

Elections and the Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka Results and Impacts

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This paper was drafted before the dramatic developments in April when the LTTE¹ agreed to negotiate directly with the Premadasa government and the subsequent demand by the latter that the IPKF leave by 29th July to the accompaniment of virulent protests by the EPRLF. It is too early to assess the significance of these developments, yet we might hazard a guess as to the reasons for the LTTE's decision to finally negotiate with Premadasa: as is pointed out in the conclusion, manoeuvring space for the Tamils has been gained to a certain extent, especially and maybe surprisingly for the LTTE who has popular support and could prove this fact during the elections in February. I think it unlikely that the aim of Eelam has been given up, instead, the talks might be used by the LTTE as another means to put pressure on India to be more amenable to the LTTE's wishes. The tenor of recent statements by the LTTE is that they feel betrayed by their protector India. Alternately, to enlist Premadasa's help to get the IPKF out might be a first step for then making further demands on the Sri Lankan government. At any rate, the future of these talks and of the fate of the whole of Sri Lanka hangs very much in the balance now after the growing tensions between India and Sri Lanka over the demanded withdrawal, and especially after the murder of the two prominent TULF leaders, Amirthalingam and Yogeswaran.

People in South India and Sri Lanka might be forgiven if they were a bit fed up with elections in general right now. Four elections in four months (November 88 - February 89) are a bit much by any standard, even in the election-happy subcontinent and Sri Lanka. The voters did not seem to be deterred, though. On average 50-60% of the voters participated in all four elections. This is even more remarkable if one considers the circumstances under which the elections at least in Sri Lanka were held.

Why this lumping together of the Tamilnadu and Sri Lankan elections? Though it is not apparent at first glance, they are quite closely connected, and the election results in one country do have a bearing on events in the other. This is not a recent phenomenon, but goes back to 1967 when for the first time a regional party won the elections in Tamilnadu.² Moreover, surprising

1 A list of abbreviations is given at the end of this paper.

2 cf. D. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *Tamil - Sprache als politisches Symbol*, Wiesbaden 1984, p. 179-180, fn. 139.

parallels in voting behaviour can be detected between the Tamils in both countries. This paper is accordingly intended to evaluate the impact of all four elections on the Tamil areas and on Tamil politics in Sri Lanka, Tamilnadu and the region as a whole. Let us take the elections one by one.

Table 1: Voter turnout (in %) in the Provincial Council Elections, Presidential Elections, Parliamentary Elections in Tamil Areas of Sri Lanka, and the Elections to the Legislative Assembly in Tamilnadu/India

Area	PC Elections	Presidential Elections	Parliamentary Elections	LA Elections in Tamilnadu
Northern Province		≈ 45.0	44.8	-
Jaffna Peninsula		≈ 30.0	63.9	-
Eastern Province	62.5	50.0	66.05	-
Batticaloa District				
(excl. Amparai)	83.0	50.0	78.2	-
Trincomalee District	57.0	50.0	84.5	-
Northern and Eastern Provinces		43.5	65.0	-
Tamilnadu				≈ 60
All Sri Lanka	62.5	55.32	63.6	

Sources: *The Hindu* 19.11.88, 20.12.88, 30.1.89, 17.2.89; *Frontline* 26.11.-9.12.88, 4.-17.2.89, 4.-17.3.89; *FEER* 2.3.89, p. 13, *Tamil Times* Dec. 88, Jan., Feb. 1989; *Tamililam*, April 1989; own computations

The Provincial Council Elections (19 Nov. 1988)

The process started off with the provincial elections in the provisionally (on 8 Sept. 88) merged Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, and it was by no means plain sailing. In fact, till two or even one day before the elections it was not at all clear whether it would be possible to hold them in the first place, given the military situation and questions of security. The (mainly Sinhalese) personnel for the supervision of the elections had to be flown in by IPKF (Indian Peacekeeping Force) helicopter from Colombo as had the bal-

lot papers and voters' cards. On top of that the EPRLF (Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front) and the SLMC (Sri Lanka Muslim Congress) had to distribute the voting cards themselves on the evening before the elections. Even so, on the day itself, only half the minimum number of supervisors required for a smooth conduction of the process were available, leading to long queues and hour long waits for the voters. There were voices maintaining that the Sri Lanka government was delaying the elections on purpose since it was not interested in having them in the first place.³ In fact, the UNP (United National Party) did not even bother to conduct a proper election campaign and never completed its list of candidates until 12 hours before nominations closed.⁴ Home Minister Devanayagam was bitter about the alleged intimidation by the EPRLF which prevented people from voting for the UNP.⁵ On the other hand, the EPRLF had long clamoured for elections to be held and had been supported by the IPKF and India, which put out veiled threats to Jayawardene if he failed to hold the elections due to pressure from the JVP (Janata Vimukti Peramuna) and other opposition forces.⁶

The Results and their Significance for the Tamil Areas

To the surprise of many observers, the elections went through without a hitch, and people, especially women, turned out in large numbers to vote in the former Eastern Province, now part of the combined Northeastern Province: 62.5%; in spite of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) demands and threats to boycott the elections. In Batticaloa the percentage was a record 83%, and in Trincomalee with a higher Sinhala proportion of the population, 57% (see table 1). The alliance EPRLF-ENDLF-TELO had already got 36 uncontested seats in the North since LTTE and TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front) did not nominate candidates, of which 24 seats alone went to the EPRLF, and it could consolidate this victory in the East by winning a further 17 seats, thus getting a total of 53 out of 71 seats. The remaining seats went to the SLMC which gained 17 seats, campaigning on a communal basis saying that a victory by the Tamils had to be prevented, and to the UNP which got 1 seat. The SLMC wins occurred mostly in the Muslim majority area of Amparai.⁷ The EPRLF alone got 41 seats of the 53 and A. Varadara-jah Perumal consequently became chief minister of the combined northern

3 *The Hindu*, 19.11.88.

4 *Frontline*, 26.11.-9.12.88 p. 115.

5 *The Hindu*, 19.11.88.

6 *Frontline*, op. cit., p. 115.

7 *The Hindu*, 21.11.88.

and eastern provinces. He was sworn in on 5 Dec. with Lt. General Nalin Seneviratne as governor. The Indian, especially the Madras press was jubilant, since it saw the results as an endorsement for Indian policy, the efficacy of the IPKF in restoring law and order and returning to the democratic process in the Tamil areas.

Table 2: Provincial Council elections in the merged Northeastern Province (19.11.88): Percentages of votes polled and number of seats gained

Party	Votes polled	Seats
LTTE	-	-
EPRLF-ENDLF-TELO	52.59	53
TULF	-	-
SLMC	29.75	17
UNP	16.52	1
SLFP	-	-

Sources: *The Hindu* 21.11.88; *Frontline* 26.11.-9.12.88; *Tamil Times* Dec. 1988; own computations

However, a closer look at the result disturbs a bit the picture of a people freed from the trammels and oppressions of civil war fearlessly going to the polls: while over 80% of the Tamils and Muslims in the East voted, less than 30% of the Sinhalese population in these areas voted, leaving the UNP with its single seat. Other parties, like the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party), did not even bother to contest. That indicates the extent of Sinhalese opposition to the merger of the two provinces as well as fear and defeatism in the face of the combined Tamil and Muslim vote and militant strength. Even the enthusiastic Tamil vote might, on closer looks, be questioned: there was an impression, and many Tamils said so openly, that they voted only to prevent a Muslim government in the East and therefore chose the only Tamil party available.⁸ Moreover, the military presence of the EPRLF did not bode well for anybody who might be reluctant to vote for them or to vote at all. The LTTE was persistent in its claims that people in these and subsequent elections had been forced into the polling booths at gunpoint by either the IPKF or the

8 *The Hindu*, 19.11.88.

EPRLF and that Indian soldiers posing as Tamils voted as well.⁹ The SLMC under its party leader Ashroff had made it quite clear, that it would contest elections come what may, and naturally got the Amparai district. Thus, despite the media hysteria about the return to normality and an end to the ethnic conflict, the facts do not quite bear out this impression.

Implications for the Merged Province

It now remains to be seen how the EPRLF will implement its programme and use the powers given. The EPRLF is the only really hard-line communist group among the militants fighting not so much for Tamil Eelam as for a socialist Sri Lanka.¹⁰ The congratulations to the EPRLF by CPI(M) leader Surjeet seem to bear this out.¹¹ On the other hand, in his first public meeting in Jaffna, Varadarajah Perumal said, the EPRLF had been forced to accept the Accord because the Tamils had not been united; if they had been, this in the direction of the LTTE, the Accord would have looked different.¹² The hard-line communist stance has been toned down, but the socialist over the ethnic factor is visible in the programme of action of the EPRLF government (including ministers from the Sinhala and Muslim groups: the first a radical who stood for the EPRLF in Trincomalee, the other a member of the LSSP [Lanka Sama Samaj Party]) which stresses restoration of peace, progress on socialist lines, and ethnic amity. The only ethnic actions to be taken are those to maintain the identity of the Muslims and the study of 'Islamic Theology for social liberation'¹³ The programme says explicitly, that the Sinhalese should be convinced that 'the administration is not based on race, religion or language, but on secularism and social progress'.¹⁴ However, since Tamil has now (in December 1988) been made an official language under the constitution, research into it should be undertaken 'in collaboration with the government of Tamilnadu'. And the extent of devolution is declared as hardly sufficient, a theme reiterated by all Tamil parties including the TULF. Problems have e.g. arisen over the actual powers devolved to the Provincial Councils which Chief Minister Perumal claims exist mainly on paper without the concomitant financial entitlements being made. For this reason, he says, the

9 *Tamililam* (A magazine by the LTTE), January 1989, p.3.

10 D. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The Tamil Militants - Before the Accord and After*, in: *Pacific Affairs*, 61, 4, Winter 1988-89, pp. 603-619.

11 *The Hindu*, 19.11.88.

12 *Frontline*, 24.12.88 - 6.1.89, p.111.

13 *Tamil Times*, January 89, p. 12.

14 *ibid.*

IPKF has to remain in the country and India has to see to it that the accord is implemented. The same argument from different angles is used by Premadasa and the LTTE as well: The former says that devolution and regulations about the Provincial Councils are Sri Lanka's internal affairs, to be worked out and changed in discussions and over time, and if India should guarantee them, it would imply that a foreign power were interfering in Sri Lanka's domestic politics forever. He takes this point of departure to demand the speedy withdrawal of the IPKF.¹⁵ The LTTE uses a similar line of argument: if only India and the IPKF can guarantee the implementation of the accord, then as soon as they withdraw, or when a different government comes to power, the accord will be abrogated. This means either an indefinite stay of the IPKF or an independent Eelam.¹⁶ The Indians, too, do not think that the accord has been fully implemented nor that enough powers have yet been devolved to enable India to withdraw all IPKF troops. Problems arose at first over choosing a governor for the province and over finding suitable ministers and legislators because most of the militants were politically inexperienced. EPRLF general secretary Padmanabha declined the post of chief minister in favour of his Colombo spokesman Varadarajah Perumal. In addition, negotiations with the junior partner in the alliance, the ENDLF,¹⁷ soon ran into rough weather, and at one point, the latter stayed in the alliance only because India wished it so, since it was a reliable ally in the armed fight against the LTTE.¹⁸ It is illuminating to check the antecedents of the new Chief Minister, Varadarajah Perumal: Now 35, he comes, not unlike Premadasa or Prabhakaran, from a humble background, from a non-Vellalar and a 'broken' family. He declares himself influenced by the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kalagam) and the FP (Federal Party), i.e. the Dravidian movement, and accuses the TULF of betraying the Tamil youth way back in the 70s. He has been in prison for alleged militant activities before becoming an assistant lecturer in economics at Jaffna University.¹⁹ Political power definitely seems to have changed hands from the high-caste mafia of yesteryear.

A major problem arose for the PC soon over the question whether the Sri Lankan government, as it seemed to be determined to do, would hold on to its plan to conduct a countrywide referendum about the merger in July this year. This more than anything, made the Tamils very suspicious. They feared

15 *Frontline*, June 24-July 7 1989, p. 22-23.

16 *Tamīlīlam*, Feb. 89, p. 2-4 and 17.

17 The ENDLF is a conglomerate of former members of EPRLF, TELO, and PLOT who elected to keep up the joint front formed for the negotiations in Thimpu rather than reverting to their constituent groups. ENDLF is generally considered an Indian stooge.

18 *Frontline*, 10-23.12.88, p. 22-23.

19 *Tamil Times*, Jan. 89, p.7.

that the referendum would favour a reversal of the merger, and that could very well have created a new round of violence and war, since the Tamils would never have accepted such a result over a territory they consider their homeland into which the Sinhalese have intruded. Varadarajah Perumal said in a recent interview that he would never agree to a reversal of the merger.²⁰ Things were very much in the balance for a time till after the elections of 15 Feb. (see below) and the beginning of the talks with the LTTE the government let the referendum date (5th July) quietly slip by. Even *The Hindu* and *Frontline*, two very pro-accord and pro-government papers, admitted that in spite of the peaceful election and the clear EPRLF victory, the LTTE was still very much alive and that the problems were by no means over.²¹

The Presidential Elections (19 Dec. 1988)

One month later to the day, on 19th Dec., came the presidential elections in Sri Lanka. It is interesting that the Tamil parties in the East did not give a clear directive whom to support! Muslims in the East openly supported Premadasa, while it was assumed that the EPRLF tacitly supported Oswin Abeygunasekera from the USA (United Socialist Front), whose election programme was strongly pro-accord and who was widely expected to win the Tamil areas. But while he did reasonably well in the Eastern districts, though not as well as Premadasa, he lost terribly in Jaffna against Mrs. Bandaranaike, where it was supposed that he would also do well.²² Mrs. Bandaranaike won all Jaffna districts except Chavakkaccheri which went to Abaygunasekare. The reasons for this voting pattern will be discussed below. However, these trends are less indicative than it seems since voter turn-out in the Northern and to a lesser extent in the Eastern districts was very low: Turn-out in the Jaffna peninsula was only around 30%, in all Northern districts 40-50% and in Batticaloa District 50%.²³ The elections ended with a comfortable majority for the UNP candidate Premadasa: 50.43% of votes polled against 44.95% for Mrs. Bandaranaike and only 4.63% for Oswin Abeygunasekera.²⁴ Again, the participation was higher than expected (55.32%) in the face of JVP threats and daily killings (these had become so common that *The Hindu* used to start or end some of its articles with the formula: 'Killed in today's in-

20 *ibid.*, Feb. 89, p. 10 (from an interview in *Sunday Times*, 15.1.89).

21 *The Hindu*, 22.11.88, p. 8. *The Hindu* is one of the most perceptive and informed papers on this issue, in spite of distinct government sympathies.

22 *Frontline*, 7-20 Jan. 89, p. 29.

23 *The Hindu*, 20.12.88.

24 *ibid.*, p. 25.

cidents ...')²⁵ up to election day which led to an exceedingly low election turnout in some places in the deep south.

Election Alliances and Manifestoes

The size of the defeat of Abeygunasekere and the USA-SLMP (Sri Lanka Mahajana Pakshaya) came as rather a surprise, since as shown it had been assumed that he would stand a good chance at least in the North and Northeast. However, if there was any party really affected by the JVP threats, it was precisely the SLMP which was the only party openly to endorse the Accord and concede many of the Tamils' demands. All other parties equivocated on the ethnic problem. Abeygunasekare's election campaign had been effectively hampered by JVP sabotage. This, however, affected mainly his chances in the South. But why did he lose in the Tamil areas? This looks surprising only at first glance. The SLFP had managed to draw into its alliance not only the MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) and the Liberal Party, but most importantly, the ACTC (All Ceylon Tamil Congress). Why the ACTC under Kumar Ponnambalam, a lawyer-politician and the son of the late minister and founder of the ACTC, G.G. Ponnambalam, would join this alliance, remains a mystery only until one knows that the ACTC and the FP out of which TULF was born, are old rivals. Its current leader Kumar Ponnambalam is at the moment waging a war to clear his father's, G.G. Ponnambalam's, name from FP allegations that he betrayed the Tamils in 1949. It is therefore logical that he would ally with a party that was not supported by TULF. But there were more compelling reasons. Ponnambalam obviously managed to persuade the SLFP combine to put into its election manifesto decisive chunks of what was once known as the Banda-Chelva pact (after its two main signatories, Bandaranaikē and Chelvanayagam), a pact to give partial autonomy to the Tamil areas.²⁶ Thus, while the manifesto promised to abrogate the pact and to send the IPKF home, a few paras later a Tamil and a Muslim province was promised with substantial devolution of power in a quasi-federal or autonomous arrangement and an immediate stop to colonisation.²⁷ This was exactly what the abortive Banda-Chelva pact had contained 30 years ago. But there was more to come right at the end of the manifesto. Representation should 'reflect the ethnic composition of the country. The electoral system shall be

25 *The Hindu*, 16.2.89.

26 for the provisions of the Banda-Chelva-pact see: *Ilaṅkai Tamil Aracuk Kaṭci Velli Viḷā Malar*, Jaffna 1974, part 'i', p. 52-53.

27 *Tamil Times*, Dec. 88, p. 11.

reviewed to ensure this'. This, together with the provision to distribute employment and education on a strictly ethnic basis, goes back even further than the Banda-Chelva pact, namely to the demand for 'balanced representation' by G.G. Ponnambalam!²⁸ Here we have the ultimate reason for the ACTC's joining the SLFP. It is not astonishing that the SLFP withdrew this rather explosive manifesto shortly before the parliamentary elections in Feb. But even this alliance could not sway the Tamils to vote in great numbers. So, the vote was distinguished by disinterest rather than by support for any one candidate.

Tamil Politics and the Presidential Elections

What is the reason for the disinterest in the presidential elections among the Tamils? Could it be only because the LTTE demanded a boycott? This seems improbable since it did not deter them from voting in the PC elections (and incidentally thus gives the lie to the LTTE allegations that people were forced to vote at gunpoint). Instead, quite simply, they were not seen as having any bearing on the Tamil areas: it indicates a lack of confidence in the ability and will of Colombo to do anything substantial to meet Tamil demands. Whoever became president, would not change the policy in the Tamil areas decisively. The Tamils at the moment are looking more to India than to Colombo for the solution of their problems and for policy directives. They do not believe that the initiative lies in Colombo. Therefore it was relatively unimportant who became president. The nevertheless relatively higher support for Premadasa might be a tribute to his attempts to find a moderate solution and having the political means for it. During the parliamentary elections, the picture was different again, because there the minorities might get some influence under proportional representation, but we shall turn to this later.

Did the results have any influence on Tamil politics? It was said that had the turn-out been only 5% higher, Mrs. Bandaranaike might have made it, and immediately after the elections, she instituted proceedings to have the elections declared invalid because of rigging. This did not detract from Premadasa's victory, which is the more remarkable since for the first time, a non-Goigama has become president. According to an election analysis of *Frontline*, Premadasa could rely on his vote banks among the lower castes and the poor whom his housing schemes had benefited and on his promise to give every poor family 2,500.-- Rs (DM 125,--) a month in social aid.²⁹ Where this is supposed to come from, is a mystery, but it made his day. Another factor

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 11 and 21.

²⁹ *Frontline*, 7-20.1.89, p. 26.

was important for Premadasa's win: the plantation vote. After the Indian Tamils had been granted citizenship, Thondaman promised and delivered the Indian vote for the UNP as usual.

Election Fallout

Immediately after the elections, Premadasa tried to build bridges to the JVP by lifting the 5-year-old emergency (which had been extended indefinitely on 18 Dec. by Jayawardene) and asking the militants to return to the mainstream of politics. The level of violence came indeed down for some time after the elections, but picked up again very fast in view of the parliamentary elections in February. Indeed, immediately after the lifting of the emergency on January 13, the JVP killed some Sri Lanka soldiers.³⁰

India hailed the UNP victory as a victory for moderation and friendship. After the elections, Premadasa showed an effort to tackle the ethnic problem from both sides: he made Tamil an official language and promised to raise the salary of civil servants who are efficient in more than one language. Besides, he promised to step up the devolution in the Northeast in exchange for a phased withdrawal of the IPKF. Accordingly, two battalions were sent home. It is interesting that recently articles have appeared in *The Hindu*, purportedly from private persons, that advocate a withdrawal of the IPKF since the problem could be tackled by Sri Lanka alone.³¹ This chimes in with Premadasa's demands and the legalisation of the CVF (Citizens' Volunteer Force) (see below). On top of that, Premadasa submitted a draft for an Indo-Sri Lanka friendship treaty which had got the cold shoulder under Jayawardene, but was now treated rather more favourably by India. However, India still insisted that the accord had not yet been fully implemented and that more devolution was necessary before an IPKF withdrawal and a treaty of friendship could be envisaged.³² Considering the fact that this was happening immediately before the elections in Tamilnadu, it is not surprising that the Indian government put these proposals on ice. And it is accordingly to the Tamilnadu elections that we now turn.

30 *The Hindu*, 13.1.89.

31 *The Hindu*, 19.2.89, p. 8.

32 *ibid.* 20.1.89.

The Elections to the Legislative Assembly in Tamilnadu (21 Jan. 1989)

The Assembly elections in Tamilnadu were the next event that was viewed with heightened interest not only in New Delhi, but with equal tension at least in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka and probably in the Sinhala regions as well. Months ahead the Tamil papers of Sri Lanka had discussed the election line-up in Tamilnadu and especially the possible influence of events in Sri Lanka on these elections.³³ The gist of the assumptions was that for the Congress to regain a foothold in Tamilnadu, Delhi had to keep a wary eye on events in Sri Lanka and how the elections there shaped up. In the event of Congress losing the elections, a more sympathetic consideration of the problem could be expected from DMK party president M. Karunanidhi.

Election Issues

However, in the run-up to the elections, the Sri Lanka issue figured only in a very minor way in news and propaganda. There were many far more pressing domestic problems to be tackled. Would the DMK make a come-back after over ten years out of power? And how would the two AIADMKs (All India Anna Munnnetra Kalagam) fare? It was the DMK which had the best party organisation and which also had no splits, factions and internal rifts which divided the other Dravidian parties not only externally - into the two main factions led by the women in MGR's (M.G. Ramachandran) life, Jayalalitha, his movie heroine, and Janaki, his widow, but also internally, with old party faithfuls demanding their parts of the spoil in various ways. If the Sri Lanka issue came in, it came via the Congress which tried to gain a new foothold in Tamilnadu politics after 20 years away from power there, and could do this only by playing the Tamil and Sri Lanka card. For all other parties, this was an important, but not a life-and-death issue. They had enough 'Dravidian' credibility not to need the Sri Lanka Tamils to prove it. This fact is best highlighted by the observation, that, while there are sufficient politicians in the Tamil parties to feel very strongly about the Sri Lanka Tamils, like S.D. Somasundaram, former MP and minister (AIADMK JL = AIADMK Jayalalitha), V. Gopalaswamy, MP (DMK), Aladi Aruna MP (AIADMK JR = AIADMK Janaki Ramachandran), M.P. Nedumaran, MP and leader of the TNCK (Tamil Nadu Congress Kamaraj), or M. Veeramani, secretary-general of the DK (Dravida Kalagam), they are all in different parties, albeit all Tamil

33 *Tamil Times*, Nov. 88, p. 6-7, Dec. 88, p. 6.

parties!³⁴ The Sri Lanka issue alone is not an issue on which any one party can win in Tamilnadu. For Tamilnadu, the Vanniyar agitation over job reservations for backward classes and their election boycott threat together with the AIADMK rivalries were much more important than Sri Lanka.³⁵ This comes through very clearly in the party manifestoes of the four main parties contesting: while all pledged more support for equal treatment for women and underprivileged groups (DMK pledged 30% of job reservation for women, Congress 25%), only Congress and DMK stressed the 'Dravidian' and language issue and only the DMK made talks with the LTTE and Sri Lanka Tamil groups a point in their manifesto.³⁶ Thus, it was a fight between Congress and DMK, though Jayalalitha very much wanted to make it out to be a fight between her AIADMK and the DMK. On the other hand, the fact that the one party that actually made it an issue, won the elections, points to the continuing significance of the problem.

An Election Campaign Gone Awry

The fate of the Congress in the whole country was said to be decided in Tamilnadu after one year of President's Rule after MGR's death, and this was not totally wrong. For Rajiv Gandhi, the performance of the Congress in the South was vital for a decision on the timing of the next country-wide elections in the face of hostile rightwing groupings in the 'Hindi-belt' and the coming together of the opposition in the National Front of which the DMK is a partner. In the event, results could not have been worse for the Congress. Karunanidhi's DMK returned to power triumphantly with an absolute majority of seats (63% = 146 seats) and 33.44% of the votes. The other parties trailed behind with 21.68% for the AIADMK (JL), 20.24% for the Congress and only 9.12% for the AIADMK (JR).³⁷

What is important in this is not so much the result which was in a way expected since early January, but the way in which the election campaign was fought and the arguments used. As was seen in the election manifestoes, no party could afford to totally neglect the 'Tamil issue', and the Congress more than anybody else, had to prove its 'Tamil' credibility to the voters. While it tried to argue against 'Dravidian' rule and indulged in personal slurs on Karunanidhi mid-way through the campaign,³⁸ in the last stages of cam-

34 *Tamil Times*, Nov. 88, p. 7.

35 *Frontline*, 24.12.88 - 6.1.89, p. 106.

36 *ibid.*, 7.-20. Jan. 89, p. 116-17.

37 *The Hindu*, 30.1.89.

38 *India Today*, 15.2.89, p. 20, and *Frontline*, 21. Jan. - 3. Feb. 89, p. 112.

Table 3: Elections to the Legislative Assembly Tamilnadu 21.1.89 (Major parties only): Percentages of votes polled and number of seats gained.

Party	Votes polled	Seats
DMK	33.34	151 (63%)
AIADMK (JL)	21.68	27
Congress	20.24	26
AIADMK (JR)	9.12	1
CPI (M) with DMK	3.44	15

Source: *The Hindu*, 30.1.89

paingning it had come round to 'Tamil' again, presenting itself as the true champion and saviour of the Tamil language against the hypocrites of the DMK who allied with Hindi and Telugu chauvinists!³⁹ It presented itself as the only party able to deliver on the language issue and to protect Tamil. In the same vein, it emphasised what it had achieved in the Sri Lanka problem by concluding the Accord, which was the Congress' work and not the corrupt DMK's. The voters could not be bothered. They were interested less in the Sri Lanka issue than in day-to-day problems and the question whether they should vote for a party far away in Delhi or for one in the state. In the end, the party with the greatest credibility in this regard won, and this was the DMK: it soft-pedalled the Tamil issue stressing in its turn the dangers of Hindi imposition and the dictatorship of the centre: they campaigned against 'puppet government' from Delhi, which has been a theme in Tamil politics nearly from the day of independence.⁴⁰ This strategy had paid off in several elections in the state, notably in 1967 and 1980 and it did so this time again. With a voter turn-out of over 60%, the DMK won not only in its traditional power base, the urban areas, notably Madras city, and the North, but quite decisively in the South of the state as well, a feat which had been declared impossible until a few days before the elections. *The Hindu's* (correct) prediction of the results based on an opinion poll five days before the election were dismissed by Rajiv Gandhi as 'another photocopy from Sweden'.⁴¹

If one compares the election campaigns, the DMK's campaign style was by far the most rational of all parties. Both AIADMKs and the Congress ap-

39 *The Hindu*, 18.1.89.

40 *ibid.*, 20.1.89.

41 *ibid.*, 16.1. and 30.1.

pealed to the voters in the name of persons, while the DMK tried to sell a programme and 'Tamil' politics. It was doubtful whether the AIADMK's emotional appeal to vote for a ghost could ever have been successful, but the Congress' mistake was to ask people to vote for Rajiv, not for a programme or even Tamilnadu Congress president Moopanar. But though the Tamils may be temperamental and sometimes sentimental, they are at the same time a hard-headed and practical people and perfectly able to see where their bread is buttered: In an opinion poll in late 1988, 50.37% of people asked in Tamilnadu supported Rajiv's government in Delhi, but only 25.10% supported the Congress.⁴² From this heartening result, the Congress drew the entirely wrong conclusions, assuming that what was right for the centre, would be right in the state as well. It overlooked that the impression that the centre pulled all strings in state politics would arouse dark suspicions among the Tamils. Like in 1980, they chose a government that kept aloof from the centre and pursued Tamilnadu politics instead of Indian politics.⁴³ They did not and do not want to be Delhi's puppet, and the large presence of central Ministers and MP's and the near-total powerlessness of the local Congress politicians to make any major decision created fear and resentment. Thus it was the DMK which has traditionally been supported by the educated and youth vote that won on the platform of Tamil nationalism. Incidentally, the AIADMK (JL) was established as the real successor of MGR with his widow and her party relegated to the wilderness and Janaki shortly afterwards renouncing politics.⁴⁴

The Significance of the Elections for the Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka

Things thus being as they are, how can there be any influence either way on the Sri Lanka problem in these elections when it was not even a major election issue and Congress got rejected over it? Moreover, politicians who are champions of the Sri Lanka cause, were defeated in the elections: Nedumaran, Aruna and Somasundaram all lost their seats. Why then, did 'Eelam Tamils ... breath[e] a sigh of relief over the DMK victory in Tamilnadu'?'⁴⁵ For one thing, the fact that a Tamil party and Tamil politics have again been endorsed in Tamilnadu in itself cannot leave Sri Lanka politicians, both Tamil and Sinhalese, unmoved. For another, the attitude of Karunanidhi towards

42 *ibid.*, 30.1.89.

43 D. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, Politische Individualität in Tamilnadu. Ein Bericht über die Wahlen zur Legislative Assembly, in: *Internationales Asienforum* 12, 1981, p. 45-49.

44 *Frontline*, 4.-17.2.89, p. 4-5.

45 *Tamil Times*, Feb. 1989, p. 6.

the Sri Lanka issue is of supreme importance. He resigned his seat in the Legislative Assembly in protest over the killings in Sri Lanka on 10.8.1983 and has always spoken up for the Sri Lanka Tamils not only since the conflict, but much earlier. The DMK has a record of concern for Tamils in Sri Lanka going back more than 20 years. Moreover, Karunanidhi has always been known to oppose the Accord for not giving enough to the Tamils and to criticize the IPKF for suppressing the people, and has supported the LTTE's stand for an independent state. (The irony in this is, that in 1987, he demanded that India intervene militarily in Sri Lanka to save the Tamils there!)⁴⁶ The LTTE, in turn, had moved, over the last year, much closer to the DMK than ever before, a proof for the statement that their political alliances were informed by political expediency, not by ideology.⁴⁷ After the elections Karunanidhi brought up the issue at his very first meeting with Rajiv Gandhi, though keeping it low-profile by claiming that he was not informed about the Sri Lanka issue, having been out of power for more than ten years. His remarks are illuminating: though the DMK had always supported Eelam, it would content itself with any political solution that was in accord with the wishes of the Tamils, the militants, which means the LTTE, the Sri Lanka government and India. Above all, he was against any violent solution.⁴⁸ Again we see that from within a position of political power things look quite different than from without! Even the Tamil Times has cottoned on to this fact and declared its pious hope that while Karunanidhi might be forced to moderate his language over the issue he would stand firm on the principle!⁴⁹ he refused, however, to apportion all blame for the violence to the LTTE and stressed that talks with this group are vital for peace, but deferred any decisive action till after the parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka on 15. Feb.⁵⁰ One should further not forget that the DMK as part of the National Front could gain quite a decisive say in national politics in the not too distant future and this could give quite a new complexion to the way the Sri Lanka problem is handled in the centre and in SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation).

Still, there is no getting away from the fact that the Sri Lanka issue has apparently ceased to excite Tamils in Tamilnadu in the way it did a year or two ago, though it has been brought up again in the Legislative Assembly mainly to gain domestic political mileage. But is interest in the issue really dead? In an interview with *The Hindu* shortly before and in statements after

46 Interview with M. Karunanidhi, Madras, March 1987.

47 Hellmann-Rajanayagam, op.cit.

48 *The Hindu*, 16.2.89.

49 *Tamil Times*, Feb. 89, p.6.

50 *Frontline*, 18. Feb. - 3. March 1989, p. 118-119.

the elections, Karunanidhi attributed the apparent lack of interest to a government disinformation campaign that presents the situation in Sri Lanka as calm and peaceful and the problem as solved, which is patently not the case.⁵¹ Even if this is a bit naive, the fact that a party that has championed the Sri Lanka Tamils for a very long time and has made it a point of its election manifesto, has won, is significant in itself. The Tamils never took the Congress' concern with the Sri Lanka Tamils seriously but saw it for what it was: a political strategy at the centre to come to grips with its neighbours and with troublesome peripheral states. The DMK, in contrast, is seen as having the welfare of the Tamils genuinely at heart, regardless of external political advantage. Thus, the DMK is seen as much more sincere in this regard. Again, it boils down to a question of credibility. The Tamils certainly do not want to be bothered any longer with the Sri Lanka problem, but for them the best way to deal with it seems to lie in Karunanidhi's hands. And that is also the reason why the Sri Lanka Tamils are so glad that he has finally won. The Sri Lanka issue is, like secession, dormant, but can be woken at any time.⁵²

The Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka (15 Feb. 1989)

There was no lull and never a dull moment between 21st Jan. and 15th Feb., the day of the parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, the first proper election for Jaffna since 1982. Killings by the JVP in the South picked up again and the total count was appalling: 669 since December. Again, it did not prevent the voters from voting: voter turn-out was in the region of 63.6%⁵³ and again gave the UNP a convincing victory, though short of the 2/3 majority it had hoped for. It got 50.7% of the votes, and the SLFP combine 31.8%. In Nuwara Eliya, the plantation area, the turn-out was as high as 80%, whereas in the North, it was 44.8% overall, in Jaffna 63.9% and in Point Pedro, an

51 *The Hindu*, 26.1.89, p. 8.

52 An indication for the intricacies of the issue can be seen in the controversial secret visit to Jaffna by Gopalaswamy shortly after the LA elections on 5 Feb. It was widely believed that he went here on Karunanidhi's behest, though the latter stoutly denied it (see *The Hindu*, 23.2.89). The thing remained a mystery till recently a short note appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* that he had been sent there to try to negotiate talks between the LTTE and the Indian government. The talks were allegedly abortive (see *FEER*, 16.3.89, p. 14), and after his return Karunanidhi condemned Gopalaswamy's lone action in no uncertain terms. But though Gopalaswamy also discounted the idea that he had been sent to Jaffna by the chief minister and maintained that it was his own initiative, one still wonders what the intents and purposes of this journey were and why the Tigers admitted it. It is highly interesting that shortly after this inconclusive visit the LTTE agreed to hold negotiations with Premadasa. Is there a connection somewhere?

53 *The Hindu*, 16.2.89.

LTTE stronghold, 26.8%. In the North-East, it was around 50%. In Hakkama, District Matara, in the deep South, turn-out was at an all-time low of 0.6%!⁵⁴ Again, the result was hailed as a vote for stability by the Indian press with the SLFP getting even less votes than in December.

Table 4: Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka (15 Feb. 1989): Percentages of votes polled and number of seats gained.

Party	Votes polled	Seats
UNP	50.7	125
SLFP	31.8	67
TULF-EPRLF-ENDLF-TELO	3.4	10
EROS (EDF)	3.9	13
SLMC	3.6	4
ACTC	0.1	-
USA	2.9	3
MEP	1.7	3

Sources: *The Hindu* 17.2.89

Table 5: Parliamentary Elections in Sri Lanka's merged Northeastern Province (selected parties only): Percentages of votes polled.

Province/District	TULF-EPRLF-ENDLF-TELO	EROS (EDF)
Northern Province	25.0	44.8
Jaffna Peninsula	22.5	62.7
Eastern Province	17.4	20.8
Trincomalee District	8.2	11.6
Batticaloa District (excl. Amparai)	32.3	30.5
Northeastern Province	23.2	27.3

Sources: *The Hindu*, 17.2.89; *Frontline*, 4.-17.3.89; *Tamil Times*, Feb. 1989, p. 3, March 1989; *Tamililam*, April 1989; own computations.

54 *ibid.*, 17.2.89.

Election Surprises

The only, and very real, surprise came from the North and East, where 13 independents closely linked to EROS (Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students), trounced the TULF-EPRLF alliance and emerged as the strongest party. The history of these 'independents' makes interesting reading: A party launched by EROS and called EPDF (Eelam Peoples Democratic Front) or EDF (Eelavar Democratic Front) had applied to be registered as a party, but had not succeeded and had subsequently nominated its candidates as independents. Among them were a couple of well-known LTTE supporters as well as a former secretary of TULF-president Amirthalingam. The EROS has been known to steer a middle course between LTTE and IPKF, more leaning towards the former and criticising, though not outright rejecting, the accord.⁵⁵ The Indian High Commissioner K.N. Dixit announced already in January that EROS was preparing to contest the elections under the name of EDF or EPDF = Eelam people's (Eelavar) Democratic Front. However, in mid-January, the LTTE again called for a boycott and practically forbade EROS to field candidates. The 4 LTTE sympathisers consequently tried to withdraw their candidatures. This was, however, not legally possible for nominated candidates, so the EROS candidates had to stand nolens-volens as independents and refrained from campaigning. The absence of any election propaganda and the subsequent votes for EROS were really remarkable, especially compared with the extensive propaganda indulged in by TULF, EPRLF, and DPLF (Democratic People's Liberation Front).⁵⁶ Two days before the elections, the LTTE changed its tune again and allowed the EROS candidates to stand.⁵⁷ An EPRLF victory was widely expected.⁵⁸ That instead this rickety field of independents won 13 seats in the Tamil regions is the most significant feature of the election. The Hindu described it as a tug-of-war between the pro-accord and anti-accord forces. The result speaks for the continuing power of the LTTE, though the fight over the accord has not yet been decided: A front organisation of PLOT (People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam), DPLF, lost heavily and considered it a defeat for its anti-accord policy and its objective of an independent Eelam.⁵⁹

Apart from the defeat of the EPRLF, the second most significant feature of the elections is the terrible bashing the TULF got. All seats won by the

55 *Tamil Times*, Jan. 89, p. 4 and Hellmann-Rajanayagam, *The Tamil Militants - Before the Accord and After*, in: *Pacific Affairs*, *op.cit.*

56 *Vīrakēcari*, 9. and 12.2.89.

57 *Frontline*, 4.-17.3.89, p. 40.

58 *The Hindu*, 14.2.89, p. 8.

59 *ibid.*, 19.2.

TULF-EPRLF alliance were gained by members of the militants, no TULF candidate could retain his seats: Amirthalingam, who stood in Batticaloa, party ideologue and former MP in the East Sampanthan, secretary-general Sivasithamparam, former MP Soosaitasan, former MP for Jaffna Yogeswaran, and MP for Kankasanturai Neelan Tiruchelvam, except for Tiruchelvam all old TULF stalwarts, lost their seats as did UNP MP Devanayagam in the East and the nation-wide parties in general. This indicates that a new generation of politicians has arrived among the Tamils, and they are no longer willing to countenance the old men of TULF who spent the time of crisis in India or Colombo. Immediately after the elections, a quarrel broke out between TULF and EPRLF over whom to nominate for the parliamentary bonus seat⁶⁰ due to the alliance from the national list. Though it had been promised to go to TULF, EPRLF had second thoughts after the defeat, and advocated to give it to an Indian Tamil or an EPRLF member, in any case not to TULF. Amirthalingam slipped in only with the help of the TELO votes.⁶¹

Conclusion

Not only is this a decisive defeat for the old guard, but it also forces one, on another and not so obvious level, to reassess one's assumptions about the situation in the Tamil areas and especially the LTTE. The EROS victory puts quite a new complexion on the earlier victory of the EPRLF. The EPRLF won in the Provincial elections because basically there was nobody else to vote for and because it had built up a military and political base in Batticaloa similar to the one the LTTE had acquired in Jaffna. But once exposed to the cold wind of competition, its real strength became apparent very quickly. It was thought that a high voter turn-out would spell a snub for the LTTE and benefit the EPRLF. Something rather more confusing happened: a high turn-out benefited a group of candidates who were known to follow a middle path but still close enough to the LTTE to make it an LTTE victory. It is still a point of debate whether the alliance with the TULF helped or hindered EPRLF. The fact remains that a group seen much less close to the IPKF and the Indians was preferred by most of the voters at least in the North. The old and often conjured divergence between North and East shows again in the political preferences: But it is impossible to say how strong this divergence really is until another provincial election that is not boycotted by the parties in

60 Under the election system in Sri Lanka, all parties represented in parliament get one or more 'bonus seats' from a national list of candidates according to their percentage strength.

61 *ibid.*, and 22.2.

the North, is held, especially if one considers that in Trincomalee and Batticaloa, the EROS won one seat each.⁶² At the moment the divide seems to be quite clear: EPRLF which like LTTE is made up of a mix of castes with a good number of non-Vellalars is ruling the East together with ENDLF and to lesser extent. TELO, who have opened party offices in Trincomalee and Batticaloa respectively. More importantly, while the North has at least an ambivalent attitude towards the IPKF, wanting and not wanting it to stay, the East has apparently quite made up its mind: the IPKF must stay indefinitely.⁶³

Yet the repeatedly stated and widely-held conviction that the backbone of the LTTE has been broken, that it has only nuisance value, that people are turning away from the LTTE in great numbers and so on has to be distinctly questioned now. Is there any truth in Karunanidhi's allegations of a disinformation campaign? An article by Thomas Abraham on the pre-election scene in Jaffna in *The Hindu* on 14.2.89 is rather illuminating in showing the confusion (wishful thinking?), but also the perceptiveness of the Tamil press: while seeing a high turn-out as a snub for the Tigers, he nevertheless acknowledges the strong emotional hold of the LTTE on the population: "There is an emotional bond between the LTTE and the Jaffna people which is difficult to break ..." and "People find it difficult to conceive of a political system of which the LTTE is not a part".⁶⁴ He goes on to show the strong influence of the LTTE on public life in Jaffna, but still attributes a measure of influence to TULF. These high hopes of TULF, symbolised in the opinion of S.C. Chandrasahasnan, the son of Chelvanayagam and founder of the PROTEG (Protection of Tamils of Eelam from Genocide), an organisation for the protection of Tamils, that the militants are fit to carry weapons but not to rule, and if after the war elections are held, they and the people will tamely return to the politicians and vote for TULF,⁶⁵ have been dashed finally. True, no LTTE candidate won, for the simple reason that none contested. But the EROS victory (which is seen by the group as a proof for its popularity) allows one to assume that the people's vote for this comparatively small group is in reality a vote for LTTE. Thus, even if the military backbone of the LTTE might be broken, its political one is, on the contrary, strong, and Sri Lanka and India will have to live with this fact. Given the victory of the DMK in Tamilnadu which very much wants to include the LTTE in any talks or solutions, the LTTE as a political force cannot be ignored. It certainly will not make things easier for chief minister Varadarajah Perumal.⁶⁶

62 *ibid.*, 18.2.

63 *Frontline*, 24.12.88 - 6.1.89, p. 110.

64 *The Hindu*, 14.2.89, p. 8.

65 S.C. Chandrasahasnan in an interview on 18.3.87 in Madras.

66 Subsequent events have proved this prediction.

Even the military weakness of the LTTE seems to be relative: every day there are reports of encounters and killings of IPKF personnel in fights with LTTE. According to the latest reports, they are again provided with weapons and ammunition from unknown sources.⁶⁷ And these are by no means the only clashes. In spite of the political process, fights between the various militant groups still go on, notably between LTTE and EPRLF, PLOT, ENDLF and TELO,⁶⁸ but even between EPRLF and TELO, groups united in a political alliance.⁶⁹ Moreover, India and Sri Lanka find it necessary to train and legalise what they call the Citizens' Volunteer Force, a sort of militia with the explicit task of taking over the fight against the LTTE once the IPKF has left.⁷⁰ For *The Hindu*, the election results show that people in Jaffna trust the democratic and electoral process, but at the same time their disapproval of uninspired and unimaginative politics represented by the TULF. While welcoming the victory of the UNP, it emphasises that the problem of the Tamils is by no means solved.⁷¹

There is an interesting parallel between voting patterns in Sri Lanka and Tamilnadu: in elections that are mainly concerned with national politics, like Lok Sabha elections in India or presidential elections in Sri Lanka, the Tamils on the whole tend to support a strong national party over and against others whose programme might be nearer to their heart. A certain practical hard-headedness seems to tell them that a Tamil predominance in the centre is illusory and that it is therefore disadvantageous for them to support small parties or candidates who claim to bring this about (cf. Kumar Ponnambalam in the presidential elections 1982). In elections, however, which are more concerned with localised issues or where the Tamils are seen as being able to have a say, things are very different, and in the Tamil areas proper, the 'national' parties, be they Congress, UNP, SLFP or whatever, have no chance. This held true for the DMK which allied with the Congress in 1980 as well as for the ACTC which tried to go with the SLFP in Feb. and failed (not least because the election manifesto was withdrawn or modified). There the Tamils do not want anybody to tell them whom to vote for, and they do as they please, to the extent to heave the LTTE into power! It is a mixture of realism and political independence which for Tamilnadu at least, has worked out well over the years and might now work out for Sri Lanka as well. In fact, the situation seems more favourable for the Tamils than since a long time: a government in India that has to contend with strong regional forces, a strong

67 *Frontline*, 4.-17.3.89, p. 40.

68 *Tamililam*, 9. and 12.2.89.

69 *The Hindu*, 19.2. and 23.2.89.

70 *Frontline*, 10.-23.12.88, p. 24.

71 *The Hindu*, 18.2.89, p. 8.

and decisively pro-Tamil government in Tamilnadu, a Sri Lanka president who tries to be moderate and is prevented from going over the top by a strong opposition and a comparatively strong Provincial Council government under a Tamil party line up in the North and East. It is left to the Tamils to make use of this situation. Quite clearly, a new period in the history of Tamil politics in Sri Lanka has begun.

Abbreviations in alphabetical order:

ACTC	All Ceylon Tamil Congress
AIADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalagam
AIADMK (JL)	AIDMK Jayalalitha
AIADMK (JR)	AIADMK Janaki Ramachandran
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CVF	Citizens' Volunteer Force
DK	Dravida Kalagam
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kalagam
DPLF	Democratic People's Liberation Front
EDF/EPDF	Eelavar/Eelam People's Democratic Front
ENDLF	Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front
EPDF	Eelam People's Democratic Front
EPRLF	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front
EROS	Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students
FP	Federal Party
IPKF	Indian Peace-Keeping Force
JVP	Janatha Vimukti Peramuna
LSSP	Lanka Sama Samaja Pakshaya
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MEP	Mahajana Eksath Peramuna
MGR	M.G. Ramachandran
PC	Provincial Council
PLOT	People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam
PROTEG	Protection of Tamils of Eelam from Genocide
SAARC	South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
SLMP	Sri Lanka Mahajana Pakshaya
TELO	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation
TNCK	Tamil Nadu Congress Kamaraj
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UNP	United National Party
USA	United Socialist Alliance

Note on Transliteration: All Indian names and expressions have been given in their usual anglicized form, except in quotes.