

Sri Lankan election leaves Tamil parties in complete disarray

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The presidential election being held today in Sri Lanka has left the various parties, factions and splinter groups of the Tamil bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie in complete disarray. During the 1994 elections, many of these parties supported the current president Chandrika Kumaratunga and her “left” People’s Alliance coalition against the incumbent United National Party (UNP). Five years later, these groups are deeply fractured and divided.

A significant section of the country’s Tamil minority voted for Kumaratunga in 1994 on the basis of her promises to negotiate with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the long-running war in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Having won the election, however, Kumaratunga continued and intensified the war, which has claimed the lives of an estimated 55,000 people, and used the security forces to intimidate and harass Tamils throughout the country. Moreover, her government completed the privatisation of the country’s plantations undermining the wages and conditions of the Tamil-speaking workforce.

The LTTE has denounced Kumaratunga, and is widely believed to be responsible for the suicide bomb attack on Saturday night that just missed killing her. While not openly endorsing the UNP, the LTTE is clearly leaning towards its presidential candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe and is not disrupting the UNP campaign in areas under its control. A large number of posters featuring Wickremesinghe are on display in the LTTE-held areas of Periyaperathivu, Palugamam, Pankudaweli, Koduwamadu, Arasaditivu, Mahiladitivu and Kakkaddichchola in the Eastern Province.

Faced with widespread hostility among Tamils to Kumaratunga, the other Tamil political parties and groups attempted to form an electoral coalition and put forward their own presidential candidate. But the “common candidate” project floundered. As a result, some of the parties support the PA, some the UNP and others have

denounced both major parties. Several of the groups have fractured into warring factions over the issue of who to support.

All of these parties are deeply compromised by their previous records of manoeuvre and intrigue with either or both of the major parties. In some cases, their associated armed groups have acted as auxiliaries to the Sri Lankan Army in its war against the LTTE. All of them are thoroughly enmeshed in the ethnic politics that has been used by the ruling class to foment the war and divide workers and the oppressed masses along racial and religious lines.

Two longstanding bourgeois parties—the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) and the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)—and the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) group have issued statements opposing both the PA and UNP candidates. By contrast, in the 1994 election, the three extended their “utmost support” to the present President Kumaratunga.

Of course, none of the three groups bothered to explain their abrupt about face nor examine in any detail the record of the major parties. To do so would have involved recalling details of their own activities, which they would prefer that voters forgot. Their “opposition” to the UNP and PA is nothing more than an attempt to salvage something of their own tattered reputations.

The TULF, for instance, stated that it “deeply regrets that the unremitting prosecution of the war has inflicted much suffering on Tamil people” and went on to instance the treatment of Tamils under the PA government—restriction on the movement of Tamils, dislocation of Tamil communities, discrimination against Tamils, the killing of non-combatant Tamil civilians, etc.

But throughout the last five years, the TULF gave its tacit support to the PA government inside and outside the parliament. Every month the party voted with the PA to extend the nationwide emergency rule, which was used to

intensify the war and to harass and terrorise civilians in the north as well as in the south. The TULF leaders helped draft and gave their full support to her “political package”—a so-called peace plan, which has been used by Kumaratunga largely as a smokescreen for stepping up military operations against the LTTE.

The EPRLF is publicly embroiled in infighting between its Secretary General Premachandran, who calls for a vote for neither party, and its ex-Chief Minister of the now-defunct North and East Provincial Council, Varatharaja Perumal, who advocates a vote for Kumaratunga. The EPRLF Central Committee has suspended Perumal's membership and accused him of collaborating with state intelligence forces—a charge he has vigorously denied. In his election statement, Premachandran restricted himself to saying: “We do not have the moral right to request the Tamil people to vote either of the two main political parties”. He could only advise Tamils to “think carefully and utilise their votes”.

In the same vein of empty moralising, ACTC leader Kumar Ponnambalam called on Tamil people to “show supreme disdain and disinterestedness in the elections”. He added: “If they place their faith in one or other of the major contestants they would once again shed tears and blood.” Having washed his hands of the situation, he had nothing to say about what Tamils were now meant to do. Others in the ACTC were not so reticent. The Colombo-based Tamil daily *Virakesari* on December 13 reported that political committee member Vinayagamoorthy was saying “there is nothing wrong in voting for the UNP”.

Two Tamil parties—the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC)—are campaigning for Kumaratunga.

In the north, the EPDP is virtually in charge of the PA campaign with its organisers putting up posters, displaying huge cutouts and distributing leaflets for Kumaratunga. Just prior to the campaign the Colombo government provided it with pick-up vehicles and vans to carry out the election work. It has also been accused of destroying UNP election material. For most of time since its formation in the 1980s the EPDP supported the UNP. Two of its parliamentarians defied the party and voted with the UNP on December 7 to oppose the government's extension of the emergency law.

Among Tamil plantation workers, the CWC, or at least the faction headed by Arumugam Thondaman, continues to support the PA candidate. Arumugam Thondaman took over as CWC leader after his grandfather S. Thondaman died earlier this year, and was appointed to a ministerial

post. The CWC leadership backed both UNP and PA governments, supported the extension of emergency rule and is responsible for the betrayal of several major strikes by plantation workers over the last five years under Kumaratunga. It has also supported PA government's intimidation and detention of plantation workers in the name of “preventing LTTE infiltration” into the plantation areas. Like the EPDP, the CWC has been supplied with 200 motorbikes to distribute the PA's election material throughout the plantations.

An opposing CWC faction backed by former CWC secretary S. Sellasamy support the UNP candidate Wickremesinghe, as do the Up-country Peoples Front (UPF) and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). The UPF was part of the present PA government and its leader Chandrasekaran was a junior minister until the first week of December. He resigned his post announcing support for the UNP—without any political explanation as to why the UPF backed the PA, or indeed why it was now supporting the UNP.

The fracturing of the Tamil parties and their political impotence reflects the bankruptcy of their perspective. For years, in some cases decades, these formations manoeuvred around one or other of the major Sri Lankan parties, claiming that by doing so they could win rights for Tamils in Sri Lanka. But the war and the continuing attacks on the living standards of Tamils and Sinhalese alike have produced a deep-seated alienation from official politics as a whole. Unable to provide any coherent explanations, let alone solutions, these organisations are rapidly disintegrating into brawling cliques preoccupied with personal ambition and political self-preservation.



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