

ELECTIONS IN SRI LANKA'S 'LIBERATED' EAST: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR A NEW POLITICAL START?

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When Batticaloa's town councillors were elected in March 2008, Sri Lanka's eastern province experienced the first democratic act in 14 years. Given that the province was controlled for many years by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a Tamil guerrilla group, and that it was not before July 2007 that the region was recaptured by Sri Lanka's military, the poll which is to be followed by nothing less than provincial elections in May 2008 attracted much attention. Although the agreement was fragile right from the beginning, the government's decision of January 2008 to terminate the ceasefire with the LTTE triggered much protest both inside and outside the country. In the period from the beginning of 2002 until the end of 2005 alone, the agreement was broken more than 3,600 times, and in 2006, the number of violations grew further. The fact that, by cancelling the agreement, the government was able to take rigorous action against the rebels with the public taking hardly any notice gave rise to concern. By setting up democratic structures, the leadership intended, so it said, to create participation opportunities for moderate Tamil actors for the first time.

However, the question remains whether setting up such democratic structures can be accomplished, and whether elections in the eastern province will actually succeed in paving the way towards a long-term resolution of the conflict in Sri Lanka. It certainly is to be welcomed that the government has recaptured the eastern province, especially as the civil war that lasted for 25 years had claimed more than 70,000 lives and led to the development of quasi-governmental structures in the country's north and east. What is more, to many people the LTTE was a regime of terror under which violent tax collection methods were as common as the forced recruitment of fighters, some of them teenagers. The ceasefire agreement acknowledged all these facts in the sight of the country itself and the international community. When fighting flared up again, the situation of the LTTE worsened. They lost numerous battles, whereas the official armed forces markedly increased their clout. What is more, internal conflicts also had a disintegrating effect, especially when almost the entire eastern faction led by 'Colonel Karuna' split from the organization as early as March 2004.

In formal terms, seizing the last stronghold of the LTTE in the middle of 2007 symbolized the 'liberation' of the province but certainly not the end of violence, especially as, according to reports, the Karuna group, the TMVP that was now in charge, was by no means any more humane in its actions than the LTTE. Between the end of 2005 and the end of 2007, at least 1,500 people were listed as missing. Although the TMVP is blamed for most of

these cases, the state security forces are also accused of being involved in the crimes.

Hopes that the political situation might stabilize were shattered again when tensions appeared even within the TMVP that were fought out in the open. In September 2007, 'Colonel Pillaiyan' seized power. What is more, other Tamil groups that had been suppressed by the LTTE for many years, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) in particular, made their voices heard. Thus, the conflict between the LTTE and the TMVP is only one of many splits within the Tamil community.

Radical Tamil groups have been in existence ever since the seventies. Some of them, such as Mr Devananda's EPDP, abjured armed fighting in 1987, seeking the path of political discourse. Regarding many of these actors as traitors, the LTTE murdered a large number of them. The internationally best known representative of a moderate direction which rejected violence is Neelan Tiruchelvam, MP for the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), who was killed by the LTTE in 1999. After that, the representatives of the TULF accepted the claim to sole representation of the Tamil Tigers which now, together with the TULF and two other so-far rivalling groups, founded the Tamil National Alliance (TNA).

In fact, the Tamil party landscape today appears highly fragmented and, as a result of this, politically weak, depriving the Tamil population of any opportunity to influence the country's politics. And Sri Lanka's government lacks a democratically legitimized counterpart to help solve the conflict. By holding elections in the eastern province, the leadership in Colombo aimed at establishing such a counterpart, with the TMVP in mind. As expected, the TMVP emerged a clear winner although the course of the elections was criticized by diverse parties as not being free or fair – very much to the chagrin of the government. This does not come as a surprise as the participation of an armed group such as the TMVP is hardly anything better than a political farce.

After the project of setting up an All Party Representative Committee (APRC) had failed, it became apparent early in 2008 that the government's intention to resolve the ethnic conflict by political means did not convince everybody. Raised from the front by President Rajapakse in 2006, the Committee was to become a tool of non-violent conflict resolution. An expert commission was put at its side, its task being to develop concrete constitutional-law proposals as to how to reach the goal. An unofficial draft that was supported by most members of the Committee was regarded as especially promising as it provided for detailed regulations on promoting governmental organization as well as for an extensive participation of all ethnic groups in the government.

However, massive political resistance prevented the implementation of this progressive approach. Instead, representatives of the APRC presented a boiled-down version of an Indian initiative which merely provided for an insufficient decentralization of the state's administrative function and was rejected by both Tamil and Muslim groups. Once again, the plan to resolve the conflict politically by reforming the existing constitution had failed.

It is to be feared that the government's refusal to concede self-government to the provinces could have a negative impact on its plan of positioning the TMVP as a legitimized political player in the eastern province. After all, history shows that Tamil candidates can acquire authority in their own ethnic group only if they are perceived as autonomous players and are politically successful. Players without political competence will not be recognized. If Sri Lanka really wants to democratize its eastern province, it must be willing to resolve conflicts by political means and to make concessions to the ethnic minorities. But it is exactly this willingness that the Rajapakse government has not displayed yet.

Given the fact that Sri Lanka's armed forces greatly outnumber the LTTE, it would have been incumbent on them to show that they are willing to make political concessions to the Tigers, to set a signal for a solution that would be acceptable to both sides, and to avoid conveying the impression that the Sinhalese majority is willing and able to make concessions only under pressure. As the President's mission in the eastern province was stage-managed so effectually, one might well think that the point was to draw attention away from the real problems. To be sure, the plan to democratize the eastern province is to be welcomed, but the limited political competences the TMVP gained from the elections give rise to doubts about the sustainability of this plan. Another question is whether the TMVP, which is anything but peaceful, is the right partner to embed democracy and non-violence in the region. Just remember that Mr Karuna himself, the founder of the TMVP, is the initiator of innumerable attacks on Tamil politicians. It will take some time for Sri Lanka's eastern province to find its path towards a truly new political start.