

Sri Lanka: NPP hitches its wagon to North star

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South-based party accurately gauges northern sentiment and secures victory. While north-based Tamil parties neglected the socio-economic issues of the people, especially the marginalised sections, the Sunday Times journalist S. Rubathesen analyses how the NPP made inroads into northern politics, first by sending its frontline soldiers—trade unionists—and then by establishing itself as a common people's party.

ARIYALAI, Jaffna – In the outskirts of Jaffna city, the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) party office is located on A9 Road in what was once a house.

In front of its name board is a mega banner of the National Peoples' Power (NPP)—an electoral alliance led by the JVP whose party machinery and unions reached out to communities from all walks of life in the northern region, including fisherfolk and farmers.

Though the party tried to establish itself in the region during the post-armed conflict period, it faced several difficulties, with the formerly influential Tamil nationalist parties re-emerging in the political arena with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

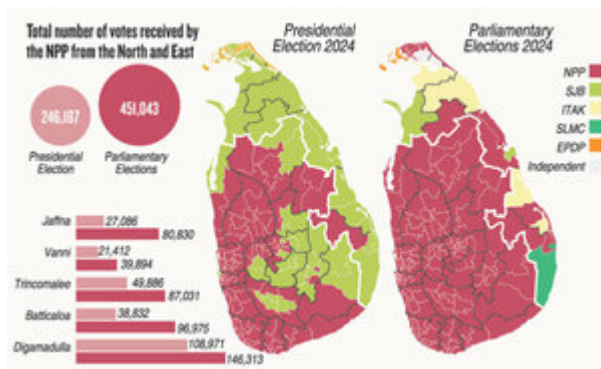
To carry out the political work and oversee its activities, the JVP sent its one-time parliamentarian Ramalingam Chandrasekar to the Northern Province. He spent significant time reaching out to the communities, identifying critical issues in fisheries and agriculture sectors, and commenting on social issues.

After 15 years, the JVP/NPP hit the jackpot. Disillusionment with the mainstream nationalist parties was growing. At last month's parliamentary elections, the NPP, largely a South-based party, secured around one-fifth of the vote in the Northern and Eastern provinces, coming on top of the heap in all the districts in the two provinces with the solitary exception of Batticaloa.

Mr. Chandrasekar was rewarded with a cabinet post in the new JVP/NPP government. Entering Parliament through the National List, he holds the portfolio of Fisheries, Aquatic, and Ocean Resources.

Kayts Fishermen's Cooperative Society president A. Annarasa told *the Sunday Times* that they warned Tamil parties of the growing support base of the NPP in the villages. "This was after some 25 fishermen's unions sought our opinion about whom to support at the presidential election. We did not take a stand, but we knew whom they would support," he said.

The North-based Tamil political parties were largely silent about critical livelihood issues the fisher communities were facing, particularly the unstoppable Indian bottom trawling in the northern waters, the illegal trawling by local fishermen, and long-term leasing of traditional fishing grounds to companies on the pretext of aquaculture development, Mr. Annarasa said, explaining the reasons for the JVP/NPP's overwhelming victory in northern coastal electorates.



“And worse, they (the mainstream Tamil parties) looked down upon us always when we sought to raise our issues. They failed us completely, and fishermen had to look for someone elsewhere,” he said, stressing the point about local dynamics of caste and social issues in the region and how it affected the political representation of communities.

At the recent parliamentary polls, the NPP returned three seats from the Tamil nationalist stronghold of Jaffna and Kilinochchi district electorates—the first time in the history of post-independence Sri Lanka that a Southern political party has achieved such a feat.

At the September 21 presidential election, where the whole country was considered as one electorate, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake secured 27,086 votes in the Jaffna district, while at the November 14 parliamentary polls, the NPP swept the three seats with 80,830 votes.

The final NPP election rally ahead of the parliamentary polls in Passaiyoor, another coastal village in Jaffna, attended by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, was the game-changer for many fisherfolk who were undecided.

During his speech, which was simultaneously interpreted, President Dissanayake vowed to protect Northern fisheries resources from long-time exploitation by foreign countries through illegal fishing methods following the end of the northern conflict in 2009.

“Several countries are engaged in illegal fishing in the Northern seas, robbing our marine resources. As a government, we will take all necessary steps to protect our marine resources and the rights of our fishermen,” the President assured the crowd.

He also touched on the northern electorates’ other key issues, such as long-time prisoners detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and the release of military-occupied civilian lands in the peninsula.

Pointing out that past leaders from the South came to the North seeking votes while the NPP was committed to developing the whole country with the support of all the communities, President Dissanayake said, “They (Southern politicians) divided us on so many grounds to do politics. But currently, we are all together to develop the country.”

It was in 2019—amid the worst economic crisis that crippled the nation and the Aragalaya protests by people power movements in the heart of Colombo—that the JVP realised that it could capitalise on the daily struggles of the masses that the Tamil parties overlooked.

Influential trade unions such as the Sri Lanka Teachers Service Union, the NPP-affiliated Ceylon Electricity Board Service Union, and the Agrarian Services Union reached out to the people at the grassroots level across the Northern Province.

More than 6,000 teaching staff joined the Sri Lanka Teachers Service Union in the North, and it expanded its operations by setting up educational development cooperative societies in the northern districts. The union began granting small loans for its members at a low interest rate of six percent.

The Tamil nationalist political parties are still trying to recover from the shock and the electoral setback that forced them to initiate dialogues on unity.

The *Ilankai Thamil Arasu Katchchi* (ITAK), the one-time main constituent of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), contested alone after an internal split and returned only eight seats in both the Northern and Eastern provinces.

At the 2020 parliamentary polls, the TNA won ten seats and emerged as the third major political group in Parliament.

Internal party conflicts, friction focused on more individuals than on policy, and disconnectivity at the grassroots level caused the alliance that dominated the northern politics to lose even some of its stronghold nationalist electorates in the province.

The ITAK won only the Batticaloa district—the only district that did not get caught in the NPP tsunami.

“We cannot dismiss the NPP waves that took a turn in the North, but our party vote bank is still intact,” said ITAK Jaffna district parliamentarian S. Shritharan, who has been elected as the party’s parliamentary group leader.

At the ITAK annual convention in June, he was elected party leader, but the decision was challenged in court. The matter is yet to be resolved.

“These intra-party issues, prioritising self-serving interests, taking the party to court, and targeting fellow candidates to tarnish their images by campaigning on allegations of securing liquor licences cost us deeply,” Mr. Shritharan said, explaining the setback for the party.

On Wednesday, the newly elected ITAK MPs led by Mr. Shritharan met President Dissanayake at the Presidential Secretariat. It was a formal meeting as MPs from the two provinces briefed the President on pressing issues, which the President assured he would look into.

“As our party’s mandate, we reiterate our stand of a federal solution for the ethnic conflict within the merged North and East. The President assured that it could be considered once the Constitution-making process is revived,” the ITAK leader said.

Apart from parliamentary group leader Shritharan, other MPs who took part in the meeting were Pathmanathan Sathiyalingam, Shanmugam Kugathanan, Shanakiyan Rasamanickam, Gnanamuthu Srineshan, Kaveenthiran Kodeeswaran, Elayathamby Srinath, and Thurairasa Raviharan.

The one-time TNA partners—the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), and the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF)—came up with their own electoral alliances but failed miserably, except for TELO leader Selvam Adaikalanathan, who got re-elected under the Democratic Tamil National Alliance (DTNA) banner in the Vanni district.

Those ITAK supporters who did not secure party nominations, including senior lawyer K. V. Thavarasa PC and Sasikala Raviraj, contested under separate alliances, further splitting the party’s vote base.

An initiative to field a common Tamil candidate at the recent September 21 presidential polls under the symbol of the 'conch shell' also split the Tamil nationalist vote bank as breakaway nationalist groups decided to use the same symbol to contest the parliamentary polls.

"Just like the people in the South voted against the elite and established parties, people in the North also extended their votes to express their disappointment in the Tamil parties," Jaffna-based political analyst M. Nilanthan said.

Arguing that the Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system played a crucial role in returning three seats for the JVP/NPP, he pointed out that the vote bank of candidates who worked closely with the South or affiliated parties such as Douglas Devananda, Angajan Ramanathan, and Vijayakala Maheswaran shifted to the NPP significantly. Both Mr. Devananda and Mr. Ramanathan, who got the highest number of preferential votes in the 2020 parliamentary polls, failed to get re-elected at the November 14 polls.

"The NPP's indirect stand against India by raising the poaching issue in the North and highlighting failures of the Tamil elite political leadership to address key social issues made this happen," Mr. Nilanthan said, describing the NPP feat as a rare phenomenon. Utilising the 'conch shell' symbol to gain political advantage at the parliamentary polls also alienated our people further," said the analyst, who was involved in the initiative for a Tamil common candidate.

Colombo-based senior Tamil journalist and political analyst V. Thanabalasingham said it was time for Tamil political leadership to indulge in some retrospection. "But I doubt they will do it. The voting pattern shows the desperate state of the Tamil people, who are disappointed with the political leadership since 2009 to undertake a sensible approach for the ethnic conflict that considers local and geopolitical dynamics," he said.

Unlike in the South, where the NPP emerged as an alternative to the established political parties, there is no such political element in the North. Eventually, that vacuum was filled by the NPP, according to Mr. Thanabalasingham.

The trend against the mainstream parties was also reflected in the election of maverick candidate Dr. R. Archuna—a medical doctor by profession who came into prominence as a whistleblower with claims of medical corruption. He converted his public support, almost exclusively through social media, into votes.

Relying solely on social media platforms and funds from the diaspora, the controversial Chavakachcheri Base Hospital Medical Superintendent (MO) turned politician secured the highest number of votes, beating established political figures like former MP M.A. Sumanthiran and All Ceylon Tamil Congress leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam.

At least now, the Tamil political leadership should realise the grassroots realities and adopt a suitable strategy to secure the rights of the Tamil people rather than sticking to dogmatic-imaginative policies. Or else, it is unavoidable that people will join the national movements in the hope of securing their rights, Mr. Thanabalasingham said.

S. Rubathesen

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