

Sri lanka: New Parliament: The fate of Tamil representation

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This week's Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka are taking place in a situation where the country's political landscape has changed to a greater extent than during previous Parliamentary Polls.

None of the traditional mainstream political parties are asking the people to vote in order to bring them to power. Their leaders are asking for votes to function in Parliament as a strong Opposition.

Meanwhile, the National People's Power (NPP) led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake is asking the people for a strong parliamentary majority to run the Government in an orderly manner, saying that nothing like a two-thirds or five-sixths majority is needed. Campaign speeches and media interviews of many of its leaders bear this out.

However, President Dissanayake and the only Government Minister, Vijitha Herath, asked the people at the start of the election campaign to fill the Parliament with members of the NPP, saying that there was no need for an Opposition. This was fiercely criticised by political parties and civil society.

Opposition politicians, especially former President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) Leader Sajith Premadasa, are taking extra care in finding fault with President Dissanayake's one-and-a-half-month rule and propagating the idea that the NPP leaders do not have the ability and experience to rule the country for a longer period. They are attempting to create an impression that the people have started losing faith in the NPP within a short span of time.

It is not believable that this time the people will deviate from the custom or behaviour of supporting the party that won the Presidential Election and bringing it to office through the next Parliamentary Elections.

The Opposition parties do not know what to say to the people in order to ask for their votes. It is certain that people will give a clear mandate to the NPP to form a strong government with a working majority to facilitate the fulfilment of President Dissanayake's promises.

Electoral situation in the north and east

Against the backdrop of such a situation in the south, the electoral situation in the Northern and Eastern Provinces remains very much confusing. It is feared that the representation of minority communities, especially of Tamil people, in the next Parliament will not be cohesive and that there is a possibility that each Tamil party may come to Parliament with only one or two members.

An unprecedented number of political parties and independent groups are contesting the elections in the five electoral districts of both provinces, posing a risk of vote splitting. A total of 2,067 candidates are contesting for the 28 parliamentary seats in the five districts.

District-wise, in the Northern Province, 23 political parties and 21 independent groups are contesting in the six-seat Jaffna District, with a total of 396 candidates in the fray. In the Vanni District, 432 candidates from 23 parties and 25 independent groups are contesting for six seats.

In the Eastern Province, 217 candidates from 17 parties and 14 independent groups are contesting for the four seats in the Trincomalee District. In the five-seat Batticaloa District, 22 parties and 27 independent groups have fielded 392 candidates. Meanwhile, 630 candidates from 23 parties and 40 independent groups are contesting for seven seats in the Digamadulla (Ampara) District.

A total of 8,888 candidates are contesting the Parliamentary Elections this time. People are going to vote to elect 196 members out of the 225 seats in Parliament, excluding 29 National List seats. Excluding 28 seats in the north and east, 6,821 candidates are contesting for 168 seats in 17 electoral districts in the remaining seven provinces.

In other words, an average of 40 candidates are contesting for one seat in the south, while 73 candidates are in the fray for one seat in the north and east.

A large majority of the candidates in the five districts are from Tamil parties and independent groups. In fact, most of these groups lack notable popular support and many candidates are unknown to voters.

Diaspora funding?

Not only Tamil political parties, but independent groups have also liberally used Tamil nationalist slogans to win the votes of the Tamil people by inciting emotions reminiscent of past struggles. Even people who had no interest in politics before the announcement of Parliamentary Elections suddenly entered the field as independent candidates, claiming that they were determined to safeguard and foster Tamil nationalism.

A number of Tamil parties are funded by various groups and lobbyists within the diaspora Tamil community, which aims to keep Sri Lankan Tamil politics under its control. This 'foreign money' is largely responsible for the emergence of various independent groups.

Several academics and eminent persons in the north directly told this columnist that some diaspora Tamil groups which had contacted them had asked if they could form an independent group and contest the election if they were given enough money. Political groups in the Tamil diaspora are contributing to corrupt Sri Lankan Tamil politics like never before.

If the Tamil parties sent to Parliament by the northern and eastern Tamil people in the period after the end of the civil war had adopted a practical and sensible approach in moving the struggle for the right to win legitimate political aspirations of the Tamils to the next stage, the Tamil polity would not have been so fragmented and degraded as it is today.

Severe fragmentation of the Tamil polity

After the end of the civil war, the political leadership of the Tamil people came naturally to the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) led by the late veteran leader Rajavarthiam Sampanthan. Thereafter, the TNA became the main political force representing the Tamils of the north and east in Parliament.

Before the end of the war, the TNA, which had won 22 seats in the 2004 Parliamentary Elections, could only win 14 seats in the 2010 elections. In the 2015 Parliamentary Elections, the TNA's seats increased to 16, while in the 2020 elections, its seats reduced to 10.

Apart from the TNA, parties such as the Tamil National People's Front (TNPf) led by Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) led by former Minister Douglas Devananda, and the Tamil People's Alliance formed by former Chief Minister of the Northern Province C.V. Wigneswaran also made it to Parliament with a couple of seats.

During this intervening period, differences began to develop between the constituent parties of the TNA.

Accusing the flagship party, the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK) of trying to dominate them, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) decided to quit the TNA early last year and contest the Local Government Elections under a new formation called the Democratic Tamil National Alliance (DTNA).

Former Parliamentarian Suresh Premachandran's Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), which had already left the TNA, and some other groups joined the new alliance.

This new alliance played an active role along with some civil society groups in fielding a Tamil common candidate at the last Presidential Election. The election exposed not only the contradictions between the Tamil parties but also the conflicts within the parties.

The Tamil polity is severely fragmented today as a result of the leaders of the member parties acting without foresight to promote the political interests of their parties, failing to realise their historical responsibility in building the TNA as a strong political movement of the northern and eastern Tamil people.

Fate of Tamil parties in the upcoming polls

At present, the ITAK, TNPf, and DTNA are the three main political formations competing in the north and east. All these parties are asking the Tamil people to send them to Parliament with at least 10 seats. The ITAK is known to have wide popular support in both provinces.

This week's election will surely reveal how much the recent internal conflicts have affected the support of the ITAK among the Tamils. In the last Parliamentary Elections, six of the 10 seats won by the TNA belonged to the ITAK. The important question is whether the party will be able to save at least those six seats this time.

Some ITAK leaders are behaving as if they lack the political maturity to not expose internal conflicts at least during the election period. Meanwhile, whether the leaders of other Tamil parties are attacking the ITAK or not, they are carrying out a fierce campaign against Party Spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran. It seems that in recent times, no other Tamil politician has come under so much criticism as Sumanthiran has.

In such a situation, another important question is whether the Tamils will vote to send any party with at least 10 seats as their main political representative to Parliament.

Meanwhile, Tamil politicians themselves say Tamil people are somewhat inclined to vote for the NPP for a change following Dissanayake's victory at the Presidential Election. What other reason could there be for that, apart from the people's aversion to the activities of the Tamil parties thus far?

Amidst the political changes taking place in the south of Sri Lanka, there is a strong feeling that there should be a powerful Tamil representation in the next Parliament, but it is feared that the fragmented Tamil polity may hinder this opportunity.

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