

Sri lanka: NPP in Power: Possibilities for Post-War Reconciliation through Civic Nationalism

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The topic of inter-ethnic reconciliation has returned to Sri Lanka's current political debate due to two reasons. The first the outcome of recently held parliamentary election which saw the emergence of National People's Power (NPP) as a formidable political force in the Northern and Eastern provinces. The same trend can be observed in the districts with concentrations of the Malaiyaha Tamil community, and also in the Muslim-majority electorates spread across the country. The second is the lack of clarity about the NPP's stand and policy towards post-war peace building, reconciliation and devolution.

The NPP's emergence as a major political actor among the ethnic 'minority' communities is a new development with potentially significant consequences. It won three seats in the Jaffna district while the traditional Tamil nationalist parties and candidates recorded a sharp decline in voter support. The NPP scored 80,830 votes, equivalent to 24.85 percent of the total votes polled for the district. It was also the highest number of votes for a contesting party in the Jaffna district. The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), the two traditional Tamil parties representing the mainstream Tamil nationalism, could obtain second and third positions with percentages of 19.47 and 8.6 respectively. These two leading Tamil parties also managed to get just one parliamentary seat each from the Jaffna district.

The electoral change that has occurred in the areas outside the Jaffna district is not very different. In the Vanni district, which is part of the Northern province, the NPP has got the highest number of votes (39,894) and seats (2). The same trend has continued in the Trincomalee and Digamadulla districts of the Eastern Province too. The Batticaloa district is the only exception in the entire North and East. There ITAK has managed to get the highest number of votes (96,975) and seats (03). In the Nuwara Eliya district with a majority of Malaiyaha Tamil voters, NPP received 161,167 votes and five parliamentary seats, the highest on both counts. The point there too is that the NPP, a so-called Southern party with a predominantly Sinhalese leadership and voter base, has been able to break up the dominance of traditional 'minority' ethnic parties.

From the point of view of the future of ethnic politics in Sri Lanka, what do these new electoral trends mean? There are two interpretations of this unprecedented outcome of parliamentary elections in Tamil, Muslim and Upcountry Tamil societies. The first, advanced by the NPP, makes the point that the Tamil and Muslim voters have joined their Sinhalese counterparts to reject all forms of communalism and also to bring to an end the communal politics identified with the established political parties. Thus, NPP views its victory as marking the beginning of a new phase of Sri Lankan politics in which 'national unity', rather than achieving 'communalist' or 'racist' (*jaathivadee*) agendas, has become a shared political goal across all communities. The NPP leadership seems to position their party and government as the joint agency for 'non-communal' solutions to Sri Lanka's 'communal problem.'

The second reaction to the election results cautions about the first interpretation. It makes the point that the overwhelming support that the NPP obtained in districts with Tamil and Muslim majorities should not be over-interpreted to negate the political validity of devolution and other Tamil nationalist gains and aspirations. It also insists that this particular election outcome should not be weaponized to invalidate the demands for political equality which has been a key aspiration of the 'minority' ethnic communities throughout the post-independence decades. Advanced particularly by Tamil and Muslim political leaders and activists, this response contains a sense of anxiety about the future of the provincial council system. They fear that NPP has an agenda to abolish the provincial councils. This is a reaction emanating from the past history of the JVP and its militant Sinhala nationalist and anti-devolution politics, specifically during the 1980s and 1990s. Meanwhile, a recent statement attributed to the JVP's leader that the new government would abolish the provincial council system has triggered a fresh controversy about the NPP government's position on devolution.

Has the JVP, the party that constitutes the political core of the NPP, changed its positions on the ethnic conflict, devolution and 'minority rights'? If so, is it the case that the JVP's past nationalist history has no bearing any longer on the present politics and ideology of the NPP? Although it is difficult to provide an unequivocal answer to such questions, the NPP, the JVP's front organization, has begun to show evidence to infer that it has abandoned the old frame of militant majoritarian nationalism and begun to construct a pluralistic and multi-ethnic vision for what it calls 'national unity' and nation-building.

A post war conception of nation and national unity?

There is a significantly new feature in the NPP's approach to 'national question'. It avoids the JVP's hard nationalist approach as well as the 'liberal peace' discourse of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. The latter has been identified with and promoted by the UN agencies as well as the global and local civil society movements. It also shuns the devolution discourse introduced to Sri Lanka by the Indian governments and its diplomats. Previous Sri Lankan governments have used the liberal peace discourse, often to please and pacify the international actors, Tamil political parties and local civil society lobbies. It seems that the JVP/NPP are weary of the old liberal conceptual framework that has not led to 'national unity.' Moreover, the new language employed by the NPP suggests that the Dissanayake administration would seem to leave its own imprint on the reconciliation process it conceptualizes, initiates and takes forward. In other words, the NPP does not seem to want its agenda for inter-ethnic peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka to be seen as a continuation of what it sees as 'failed' past attempts.

This reading of the NPP's approach raises a few questions such as the following. Has the NPP abandoned the stand held by the JVP earlier opposing devolution and the 13th Amendment? Is the NPP now ready to accommodate Tamil nationalist demands for reconciliation with the participation of mainstream Tamil parties through a new dialogue with the latter? What significance will the NPP attach to the UNHRC process of reconciliation in Sri Lanka?

With regard to NPP's position towards devolution, the 13th Amendment and the Provincial Councils, two observations can be made. First, the JVP has been participating in the provincial councils since the mid-1990s with political reservations about the notion of 'devolution.' The opposition was partly due to the fact that Indian government 'imposed' on Sri Lanka both devolution and provincial councils. The JVP also insisted that it refused to accept provincial councils, or devolution, as constituting an acceptable solution to the ethnic conflict. The NPP's position is an advance from this orthodox JVP position. The JVP leaders have been insisting in recent weeks that they will not abolish the 13th Amendment without a replacement since it is the only institutional framework available to the Tamil people at present. However, there are no indications about the exact nature or conceptual

identity of the replacement being contemplated.

The Election Manifesto, called *A Thriving Nation -A Beautiful Life* (NPP: 2024), issued in September this year, is a very useful document to understand the NPP's current position on peace-building, reconciliation, inter-community relations as well as the state-'minority' citizen relations. Without directly referring to the 13th Amendment, the Manifesto makes the commitment that the NPP government will "guarantee equality and democracy and the devolution of political and administrative power to every local government, district and province" (NPP, 2024:127). One can assume that this formulation envisages a fusion of devolution and decentralization as means to democratization of the state and governance. The constitutionalist thinking implicit in the NPP's reform commitments indicates that democracy and equality of all citizens constitute the basic normative framework of the NPP's approach to a peace and reconciliation agenda.

The Manifesto also contains an action plan for establishing what it calls "national unity for the rebuilding of the Sri Lankan nation." Making a clear break from the Sinhala ethno-nationalist ideology, the NPP acknowledges the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and pluralist character of the "country". According to the Manifesto, the NPP is "dedicated to creating national unity for the rebuilding of Sri Lanka." This concept of national unity implies a goal as well as a condition in which the Sri Lankan nation is "not divided on the basis of ethnicity, language, religion, caste or gender" (all quotes in NPP, 2024: 126-127) Moreover, it advances a conception of national unity built on "respecting the diversity of identities and ensuring their survival and protection" (ibid). In brief, the NPP's Manifesto envisions a goal of pluralizing the ethnic foundations of the Sri Lankan state. An optimistic reading of this commitment suggests that the JVP's/NPP's constitutionalist thinking has slowly shifted away from the much worn-out unitarist model of state.

The Manifesto also offers a series of actions leading to the goal of building what it terms as 'national unity.' These actions have a strong emphasis on inter-community reconciliation. These include constitutional and legal reform to ensure political and cultural equality of all citizens, repeal of anti-terrorism legislation, building new institutions to eradicate inter-group inequalities and discrimination, providing relief for war victims, particularly war widows, and ensuring cultural and language rights of the Tamil and Muslim communities.

Resolving ethnic conflict

According great prominence to proposals for 'resolving the ethnic conflict' has been a major aspect of constitutional reform initiatives in Sri Lanka since 1987. No constitutional reform project could gain legitimacy or even relevance if it had ignored the 'ethnic issue.' In contrast, the NPP's policy manifesto marks a departure from this tradition too. In two places of the Manifesto, mention is made to the theme of constitution-making. The position outlined in Section 4 of the Manifesto under the theme "A Sri Lankan Nation -The Universal Citizenship" is that the constitutional reform initiative of the NPP government will be built on the constitutional reform process started in 2015 but not completed. Except stating the NPP's commitment to three-tier system of devolution to provincial, district and local levels, no specific constitutional proposals or principles for enhancing or curtailing devolution are outlined. It is not clear whether the NPP is cautious about disclosing its own constitutional reform thinking in concrete terms in the election manifesto or it still remains work-in-progress.

Even with such instances of ambiguity, does the vision embodied in the policy manifesto suggest that the NPP reflects a clear shift from the JVP's hardline Sinhala nationalist positions on the ethnic conflict and its resolution? An optimistic answer should be 'yes'. It is quite clear that the JVP through the NPP has begun to construct the outlines of a post-war model of nation and national unity, which is pluralist and inclusivist, for Sri Lanka. It is a project that awaits some more clarity and

conceptual rigour. Without any doubt, it is a home-grown vision for post-war national reconciliation conceived outside the conflict-resolution discourse of the United Nations or the advice of the international actors, particularly India. It has also the distinction of being conceived independent of the ethno-ideological battles that have exacerbated communal enmities, contributing to making the conflict intractable. In fact, such ideological battles have only blocked the development of moderate and accommodationist approaches to ethnic peace among political actors in Sri Lanka through fresh political imagination. In this sense, the NPP has detached itself from the past to imagine a vision and a path with its own emblem.

Can this vision produce an effective programme of peace-building, reconciliation and inter-community trust in Sri Lanka in the post-war context? Can it generate continuing trust and faith in the NPP's project of national unity, particularly among the Tamil and Muslim communities. Doesn't the NPP propose a framework in which moderate nationalisms among the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities of Sri Lanka can at last find mutual accommodation through dialogue and compromise, without forgetting the past, yet not allowing the past to continue as a burden on the future?

Answers to the first two questions will certainly be shaped by how the NPP government formulates a programme of action to implement its conceptual pledges made in the Election Manifesto. Implementation of these election commitments calls for three levels of reform – constitutional, institutional and legal. By doing so, it would not be very prudent to ignore the Tamil and Muslim nationalist demands for strengthening devolution merely because they have been part of the politics of previous generations of Tamil and Muslim politicians who have now lost their prominence in representation and voter loyalty. Similarly, the apparent decline in the passion for the 13th Amendment and the provincial councils in the Tamil and Muslim societies should not be interpreted as the Tamil and Muslim politics has now reached a post-ethno-nationalist era. Similarly, the project of nation-building through national unity actually calls for reforming the state, its constitutional foundation and institutional composition, as envisaged in the NPP's election manifesto.

An answer to the third question above needs to begin by the assertion that the time has come in Sri Lanka and in the world as well to recognize the negative political role of the exclusivist and extreme versions of ethno-nationalisms in multi-ethnic, plural societies. Such nationalisms can only highlight in dramatic forms the grievances and aspirations of ethnic communities. Paradoxically, their ideologies and politics have often failed to produce fresh imaginations or provide sustainable solutions to the very problems they highlight. Their continuity has become a major obstacle to re-imagining lasting frameworks for conflict settlement and peace through mutual accommodation among the communities and peoples as citizens. The NPP manifesto gives the impression that those NPP leaders who have conceptualized it have got the historical sense, obviously correctly, that Sri Lanka has reached a turning point in which the time has come for moderate nationalisms to explore a post-ethnic and unifying nationalist project. It is a project that should advance an ethic of not only unity in diversity, but also diversity in unity. It would be very interesting to see how the NPP government advances, promotes and institutionalizes such a *civic nationalist* future for Sri Lanka. Civic nationalism gives primacy to the membership of the political community, that is *equal citizenship* of the multi-ethnic nation state with diverse cultural belongings among all identity communities with no differentiation or discrimination. It also celebrates different cultural and community identities and group belongings of citizens as a source of positive energy to all citizens of the political community.

A project of promoting post-war civic nationalism for Sri Lanka needs also to focus on some major initiatives for state reform. To advance a state reform vision aimed at transforming the Sri Lankan state within a framework of civic nationalist pluralism and multi-culturalism, the NPP government is

uniquely placed in terms of its political capacity and legitimacy. The NPP has the political will which the previous governments lacked. Its nationalist past can be strategically deployed as a positive asset to justify and validate the new civic nationalist project. The NPP also has the two-thirds parliamentary majority that can enact constitutional legislation with no institutional barriers. However, a state reform project should have a wholistic framework that brings together abolition of the executive presidential system, laying down a strong framework of checks and balances and accountability, providing institutional space for citizen participation in governance, enhancing devolution and 'minority' rights, a new institutional framework for peace building and reconciliation, electoral reforms to restore public trust in representative democracy, and re-building state capacity for human security and social welfare.

The NPP government will also have to take into account the fact that it needs to set in motion the state reform initiative without delay. The government has to be sensitive to the possible limiting of the favourable political space available for a such a comprehensive state reform process, primarily because of the complex challenges arising from the on-going economic crisis and the IMF-led austerity programme. Unless the government can work out a socially sensitive policy package for the economic recovery and debt re-structuring, the social discontent that has become subdued at present might not stay still any longer. The Sri Lankan citizens who brought the NPP into power have been tolerating economic deprivations and injustices far too long. Pacifying a restless society and pushing forward a major state reform programme at the same time can be quite a task.

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