

Tamil National Alliance faces biggest test in post-war decade as Sri Lanka gears up for election

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The Alliance goes to the polls amid a growing disenchantment among Tamil voters who, 11 years after the war, are still demanding justice and greater powers

As Sri Lanka gears up for the [August 5 parliamentary election](#), the [Tamil National Alliance](#) (TNA) — the main grouping representing minority Tamils living in north and east — is facing its biggest test yet in its constituency, since the war ended a decade ago.

Though the Tamils have repeatedly given a huge mandate to the TNA, whether in the 2013 Northern Provincial Council election or the parliamentary polls of 2015, the Alliance — which secured 16 seats in the 225-member Parliament in 2015 — is contesting this election amid what seems a growing disenchantment among voters.

“No matter who gets elected nothing changes in our lives. We vote because it’s our duty, not in eager anticipation that our situation will get better,” said Yesudas Jenova, seated outside her small home just outside Pallai town in Kilinochchi district. Jaffna and Kilinochchi together form one of the two northern electoral districts, while Vanni — including Mullaitivu, Mannar and Vavuniya — is the other.

Ms. Jenova’s sentiment, echoed by many across the Northern Province, stems from many reasons. Eleven years after coming out of a war that resulted in huge losses to life and property, the Tamil community is still demanding justice and greater political powers that much of the Sinhala polity does not want devolved to them. The TNA bears the additional baggage of the failed promises of the previous Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe government that it backed, especially on delivering a constitutional settlement.

Meanwhile, the Tamils’ economic distress has only grown, with governments in Colombo and their own TNA-led Northern Provincial Council failing to revive a war-ravaged economy by creating jobs and livelihoods. Registering their disappointment over the TNA’s governance record in the north, they gave a sizeable vote to candidates from the competing Eelam People’s Democratic Party (EPDP) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) in the 2018 local authority polls.

Perhaps recognising this criticism and uncertainty of the Rajapaksa administration delivering a convincing political solution, the TNA for the first time prominently included development and livelihoods in its manifesto. However, for northern voters, who unambiguously rejected President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in last year’s presidential polls, making up their mind isn’t as simple this time.

Fragmented polity

To start with, the general election comes during a pandemic that has forced all parties into a muted

campaign. Further, the choices before voters are from a fragmented Tamil polity whose members speak varying degrees of Tamil nationalist politics. The divisions are on all sides.

On the one hand is the TNA, which is witnessing heightened tensions within, seen in the vitriol targeting some contestants, and facing an increasingly sceptical electorate. On the other are critics of the TNA, including former Northern Province Chief Minister and retired Supreme Court judge C.V. Wigneswaran, who broke away from the Alliance, and the ACTC, led by lawyer-politician Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam — both known to have some support in urban Jaffna — who are contesting separately, as different camps.

Vying for the same parliamentary seats in the north-east are politicians aligned to the Rajapaksa's ruling party, such as EPDP leader Douglas Devananda, a Cabinet Minister in the Rajapaksa administration with a traditional support base in Jaffna and the islands off the peninsula, and Angajan Ramanathan of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

Past and present

While navigating this political landscape, voters are thinking about both their long-standing demand for political rights, justice and accountability, as well as their pressing everyday concerns over land, housing, joblessness and indebtedness. And to them, neither is less important.

A range of voter concerns came to the fore at a pocket meeting where a union of hairdressers in Jaffna met prominent TNA contestant and former Jaffna legislator M.A. Sumanthiran, near Valvettithurai, the birthplace of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

In the nearly 30 minute-long meeting, union members quizzed the former MP mostly about the TNA's bargaining power in the south, India's "waning influence", prospects for federalism, and Mr. Sumanthiran's position on the armed struggle that his critics had widely criticised following a recent interview.

"We would like the TNA to remain united as one force and represent us," said A. Udayasankar, president of the federation of hairdressers' unions, voicing a view more trusting of TNA's capacity for national politics. The long-simmering differences within the TNA are more visible this poll season, especially when candidates from the same party compete for preferential votes. In Sri Lanka's proportional representative electoral system, voters get to mark up to three preferences while casting their ballot and a candidate's chances are determined by both, the total number of votes and her preferential count.

Seated with a group from Thondaimanaru town, a young man asked the TNA contestant why the Alliance, which holds considerable power in the local body, could not lay roads in the area despite repeated appeals. "When our own Tamil leadership is unable to address our basic needs, how can we expect the Sinhala political leadership to deliver on larger issues?" asked S. Brindan, a student of law.

Alternative-ready?

The TNA's "overemphasis" on the ethnic question, while "ignoring people's economic problems," is the cause for this, according to Murugesu Chandrakumar, a former EPDP MP now contesting independently. "In Kilinochchi alone, there are 20,000 jobless youth and a growing threat of illegal activities, including narcotics trade. The TNA has shown no leadership," said Mr. Chandrakumar, whose efforts to provide housing and jobs, and his current campaign, have drawn considerable local attention.

While voter disillusionment with the TNA, especially among youth, is hard to miss, it is unclear if the electorate is ready to break from its habitual vote for the 'House', that too at a time when the Rajapaksa government is eyeing a two-thirds majority in Parliament to consolidate power and amend laws.

That is perhaps why some other independent groups are also testing the waters this election. "Our campaign is centred on working people of the north. We are pitching a progressive Tamil nationalism that highlights their voices," said S.K. Senthilvel, a senior leftist who has been part of struggles against caste oppression in Jaffna. "Our campaign is not about this poll alone, it is also to see if Tamils are ready for a political alternative," he said.

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