here concerns largely Tamil politics, political leadership and the north and east Tamil voter, particularly of the north. In this, I wish to state at the outset, I am not addressing the Malaiyaha Tamil voter or those who are 'traditional' residents of Southern Sri Lanka. I write this in the context of how one should see the possibilities that have arisen around the Presidential Elections of 2015. I here focus on the northern Tamil voter, whose aspirations and social location I am more familiar with than that of the east. Elections 2015 has much to offer to the Tamil voter in the north, both in the peninsula, in the Vanni and in the rest of the province. How? The northern polity is under the yoke of both the military and a certain militarization of its structures, even where there is no military presence. There is tight control of its activities that has proved lethal for normal democratic action. This is so in the south, but amplified in the north, where the governor himself is a personality from the military establishment. Educational institutions seemingly come under very strict and direct surveillance of the military and the defence establishment. Routine civil activities, such as the right to gather, discuss, hold a wedding, a procession, have to be meticulously negotiated both with the local military authorities and the Defense Ministry at the centre. The Presidential Election of 2015 gives us hope and a confidence in our own strength to bring about change in the way administrative matters are handled, basic civil rights are safeguarded, greater demilitarization at all levels. For the north and east Tamil and Muslims, nothing will change overnight. But it will bespeak a change in the way we conceive of our own lives. In this respect, it is suicidal for the Tamil voter to not vote, to engage in a politics of isolationism and in boycott politics. The argument that not to vote is a democratic right is politically myopic. There is nothing inherently wrong with boycotts. But to boycott a major event such as the Presidential Election which has consequences for all of the people of Sri Lanka, in the years following the war, is to not seize the opportunities facing us at this crucial time: to belong or not belong. Isolationism is not the answer today.

There is little that can be deemed independent in the north, independent of party politics. It is either patronage politics or a heightened Tamil nationalist politics of resistance that has little to do with the daily realities of the populace. One has to assess the needs of the Tamil population in the north and east, within the context of their basic life situation, democratic action, access to the judiciary in a climate freed of fear and intimidation, a climate where economic and social, cultural activities can find expression. It is not to be denied that Tamil and Muslim populations in the north and east have many particular grievances that distinguish them from the dominant community. This election will

not bring a solution to those. But it is a step toward ensuring that there could be at least partial solutions. Students in Jaffna are not boycotting the A/levels because the grievances of Tamils have not been alleviated. I have seen quite a number of congratulatory messages about a student of Jaffna Hindu College gaining the highest mark in Math in the A/Levels this time. I am happy for that student and congratulate him. But I am also concerned about a vast number of students who are not getting a proper education, because of lack of facilities in the Vanni, in the non prestigious schools in Jaffna, and because of caste and gender discrimination. Recently I met two students entering the state university system from Mullaithivu, one of whom had done the A/levels during the war. What does the future hold for her? If the aggressive educational policies of the current government are to go through, very soon, that student from Mullaithivu who goes to the state university will have to compete with privately funded universities where only the children of the upperclasses could go to. The same goes to this student who obtained the highest mark in Math. His high mark would be of no value, if other more affluent students can go to privately funded universities.

The commonalities, the aggressive de-democratization of state and civil society which took place during the war have been channeled into development programmes many of which have little to do with the people in the north and the east. I am not critiquing all development programmes. Those that are designed to involve the people and not destroy people's initiatives and building community, generating employment can be productive. But the aggressive neo-liberal policies of the current government have ridden rough shod over all the people in the country. The eastern coast has suffered heavily here with land grabbing taking place for tourist purposes that do not benefit many people.

The minorities question

The question of minorities and how they are situated within a politics of the state is important. This question is particularly pertinent to the Tamil populace of the north and east, communities that have faced war and been at the receiving end of state brutality for decades. The ethnic conflict, in Sri Lanka placed the Tamil population in a precariously central position. It forced them to adopt a particular kind of politics that went dangerously off course, propelled by increasing nationalist and exclusivist tendencies. Nevertheless, the conflict years and the war have spawned an identity for the northern Tamil as victim and only as a victim, and as one grieving and not in a position to act outside of what is understood as Tamil. Everything a Tamil does has to do with being Tamil, politically speaking. I am not sure whether this is the case in the east, but the political discourse of Tamil nationalism has carved such an exclusive and ethnocentric place for Tamil politics that it is unable to think of general economic and social issues and be sensitive to class, minority, caste, gender perspectives. This is not to deny that the Tamil people (along with Muslims and Malaiyaha Tamils and others) have been victimized over several years, particularly in the war years. Problems such as militarization, displacement, and resettlement have not been resolved to anybody's satisfaction. This is compounded by the fact that, displacement, resettlement, language, land, administration related concerns are issues that face a) different ethnic communities differently and b) the same communities of different regions differently. And yet, despite these complexities, the northern Tamil populace has imagined a common ground in forging an identity that is described as Tamil and Tamil only. They vote, when they did vote, or were allowed to vote, overwhelmingly for nationalist parties; this trend saw growth from the '70s onwards. Left tendencies and allegiances which had a strong presence in the peninsula have been eroded by what has been seen as the historical betrayal of the Tamil people by Southern Left leaders on the one hand and the accompanying growth of Tamil nationalism on the other.

In the war years, large numbers of people left and the northern Tamil population was decimated, in

war and through migration. The north was under the direct yoke of the military of the LTTE for several years; while ideologically, all that was represented by the LTTE, its narrow nationalism, chauvinism, fascist tendencies, lack of a medium term strategy for survival, focused solely on a separate state, has remained intact.. Yes, there is a disconnect between the social lives of the Tamils in the north and their political articulations. The daily lives of the people are racked by unemployment, a dearth of skilled labour, caste discrimination persisting at many levels, in white collar as well as working class sectors. Education, housing, farming, the persistence of problems facing the fishing people, the right to the sea, access to government bodies, safeguards for farmers etc. The resettled do not have the capital to start up life anew and they go into debt in a major way. Many of these problems beset other communities too: debt, bad harvests, lack of capital, competition from outside, though the north has found markets outside, after the war and the reopening of the main thoroughfare. At the same time, a new middle class is slowly emerging on the ashes or on the residue of the old, perhaps as an extension and yet how dynamic this middle class is yet to be seen.

The social aspect of the lives of the northern people reveals a complexity that is not reflected in the political articulation of its leadership. Self-determination of the Tamils is a cry that has to go through a historical transformation. If the Tamil leadership, and its intelligentsia do not reassess these claims in the climate of this new era, bringing with itself its own set of fears, anxieties, strengths and hopes, remapping the old, Tamil leadership will soon lose its hold on the people. Political leadership provided by the TNA has not been able to shed itself of an exclusionary vision for the people. Self Determination is not the only democratic option for the Tamil people of the north and east, as some do. In fact, one could argue, it is even, undemocratic at this historical juncture to talk of self determination. It is heartening that the TNA is not taking a stand against the elections, while extremist factions are adopting this position.

The North and its internal complexities – Muslims

The vexed question of the relations between Muslims, Tamil political action and the Tamil populace demands urgent need; it is as urgent as the broader national questions concerning minorities. The rhetoric of victimization has served to strain relations between Muslims and Tamils. Where Jaffna is concerned, the returning Muslim has not found a welcome among the Tamil people. The Tamil intelligentsia, political leadership, caught in its exclusivist vision and rhetoric has had very little to offer the Muslims. This has made life difficult for the people, who have had to deal with a bureaucracy that is at best, indifferent and at worst, hostile. In the rest of the Northern Province, Muslim-Tamil relations are mired in distrust, chauvinism and exclusiveness and political opportunism. That the state has not provided for resettlement in an all encompassing and politically sensitive manner and through a well formulated policy is also a leading factor in exacerbating relations. The question of the situation of up-country Tamils settled in the north in the course of the last 30 years and who have had to bear the brunt of the assault of the war in the Vanni is also an issue that has not had found a conducive platform for articulation. Tamil politics and minority politics has to have a dialogue, assess the economic situation concerning each region in its own context, recognize the right to return of Muslims, Sinhala and Tamils to their original or resettled abodes and strengthen democratic participation of the people in decision making. Power Sharing at the centre and in the regions has to be something that has to be negotiated both with the southern polities and minority communities. In order to do this, minority politics has to recognize its place within the political structure of Sri Lanka. Whether resistant, accommodative or even nationalist, Tamil politics has to pursue a path that takes into account its organic links with Sri Lankan politics and the state. Economically, socially and structurally, the north and east Tamil voter is an integral part of the Sri Lankan state and its citizenry. To deny this is to be disingenuous.

It is imperative that Tamil political leadership have dialogue with southern political leadership and southern political and civil society groups as regards power sharing, devolution and the implementation of the 13th Amendment. Of course one could legitimately say that that dialogue initiated by the minorities at many fronts has already taken place and to call for dialogue now and among Tamils is to place the onus of initiation and implementation on the side of the minorities. While I do agree, it is important that dialogue takes place on new terms under the new conditions and with a view to addressing ground realities that are ever changing. The elections have opened up a space for us to formulate a politics, terms and the content of this dialogue. The curtailing of the extra ordinary powers of the Executive Presidency can be critical in this dialogue. The debate on corruption and nepotism, that has caught the attention of the 'opposition' forces, might appear as seemingly not concerning the north. But, it is a way of opening up the discussion on meaningful development, such as mega development programmes versus sustainability of people's initiatives, super expensive express ways versus roads in the rural areas, the right to association, which can give communities living in displacement, workers, fishing people, women, journalists, and artists among others, such a lot of space to build resistance to oppressive development and aggressive militarization. The Tamil voter shall not stay away from debating these issues.

The space for democracy

There is a resounding call for democracy today. A very clear message has been sent to the powers that be that one cannot be arrogant about power and resistance will always emerge from some quarter. The space for democracy has widened. People are speaking openly, acting openly, and giving voice to their aspirations. For me, democracy is not just about speaking and acting as an individual. It is always deeply embedded in the social and the cultural. Democratic action has to take care of the lives of people, whether it be the lives of farmers who are steeped in debt, displaced people, whose lives have been ravaged by the war, waged workers who need a decent living standard, the plantation community that has been in centuries-old enclave habitation with little hope for social mobility, migrant workers whose lives are so precarious, minority ethnicities, who feel increasingly alienated from the state and feel they are second class citizens, students, anxious about their future, women who feel trapped within the violence of the state and community; traders who are being edged out by mega development plans; Writers, artistes, journalists, teachers and academics, who find the space for intellectual and cultural work rapidly shrinking. The list of marginalizations is endless. The Presidential Election of 2015 has given many of us hope. The Tamil voter, whether displaced, student, Minority person, woman, otherwise, is in this list. We hope a space will open up. In fact, it has already opened up. The struggle for democracy does not end with the election of 2015. While some of us who are attached to the university and educational centres will continue to struggle to preserve free education and a meaningful education, all democratic forces will continue to struggle for the space to broaden: for diverse articulations of the people to emerge and find a platform.

As one Ajith has said in a comment on a blog which I paraphrase and summarize: "This election is not about self determination of the Tamil people. It is important to analyze what has happened in the past years, the injustices done to the Tamil people, the destructions, the erosion of the independence of the judiciary, corruption. One needs an assessment of the political situation where the entire constituency will benefit of which the Tamils are an integral part." I will add social welfare and a commitment to education and health, two crucial sectors that assure the fundamental well being of a society. We need change, but not for the sake of change. We need change, so that democracy can be strengthened.

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P.S.

*http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=116838

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