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Sri Lanka Elections: Tamil's voice

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Sri Lanka's newly elected President, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, dissolved parliament to pave the way for a snap general election on November 14, 2024, aiming to secure a fresh mandate. Dissanayake, a left-leaning politician, was elected on 21st September amidst the country's recovery from a severe economic crisis. While the election presents an opportunity for progress, longstanding issues between the Tamil and Sinhalese populations, including the matter of political representation in parliament, continue to require thoughtful resolution. Despite these challenges, the ongoing political changes have set the stage for potential dialogue and reforms aimed at fostering greater inclusivity and addressing ethnic concerns.



New President's National People's Party holds only three seats in the current parliament, pushing him to seek broader legislative support for his reforms. The snap election follows Sri Lanka's first vote since the 2022 financial collapse, which led to massive protests and the resignation of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Dissanayake's plans to revise tax policies and renegotiate the IMF bailout terms have raised concerns among investors, despite his pledges to support those affected by austerity and expand welfare programs.

The election in Sri Lanka focus heavily on economic recovery, with candidates offering different approaches to stabilize the country but the question of equality and justice for Tamil ethnicity is still unresolved. This discord, which has persisted for decades, can be traced back to three pivotal constitutional aspects that have shaped the country's governance. These are: the unitary governance structure, unicameral legislature, and the prominent role of the Presidential system, present challenges for the full inclusion of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka's governance processes. While Sri Lanka functions as a democracy, these factors have, at times, made it more difficult for the Tamil community to have a proportional say in national affairs. These structures have contributed to the complexities of ethnic relations and may have, in some instances, limited the political influence of the Tamil population.



Issues with Representation

There is a unicameral legislature in Sri Lanka, which means there is only one legislative body at the national level elected through popular elections. In a unicameral system, there is no separate chamber or house to represent specific regions or provinces. This absence of regional representation is particularly problematic in a nation like Sri Lanka, where ethnic identities are closely tied to specific regions. The Tamils, who predominantly inhabit the Northern and Eastern provinces, find themselves at a disadvantage because they have no dedicated platform to voice their regional concerns and priorities. As a result, their unique needs and perspectives are easily overlooked in the national legislative process.

Inadequate Participation in Governance

The unitary system of governance in Sri Lanka, coupled with the dominance of the Presidential form of government, have made it more difficult for the Tamil community to fully participate in decision-making processes, which has, at times, heightened ethnic tensions and contributed to ongoing challenges in fostering national unity.

Despite the establishment of Provincial Councils, the devolution of power to regional governments is questionable. The Governor, appointed by the President



and not elected by the people, exercises significant authority over provincial administration elected by the Tamil people. This lack of genuine autonomy for provincial governments diminishes the ability of the Tamil-majority Northern and Eastern provinces to make decisions that align with their unique needs and preferences.

Numbers' Game

As a territory-based community, the Tamil population currently holds fewer than 20 out of 225 seats in the National Legislature, limiting their ability to influence policy decisions and reduce their bargaining power. This leaves them at a disadvantage in ensuring that their community's interests are adequately represented.

There is no federal devolution of power in Sri Lanka, and every major change or decision that could determine the fate of the Tamil people has to be taken at the level of national government. This absence of regional representation hampers their pursuit of greater autonomy and control over regional affairs. With less than 15% of the total population, the Tamil community's weak representation in the National Legislature lowers their possibilities to participate effectively in decision-making processes.



The obvious corollary of these two factors is that the Tamil people in Sri Lanka face significant challenges to achieving practical equality of opportunity due to the structural barriers that limit their participation in governance. The unitary system's centralized power further exacerbates these challenges, hindering the realization of regional autonomy. In contrast, the Sinhalese majority population has more weight in voting power and therefore their interests as an ethnic identity group (which often clash with those of the Tamils) dominate the political landscape. These obstacles sustain a feeling of isolation and disadvantage among the Tamil community, hindering their efforts to achieve significant involvement within the country's political framework. This highlights the need for crucial reforms to rectify these imbalances and promote true inclusiveness.

Conclusion

Although Sri Lanka is defined as a democracy, structural limitations, such as limited representation and participation, challenge this notion for the Tamil community. The combination of a single-chamber parliament, centralised power, and a dominant Presidential system often sidelines Tamil concerns in favour of the Sinhalese majority. This imbalance highlights the need for substantial reforms to ensure that the democratic process genuinely includes all communities and their diverse interests.

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