

# PARLIAMENT WATCH – SRI LANKA\*

JULY 2011



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\* Conceptualised, implemented and funded by South Asians for Human Rights; Research carried out and assistance provided by Transparency International, Sri Lanka

## **Overview**

The Local Government Election which was held in July was a key political event and was an important election for the local government bodies. This election was symbolic of the state of the political environment in Sri Lanka. At the election the government secured an overwhelming victory and the election results were divided along ethnic lines.

In a promising development, travel restrictions which were imposed during the war were relaxed in response to an improved security environment. It remains to be a mystery if easing restrictions will lead to improved governance in war-affected areas, or if it is merely an isolated step in the continuation of repressive policies.

## **Local Government Elections**

The poll to elect representatives for 65 local government bodies was conducted on 23<sup>rd</sup> July amidst a great deal of fanfare from a government confident of its success. The ruling United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won a vast majority of the seats in the Sinhala-dominated areas in the South.<sup>1</sup> However, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) secured the majority in all local government bodies in the Tamil-dominated areas of the North.<sup>2</sup>

The election results serve as a clear indication of ongoing tensions in the country. It also suggests that there are serious issues that need to be addressed before voters cease to vote along ethnic lines. The rejection of the United National Party (UNP) and the leftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) by both Sinhalese and Tamil voters across the country also demonstrated how ethnically polarized voters have become.

This division was clearly visible during the campaign as well. The UPFA pandered to the Sinhalese nationalist sentiments and trumpeted its victory over the LTTE in 2009. Meanwhile, Tamil ethnic identity was the key deciding factor in the North when campaigning for local government seats. The Campaign for Free and Fair Election (CaFFE) noted that some TNA candidates frequently used the term "separate state" and fueled anti-Sinhala sentiments during their campaigns.<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that such tactics may be a desperate attempt to counter the government's influence with voters through its monopoly on resources and donations to the people. However, the election results indicate that the TNA has a strong position in the North, and it does not need to use ethnic rhetoric to overcome the government. Rather, their rhetoric indicates a substantial gap between the Sinhala and Tamil communities in the post-war era.

## **An Opportunity Missed?**

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<sup>1</sup> UPFA secures easy win, ITN, July 24, 2011. <http://www.itnnews.lk/latest/?p=27175>.

<sup>2</sup> Former rebel proxies sweep Sri Lanka council elections, CTV News, July, 23, 2011. <http://www.ctv.ca/CTVNews/World/20110723/sri-lanka-local-voting-council-110723/>

<sup>3</sup> TNA ahead on the streets, UPFA could upset, Lakkima News, July 23, 2011. [http://www.lakbimanews.lk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2247%3Atna-ahead-on-the-streets-upfa-could-upset&Itemid=56](http://www.lakbimanews.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2247%3Atna-ahead-on-the-streets-upfa-could-upset&Itemid=56)

In the immediate post-conflict environment, the government had a golden opportunity to assist the Tamils who suffered displacement, destruction of homes and the loss of their assets during the armed conflict. While significant resources have been dedicated the administration has failed to present a structured programme of action to address the urgent needs of such affected individuals and to assist them in meaningfully rebuilding their lives. This concern has been often noted by opposition MPs, especially the TNA. A report on the North-Eastern situation was released by TNA MP M.A. Sumanthiran, and tabled it in Parliament on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2011.<sup>4</sup>

Speaking in Parliament on July 21<sup>st</sup>, TNA Leader R. Sampanthan urged the government to “come up with an acceptable political solution that addresses the core causes of the conflict. To implement a structured program to enable the displaced and affected people to meaningfully rebuild and recommence their lives, and to address the belief among Tamils that while the war was conducted to destroy the LTTE which was waging an armed struggle against the Sri Lankan State in the name of the Tamil people, at the same time yet another objective of the war was suppressing and subjugating the Tamil people and thereby negating the need for a political solution.”<sup>5</sup>

The election also indicated that a state of normalcy has not yet returned to the North. However, throughout the election, the opposition political parties were complaining of systematic intimidation. Election monitors claimed that the first ever local government post-war election conducted in all the northern constituencies was marred by acts of intimidation and violations of the election law. Around 4,500 polling cards were snatched from voters in the Kilinochchi District the day before the elections and residents of the area alleged that this was carried out by members of the Army and the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP).<sup>6</sup>

Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe addressed Parliament urging the government to ensure a peaceful, free and fair election.

“In 2009, in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the LTTE, when conditions of security had not yet reached normalcy, elections were held for some of the local bodies in the North. Only the armed forces stayed out of that election campaign,” Wickremesinghe said.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Situation in Northern-Eastern Sri Lanka: A Series of Serious Concerns, M.A. Sumanthiran  
<http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/2759>

<sup>5</sup> Hansard, Volume 200 - No. 3, July, 07, 2011, pages 394-6, Action To Rectify Problems In North And East, R. Sampanthan.  
<http://www.parliament.lk/news/ViewPublication.do?published=Y&documentID=PUB3352>.

<sup>6</sup> Hansard, Volume 200 - No. 9, July, 21, 2011, page 1203, holding of free and fair election in North Ranil Wickremesinghe.  
<http://www.parliament.lk/news/ViewPublication.do?published=Y&documentID=PUB3389>.

<sup>7</sup> Hansard, Volume 200 - No. 9, July, 21, 2011, page 1203, holding of free and fair election in North Ranil Wickremesinghe.  
<http://www.parliament.lk/news/ViewPublication.do?published=Y&documentID=PUB3389>; Paramilitaries take polling cards by force, Lakbima News, July 23, 2011.  
[http://www.lakbimanews.lk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2276%3Aparamilitaries-take-polling-cards-by-force&Itemid=56](http://www.lakbimanews.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2276%3Aparamilitaries-take-polling-cards-by-force&Itemid=56).

This is in comparison to the July elections, where the army actively supported the government. The army's participation in the July elections constituted an integral part of the election campaign of several Ministers. While several allegations relating to these electoral crimes were levelled against the security forces, no progress has been made regarding investigating into the matter.<sup>8</sup>

The long-term effects of such polarized elections on the residents of the North remain to be seen. Yet, the July local government elections appear to have been a lost opportunity, which could have been utilized to unite the people and to restore their collective faith in the democratic political process.

### **Travel Restrictions eased for Foreigners**

Since the end of the conflict in May 2009, it was mandatory for all foreign passport holders (travelling to xxx) to obtain prior approval from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in writing, to be submitted at the Omanthai entry point. This was viewed by many critics as a ploy to restrict the information flow by preventing impartial/critical observers visiting the war-affected areas and revealing their findings to the international community.

However, on July 4<sup>th</sup>, the Ministry of Defence stated that foreign passport holders were no longer required to produce a MoD travel approval document at Omanthai security checkpoint, located in Vavuniya.<sup>9</sup>

The government in recent times has hinted at the possibility of repealing emergency regulations and appointing a parliamentary commission to make recommendations with regard to a political solution acceptable to all communities. In this light, relaxing travel regulations can be viewed as a part of the gradual plan to repeal highly visible draconian practices.

This decision should be considered in the context of the upcoming United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) meeting in September, where the human rights situation in Sri Lanka is scheduled to be discussed.

### **Commitment to a new Defence Headquarters**

Just two days after announcing the removal of travel restrictions the government presented a supplementary estimate of Rs. 20 billion for the construction of Defence Headquarters (HQ), as the current complex was to be relocated from Galle Face in order

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<sup>8</sup> Situation in Northern-Eastern Sri Lanka: A Series of Serious Concerns, M.A. Sumanthiran

<sup>9</sup> <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/2759>

ix Sri Lanka lifts travel restrictions for foreigners travelling to the North, July 4, 2011.

[http://www.colombopage.com/archive\\_11A/Jul04\\_1309795910CH.php](http://www.colombopage.com/archive_11A/Jul04_1309795910CH.php).

to develop the area for tourism. The funds were to be raised through the leasing and selling off of Colombo's prime land for tourism development.

Although a Defence HQ is a 'must' and the need for its relocation is not challenged, many opposition MPs questioned the logic of spending Rs. 20 billion on a building complex when the total budgetary allocation for resettlement, a major issue for minority Tamil and Muslim communities remained at a paltry Rs 1.7 billion. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities has a budget of only Rs. 2 billion. To put the cost of the new Defence HQ in context, Sri Lanka only spends Rs. 30 billion for basic education and Rs.21 billion on higher education.

The relocation of the Defence HQ is seen as a part of the government's plan to encourage investors to build an array of super luxury hotels, shopping complexes and recreational facilities in a bid to attract tourists. Acres of prime Colombo property have already been sold/leased including the Colombo Commercial Company property, Charmers Granary, Transworks Square, the former Dutch Hospital, a 15-hectare plot of land near the former Gamini Hall, Maradana, Sri Lanka Exhibition and Convention Centre, Ceynor Restaurant, Air Force Lodges, and lands vested in the Sri Lanka Ports Authority, Railway Department and Sathosa Stores.

Economist turned UNP legislator Dr. Harsha de Silva criticized the proposed construction by stating that this was indicative of the Rajapaksa administration's failure to identify national priorities.

“Already 20% of the budget is reserved for Defence. That is Rs. 212.5 billion and we are going to add another Rs. 20 billion making it a total of Rs. 232.5 billion, 21.8% of our total budget. On the other hand, we have only allocated Rs 1.7 billion for resettlement and we hear constant complaints that those who were affected by the 30- year war are not properly resettled and that they have no facilities. So the question is whether we should spend so much money on this?”<sup>10</sup>

However, Parliament passed the estimate with an overwhelming majority, with the Prime Minister's explanation being that the HQ was essential for national security.

## **Conclusion**

July saw ethnic relations in Sri Lanka take one step forward and two steps back. While the repeal of travel restrictions should be lauded, increased defence spending and ethnically charged campaign rhetoric are deeply troubling. Furthermore, the use of separatist arguments by Tamil politicians has no place in an open and democratic country. Local governance plays a crucial role in Sri Lanka, and often serves as a link

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2011/10/71639.html>

<http://www.tisirilanka.org/?p=7844>

xi Hansard, Volume 200 - No. 2, July, 06, 2011, pages 245-55, Supplementary sum: construction of defence headquarters.

<http://www.parliament.lk/news/ViewPublication.do?published=Y&documentID=PUB3346>

between citizens and the broader political process. The July elections revealed that citizens are not yet ready to divorce their politics from their ethnic identity, a problem that must be addressed before meaningful peace and development can be achieved.