

## The Tamil vote in Sri Lanka's bogus 'General Election' 2010

Brian Senewiratne  
MA. MD. FRCP.FRACP  
Brisbane, Australia

I am not a Tamil. I do not live in the Tamil North and East of Sri Lanka. It is almost presumptuous of me comment on the 'Tamil vote' in the so-called "General Election" on 8 April 2010. I am doing so only because of the confusion as to whom the Tamils, in general, those in the devastated North and East, should vote for, in an election that is unlikely to be of much consequence to the Tamil 'minority'.

The so-called 'General Election' for the 'Sri Lankan' parliament, is a bogus election. It is not a '*General*' election, but an election in the Sinhalese South; it is not to elect a '*Sri Lankan*' parliament, but a Sinhalese parliament, just as the Presidential Election (26 January 2010) to elect a 'Sri Lankan President', was essentially to elect a *Sinhalese* President.

A single fact will document this. In Jaffna in the Tamil North, 74% of the electorate did not vote at all – the choice being President Mahinda Rajapakse and former General Sarath Fonseka. Both men were responsible for the war that devastated the North and East of the island – Rajapakse as the Executive President, Minister of Defence and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and Fonseka as the Head of the Armed Forces. The reluctance of the Tamil people to choose between two war criminals is understandable.

There has been no "General Election" in Sri Lanka since 1977, nor is there likely to be for some (many?) years to come.

Most of the Tamils in the North and East have been effectively disenfranchised, only marginally better than the Plantation ('Indian') Tamils (1 million people – one seventh of the total population of the country at that time) on the tea estates, who were officially disenfranchised and decitizenised in 1948/49 in the first act of the newly independent country.

Tamils in the North and East are unable to vote, because they are in detention in concentration camps, have just been thrown out of them without the necessary papers, have no place to go (their homes having been destroyed), lack transport, or are simply too afraid to vote because of the presence of pro-government thugs, some in uniform, some in civilian clothes. Those who do vote may well be intimidated to vote for those they do not want to represent them, because it could be lethal not to do so (as was seen in Jaffna after the recent Presidential Election).

President Rajapakse is pressing for a two-thirds parliamentary majority in order to change the Constitution and rubberstamp the government's agenda. Rajapakse has increasingly functioned through a presidential cabal, with scant regard for parliament, the Constitution or the legal system, using his extensive executive powers and the continuing state of emergency. He has quite literally bought parliamentarians, some of them Tamils, some former Tamil militants, some from the Opposition, by offering them portfolios, and all the perks that go with these. (Sri Lanka has the largest cabinet in the world with some 51 Cabinet Ministers, 39 Non-Cabinet Ministers, 19 Deputy Ministers, a

total of 109, which is more than all the MPs elected to the governing party in the last 'General Election'!)

The Election is taking place in a general climate of intimidation and repression. On 4 April, 2010, four days before the Elections, The Program for Protection of Public Resources (PPPR) conducted by the Sri Lanka chapter of Transparency International said that it had received 200 complaints on the abuse of public resources during the General Election campaign.

The complaints received related to the abuse of government funds, vehicles and buses, buildings and utilities, media institutions and public officials for electioneering. The PPPR had also recorded a sudden increase of complaints which highlighted the increased level of abuse of public resources as the date of election neared.

The PPPR said that, although they had highlighted the abuse of public resources for election propaganda work in their reports, the authorities had failed to take notice of the abuse highlighted by the PPPR, and there had been a significant increase in the level of abuse. PPPR concluded:

**“Therefore, it’s doubtful as to whether this election can be considered as a ‘free and fair’ election when taking into account the level of abuse of public resources at the Parliamentary Election 2010”.**

As well as intimidating opponents, the government is shamelessly exploiting its control of state-owned media for campaign purposes. The two state-run TV channels—Rupavahini and ITN—as well as radio stations are devoted to pro-government propaganda and attacks on opposition parties.

The extensive use of state media resources to record speeches of candidates of the UPFA which is not extended to other political parties is a violation of the guidelines issued by the Commissioner of Elections on 17th February 2010. Guideline number 1 states:

*“[A]ll telecasting, broadcasting and print media shall be balanced and impartial in their election reporting and shall not discriminate against any contesting political party, independent group, candidate or political party leaders in granting access to airtime.”*

The PPPR also highlighted the gross abuse of Government buses and state vehicles for propaganda work. A Directive issued by the Commissioner of Elections on 13th February 2010 prevents the abuse of state owned vehicles, including helicopters and aircraft, during the time of election by the candidates. This has been completely ignored by the Government.

The election commissioner, Dayanada Dissanayake, has wide powers, which include appeals to the Supreme Court for action. Yet he has refused to act against the government. On March 12, 2010, a member of a political party, asked Dissanayake what action he had taken against the government’s abuse of state power and state resources. He bluntly answered “nothing” and, when asked why, claimed that such matters were beyond the limits of his powers.

## **The Tamil areas**

Two specific problems face the Tamil people in the North and East – voter intimidation by thugs and hooligans under (Tamil) Government Ministers, and the fact it has not been possible to deliver polling cards to nearly half of the population.

In Jaffna, in the Tamil North (covering Jaffna district and the Kilinochchi district) of 721,359 polling cards, only 427,164 (59%) had been delivered at the time of writing. The rest (41%) were undelivered, with “arrangements to get the polling cards to the voters by 4:00 p.m. on polling day” has been given by Government authorities. It is, of course, unlikely to happen.

There are serious problems with transport for more than 100,000 people locked up in illegal ‘detention centres’ in the North. Arrangements are being made for “cluster voting” – whatever that may be. Of importance is whether these ‘clusters’ will be under the watchful eye of the military that runs the camps.

Voter intimidation in Jaffna, in particular, the Islands off Jaffna eg Keyts, is serious. Jaffna is a Police State run by the Sri Lankan military in conjunction with a bunch of (armed) hoodlums and thugs, under Cabinet Minister, Douglas Devananda, a Tamil, and a former militant, now in bed with Rajapakse. His political party, the EPDP (Eelam People’s Democratic Party), has a paramilitary wing that operates closely with the military in Kayts and in the neighbouring islands, and has now spilt over into the Peninsula itself.

The Honourable Minister is President Rajapakse’s ‘point man’ in Jaffna. He is, virtually the *de facto* President of Jaffna. As such, he can do what he wants, with no questions asked. The unwritten demand seems to be “Vote for the EPDP, ie the Government, or not at all”.

EPDP thugs regularly tour the villages where most of the villagers are poor fishermen. The thugs are armed with large wooden clubs, and some have revolvers. All this is very well known to the Armed Forces and the Police.

As I have said, they are now in the Peninsula itself, intimidating other political parties. A single example will suffice to give the flavour of what is going on. On 19 March 2010, six EPDP thugs confronted K. Chitrakumar, a candidate of the Socialist Alliance Party (SEP), who was electioneering with two other SEP members in Vaddukoddai. The gang leader threatened the SEP members, declaring:

*“This is the area of Minister Douglas Devanada. You rascals can’t be allowed to do (election) work here. I have a pistol with me. I could shoot you if I want.”*

These are the problems electioneering in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

## **Whom to vote for**

The options for the Tamils in the North and East are limited.

1. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA)
2. The Tamil National People’s Front (TNPFF)
3. One of the Left parties, in particular, the SEP (Socialist Equality Party) under Wije Dias, the NSSP (Nava Sama Samaja Party) under Dr Vickremabahu Karunaratne, or the USP (United Socialist Party) under Sirtunga Jayasuriya. All of these leaders are Sinhalese.

The Left parties have been very supportive of the Tamil people, and if elected, will certainly attempt to look after the interests of the Tamil people, more than any from the Tamil parties. They have publicly and consistently expressed concern at what the Tamil people are going through. This they have done in the Sinhalese South, a dangerous activity, if there ever was one. At one of the rallies where Dr Karunaratne was espousing devolution of power to the Tamils, he was shot by so-called Marxists (read 'Marxist-turned-ethnic chauvinists', in the Sinhala extremist JVP).

Wije Dias' SEP has gone as far as advocating a "Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and (Tamil) Eelam". The SEP is contesting the elections with 58 candidates in four districts across the island – Jaffna in the North (the candidates are Tamil), Nuwara Eliya in the Plantations (mainly Tamils), Colombo, and Galle in the South.

Despite all the support given by these Left parties to the Tamils, I cannot see the Tamils "breaking out of the box" and voting for a socialist/left party or a Sinhalese-led party. Such is their thinking.

This leaves the choice between two Tamil parties, the TNA and the TNPf.

It is not for me, a Sinhalese, to advise which Tamil party Tamils should vote for, but I have spent a considerable time studying their manifestos, and more importantly, looking at what they have done, rather than what they have *said* they will do.

The TNA, in its lengthy manifesto, barely mentions the killing of more than 75,000 Tamils by the Sri Lankan government, the transformation of hundreds of thousands into permanent refugees, and the devastation of large areas of the North and East, their electorates, their people. The TNA fails to raise, let alone address, these serious problems.

The LTTE's collapse was not primarily a military defeat, but a result of political bankruptcy, for which the TNA must take full responsibility. The TNA seems to be unable to even address these issues, but is content to continue with the same perspective that produced this disaster for its people (and its voters).

In the January Presidential elections, the TNA backed General Sarath Fonseka, who was fully responsible for the mass slaughter of the Tamil civilians. Not surprisingly, the TNA manifesto leaves out this fact.

If I were a Tamil, there is no way I would vote for the TNA. They seem to be preparing to do exactly what they have been doing for the past 60 years, with disastrous results. They simply have not learned anything from history. Those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it.

The TNPf, which split off from the TNA, seems to have got the message that the fundamental problems facing the Tamil people at the hands of a Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-religious chauvinistic regime of extreme brutality, has to be confronted, and challenged, not pampered. Challenging the government is not possible by jumping into bed with them. The manifesto of the TNPf cannot be faulted. But, what the TNPf will achieve, or what can be achieved with a totalitarian regime, is difficult to predict. At least, they have been able to identify and list out in their manifesto, the problems that have got to be addressed if the Tamil people are to live with equality, dignity, and even live at all!

The TNPf has been formed by Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, the leader of the ACTC (All Ceylon Tamil Congress) and others breaking with the TNA. Gajendrakumar is an extremely articulate and well-informed person (whom I know and can testify to his

capability), who can, among other things, be a very effective international lobbyist for the Tamil cause.

### **The Plantation Tamils**

The election choices facing the Plantation 'Indian' Tamils are serious, mainly because the political party representing the tea workers is as ruthless as the government it is in bed with. A tea estate worker put this very well:

*"President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government say they have produced a golden era for the plantations. Yes, it's a golden era for the bosses of the plantation companies, but not for the workers".*

A reporter from a political group I know, found deep hostility among the plantation workers towards the Rajapakse regime, as well as widespread disgust with all parties and trade unions that have dominated Sri Lankan politics for decades. This was exactly what I found working with these people three decades ago, when members of my family were in power.

The seething anger seems to be directed towards the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which is both a trade union and a political party, a member of Rajapakse's ruling coalition.

Since Rajapakse took office in 2005, the daily wage of a plantation worker has increased only from Rs 200 to Rs 285 (US\$ 1.80 to US\$ 2.50), while the cost of living has skyrocketed. In a downright lie, the government claims that there has been a massive development in the plantations. The reality is that most of the workers still live in dreadful barrack-style rooms that lack basic facilities, and with which I am more than familiar. The cattle on our estate had better accommodation than these 'slaves' who, by their sweat and toil in freezing conditions have enabled the high-life in Colombo to go on.

One female worker put the reality of this, *"I am not going to work today because I have to fill water for our use this week. We don't have a house, we are living in a small temporary hut with two children"*. It is *déjà vu* for me.

The anger at the pay is palpable. Murugan, 45 years:-*"The government spent millions of rupees for a war that killed so many people. When we ask for a small wage increase to survive, we were branded as supporters of terrorism. All our unions supported the government and betrayed our struggles"*

The work is truly slave labour. To receive a full salary, workers have to work 18 days a month, and achieve plucking targets (which I know only too well, having done numerous research projects on the estates). If they work one day less, they lose about 25% of their monthly salary.

I will not burden you with their health problems or education, which I know very well, and which have got *worse* since I was last there, some 35 years ago.

Youth unemployment is critical, heartless capitalism obvious. A young worker said that in his estate nearly 60 youths were unemployed, but the estate management hired retired workers as cheap casual labour and refuses employment to young people.

One female worker set out what she intended to do:-*"I will tear up my polling cards. So will many others"*.

Facing open discontent among workers to an extent that I find unbelievable (knowing these humble people as well as I do), the CWC is desperately trying to boost its vote. It is doing this by intimidating Opposition parties, especially from the Left, who are working

in the Plantations, and, if this fails, will not hesitate to intimidate the workers (voters) themselves. This is what has happened for years, and is not about to change.

If the Tamil people, both in the North and East, and in the tea estates do not get it right, their long-term outlook, at the hands of the likes of Rajapakase, will be disastrous.

Brian Senewiratne Brisbane Australia

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