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Sri Lanka

Elections, Politics and Tamil Nationalism: Hopeless Impasse and Strivings of the People

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV488 - September 2015 -
Publication date: Thursday 24 September 2015

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The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has swept the 2015 parliamentary elections in its Tamil constituencies. This victory further consolidates the power of the TNA and particularly the Federal Party (ITAK). However, this is also the weakness of Tamil nationalist politics. Historically, Tamil politics dominated by the Federal Party has done little other than win elections. Politics should be much more, building alliances with other political forces and mobilising society and finding solutions to people's social, economic and political problems. Tamil nationalist politics neither seems to have the capacity to govern as with the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) nor does it seem to have a vision to recover Tamil society out of the post-war crisis in the North and East. This article addresses the future of Tamil politics given this problematic political trajectory. [1]

Changing political space

The 2015 parliamentary elections have signified two important changes, both in national politics and the Tamil nationalist political terrain. One, on the national front, aggressive authoritarian Sinhala Buddhist politics has been rejected for the second time, opening democratic possibilities. Two, aggressive exclusivist Tamil nationalist politics of the Tamil National People's Front (TNPf) has been rejected. These two changes constitute a political opening to address the 'national question'; broadly considered to be the problem of minorities in relation to a majoritarian state over the last six decades.

The Rajapaksa regime – for almost a decade starting from late 2005 – shifted the political discourse in the country away from the national consensus on power sharing created through the devolution debate during the previous decade. The centre stage given to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, continuing militarisation and the promotion of infrastructure development as the solution to the country's problems were put to the test in the presidential elections of January 2015 and the recent parliamentary elections. The successive and deepening defeats of the politics of the Rajapaksa regime signifies a major shift in the national political terrain.

In the Tamil constituencies and particularly in the North, a major opening was created in January, after the Tamil voters along with other minorities joined sections of the Sinhala constituency and voted out Rajapaksa. The TNA leader Sampanthan was then invited to participate in the National Executive Committee. However, the extreme Tamil nationalist forces were relentless in their attacks on the TNA leadership and the new regime in Colombo. They further misled the Tamil community, claiming it was only pressure from pro-LTTE sections of the Tamil diaspora, the Western governments and Tamil Nadu that will bring a lasting solution to Tamil grievances. In this way, the political space to work with the Central Government was constrained.

The despicable culture of branding persons as 'traitors' and eventually assassinating them practiced by the LTTE, now resurfaced in attempts at character assassination of those who wished to engage the South. They attacked Sumanthiran and Sampanthan for attending the Independence Day celebrations. The effigies of Sumanthiran and Sampanthan were burned a number of times, both here and abroad. Ironically, one such effigy burning took place during an awareness march for the disappeared. The purveyors of these attacks on the TNA leadership and to block any efforts to work with the new Government in the South were led by the TNPf, the Tamil Civil Society Forum (TCSF), the pro-LTTE sections of the diaspora, sections of the NPC including Ananthi and Chief Minister Wigneswaran and even Suresh Premachandran a TNA Parliamentarian.

The NPC led by Chief Minister Wigneswaran passed the Genocide Resolution; which served no other purpose than to alienate the South. Indeed, the extreme Tamil nationalists have proven to be the best friends of extremist elements in the South; both need each other to polarise communities and reinforce their nationalist social bases. Wigneswaran was making increasingly virulent statements both in Jaffna and during his visits to India and US, but it was when he finally betrayed the TNA at the height of the parliamentary election campaign that his extremist political stance supporting the TNPF became all too clear. The TNPF campaign suffered a thumping defeat where they polled even less than the UPFA in Jaffna. This resounding defeat for aggressive divisive politics with all the undertones of separatism signals an important shift within the Tamil nationalist space for a negotiated political solution.

Political solution beyond the homeland

Tamil nationalist politics continues to reiterate the idea of a homeland in the North and East. Yet in recent decades and even the post war years, many people in this homeland dream of migrating to Western countries. Most young men and women in Jaffna for example are either expected to marry and go abroad or find employment outside the country. Those youth who cannot migrate to Western countries are seeking employment in the Middle East and the Free Trade Zones in the South. Dubious agents have established networks luring women into exploitative work with dreams of better lifestyles.

In the North and East, people now lack hope for a meaningful future. There is a major divergence between the ideological claims of Tamil nationalist politics and the social and economic realities of the war devastated Tamil population. Given this dilemma of Tamil politics, how do the recent elections and its outcome relate to the contradiction between political demands and social life?

The new government emerging in January 2015, took a few but significant measures to respond to some demands of the Tamil political leadership. Hence both the military governors in the North and the East were replaced, and in Jaffna and Sampur nearly two thousand acres of land held by the military were released for resettlement. These moves have created space to negotiate a political solution.

The contours of a political solution will have to address such questions as the degree of the devolution of powers; mechanisms to share power at the centre including a second chamber such as a senate; the structure of state as to whether it be federal, unitary or neither; and the unit of devolution, particularly the demarcation of the Province. These political demands about autonomy and the state also relate to demilitarisation, ending the climate of fear and guaranteeing freedom of association; all of which will give some confidence to the people about a secure future in the North and East.

The problem, however, is that the economic and social crisis coming out of both the devastation of war and the failure of post war reconstruction may remain unaddressed even with a political solution. We argue that it is this crisis characterised by falling incomes, lack of employment, widespread indebtedness, deteriorating social and educational institutions, and rising social violence, which are the central causes for the hopelessness of the people. Here, Tamil politics has the important task of providing leadership and hope to a broken society. A political solution is necessary to change the mind set of all communities and for a more robust democracy in the country, but the process of uplifting the people requires a deeper vision and committed mobilisation of society.

NPC and the limitations of devolution

While a mounting crisis of society consumes the North, the NPC which emerged with considerable international pressure has been a complete failure. Until the end of 2014, there was the excuse of the Rajapaksa regime undermining the workings of the NPC. However, its lack of initiatives and, in fact, a tendency to even block positive measures by the Central Government and the donor agencies needs critical scrutiny. The NPC and its Chief Minister have been taking the inflexible view that all donor assistance should come directly to the NPC and bypass the Central Government; this blocks donor assistance where protocols require disbursing funds to the Central Government. In reality, the sad state of the NPC is the lack of capacity to develop project proposals much less a blue print for the economic development of the North.

Chief Minister Wigneswaran was brought for his experience of working with the state as a former Supreme Court Judge and that he would bridge the North-South divide. However, he has spent his time in the NPC making increasingly polarising speeches and passing rhetorical resolutions instead of statutes that could have turned the wheels of administration. Even after the overthrow of the Rajapaksa regime, and a civilian Governor interested in solving provincial problems was appointed, the NPC failed to address urgent issues. For instance, the position taken by the NPC on the Chunnakam water pollution issue amounted to grasping photo ops at citizens' protests and then making irresponsible dismissive statements on the extent of the problem. The NPC lacked leadership in the aftermath of the rape and murder of Vidhya; they could not initiate a reflective discourse about sexual violence within the community and watched on as violence was unleashed on the courts and over a hundred youth were arrested. The possibility of progress with the greater devolution of power is undermined by such an incompetent NPC.

The TNA's election manifesto of 2015 and its position on a political solution should be read critically given the inaction of the NPC. The TNA states: "Devolution of power on the basis of shared sovereignty shall be over land, law and order, enforcement of the law so as to ensure the safety and security of the Tamil People, socio-economic development including inter-alia health, education, higher and vocational education, agriculture, fisheries, industries, livestock development, cultural affairs, mustering of resources, both domestic and foreign and fiscal powers." However, some of these powers were in fact granted in part through the 2013 Provincial Council elections. Yet, the NPC has done next to nothing other than peddle a discourse of victimhood. Such inaction is alienating the marginalised sections of society needing relief.

What did the NPC do in terms of advocacy to raise concerns of encroaching Indian trawlers and southern fishing boats during the last three years? The NPC members have hardly met the various elected fisher co-operative leaders much less work with them. The Northern Province had a robust co-operative structure before the war and many of the co-operatives are attempting to reorganise themselves. However, lack of capital, trained human resources and technological assistance severely handicapped them. Why hasn't the NPC, for which co-operatives are a fully devolved subject, not taken any initiatives to revitalise the co-operatives?

Tamil nationalism and its blinders

There are inherent limitations to forms of politics given their class basis. For example, the UNP and SLFP will not resolve the class question or even reduce the class inequalities in our society. Yet depending on the particular bourgeois democratic character of the UNP and SLFP regime there might be more room to engage them on some of the concerns of the working classes. Similarly, Tamil nationalist politics disregards many of the social differences and forms of oppression, and it is the role of dissent to challenge such blindness. For example the issue of Tamil-Muslim relations, class and caste oppression, gendered forms of exploitation and regional inequalities, rarely surface in Tamil nationalist political discourse. Yet, these social concerns are at the core of the social and economic crisis facing Tamil society. Indeed, it is the rural folk in the Vanni, the oppressed castes involved in Palmyrah work, the fisher-folk on the periphery and single women with dependents that face the brunt of the post-war crisis, and not the urban Jaffna Tamil middle class with strong links to the Tamil diaspora.

Tamil political parties rarely engage women in politics, though more than half the northern population is female. Furthermore, only a few women would have stepped up even if the opportunity was given to contest elections. This is because Tamil cultural politics discourages women from taking leadership positions and perpetuates the dependency of women on men through various means. For instance marriages are negotiated with dowry even today. In fact, one of the main concerns of single mothers with daughters who came before the recent Presidential Commission on Enforced Disappearances was that they did not know how to raise dowry for their daughters. Furthermore, state lands are mostly given to the male in the family. With increasing break up of families in the post war context, women are left to fend for themselves and their children without property. Such economic dependence is also one reason for the continuing cycles of domestic violence against female spouses.

Tamil nationalist politics constantly reiterates how the Tamil community is losing its traditional customs and values in the post war period. It also talks about systemic cultural deterioration introduced by alien forces through modern communication technologies, drugs and alcohol. These factors often blamed for all evils in society today including the rise in sexual violence against women. However, Tamil women often suffer violence within their own family. These are the consequences of a cultural politics repressing women, where the space for self-criticism is denied by Tamil nationalism.

Over the last five years, there has been considerable advocacy for the release of lands acquired by the state and the resettlement of Tamil communities. Resettlement is often discussed in relation to planned colonisation of Sinhalese farmers by the Government. No doubt Sinhalese were settled into the North and East under the Mahaweli development scheme. This discussion however ignores, the eviction of Muslims from the North in 1990 and the 'colonisation' of Tamils by the LTTE in Muslim lands. Tamil Nationalist discourse makes claims over the Eastern Province, without considering the almost equal ratio of Tamil and Muslim populations. Are Tamil nationalist majoritarian claims over the Eastern province and the Muslim population no different from Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism?

Tamil nationalism claims it will build a society where all persons will have equal access to social and economic benefits. It overlooks centuries of caste stratification within the Tamil community. Even during displacement in temporary shelters, caste became a concern as to who lived next to the upper castes. The youth from the North who migrate to Colombo for studies and work, find ways to retain this hierarchy. An oppressed caste student is often excluded from lunch groups and social gatherings. Inter-caste marriages are seen as a despicable crime and the couple will be excluded from their communities. Most of the social investment in the post-war years have been in caste-based temples leading to the reconsolidation of caste structure. However, Tamil nationalist discourse dismisses caste as a minor problem, allowing caste oppression to fester.

The problematic nature of the concept of nationhood put forward by Tamil nationalism ignores forms of discrimination, inequalities and oppression within the community. It often places its demands without giving space for dissent and self-criticism to correct the wrongs. These prejudices are too deep rooted within the Tamil community to be wished away by merely embellishing nationalistic policy documents with phrases of equality for women, creating a casteless society and non-discrimination against the Muslim community. It will require a fundamental rethinking of politics including the central elements of Tamil nationalism.

The way forward

The LTTE decimated Tamil politics through assassinations and a climate of fear, and the Tamil political parties are yet to recover. These political parties lack organic relationships with their constituencies as well as a broad second rung leadership necessary to mobilise the people and address their immediate concerns. In this context, backward cultural politics which represses women and perpetuates caste oppression are filling this political vacuum. Tamil

nationalist politics has been either complicit with or shied from taking on such backwardness within the Tamil community, and has reduced the predicament of the Tamil community to victimhood.

The war has also left deep wounds which have to be addressed through processes of accountability and truth-seeking. However, advancing such processes of accountability require openness and self-criticism among all communities and cannot be approached from a position of victimhood and covering up for the LTTE. The process of accountability, truth-seeking and reconciliation will also require mature political leadership, rather than buckling in the face of aggressive campaigns. In the months ahead, the TNA leadership has the major challenge of finding a political solution and engaging in a credible process of truth-seeking and accountability.

Many issues facing marginal sections of the Tamil community such as access to land, livelihoods and decent education are common issues confronting other marginalised communities in the country. For instance ownership and access to land is not only an issue in the North, but also in the Up-country and deprived Districts such as Moneragala. Uneven development which characterises Jaffna town and the Vanni is a problem in other parts of the country, and the TNA needs to be cognisant of the charge of Jaffna-centrism within Tamil nationalist politics. Will the TNA recognise the need for joint struggles for the welfare of all peoples in the country? And will it have the political maturity to not continue the exclusivist political path which narrow Tamil nationalists have been demanding? Any campaign taken forward by Tamil politics should be mindful of larger possibilities of solidarity with progressive forces, even if majoritarian forces attempt to ethnicise and polarise the country

It is fitting to return to V. Karalasingham's profound words in his seminal essay, 'The Way Out for the Tamil Speaking People', originally published in the Young Socialist in 1962.

We have come against a strange paradox. The Tamil speaking people have been led in the last decade by an apparently resolute leadership guided by the best intentions receiving not merely the widest support of the people but also their enthusiastic cooperation and yet the Tamil speaking people find themselves at the lowest ebb in their history. Despite all their efforts the people have suffered one defeat after another, one humiliation after another. How is one to explain the yawning gulf between the strivings of the people and the virtually hopeless impasse in which they find themselves?

The fundamental flaw in the political strategy of the Federal Party is their conception that the fight for the rights of the Tamil speaking people is the responsibility solely of the Tamil speaking people themselves and that it is only the Tamils who can wage this fight and that they must do this as Tamils.

This warning of Karalasingham over fifty years ago is just as valid today. Will Tamil politics eschew its exclusivism and begin working with the Muslims, the Up-Country Tamils and the progressive Sinhala forces? Will Tamil politics begin to address the inequalities and oppression within its fold, whether it be of caste, gender, class or regional differences? All this may require questioning the Tamil nationalist trajectory of politics. The much needed alternative politics should draw on the strivings of the people and strengthen dissent, engage the legacy of the war through processes of accountability and self-criticism, move on a political solution and address the social crisis in the post-war North and East.

[1] This article co-written by Swasthika Arulingam and Ahilan Kadirgamar was originally published in the September 2015 issue of Samakalam, a Tamil monthly magazine on contemporary affairs. A group of us have been writing a column every month titled 'Dissent and Debate'. Samakalam is a unique effort to interpret the debates in the national press in Sri Lanka to the Tamil speaking audience and in turn also engage the rest of the country on debates in the North and East through a few articles in English.