
The war dividend

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WADING into Trincomalee harbour early on May 10th, a line of poor fishermen received election-day gifts from both sides of Sri Lanka's nasty, 25-year-old civil war. From the government, dominated by the Sinhalese majority, the gift was of a day's work. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse had lifted a two-year ban on entering the harbour, an important naval base, just before the poll. From the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who claim northern and eastern Sri Lanka, of which Trincomalee is the capital, there was a stench of diesel. This was all that remained of a naval transport vessel, the *Invincible*, which had been blasted and scuttled hours earlier by a "Black Tiger" suicide-diver.

Much was riding on the provincial poll. Last year, the government drove the Tigers from Sri Lanka's eastern province, which they had more or less held for over a decade. Defying international condemnation of its brutal methods, and a 2002 ceasefire that was officially scrapped in January, Mr Rajapakse's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) promised to bring development and devolution to the "liberated" places. This week's election was the first test of its vow.

The government won. In alliance with the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) party—formerly the Tigers' eastern wing, a vicious militant group whose defection to the government had been crucial to its military success—it secured 20 of 37 seats. The main opposition, a coalition of the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), won 15 seats. The TMVP's leader, Sivanesanathurai Chandrakanthan, who is known as Pillaiyan, is now vying to be the province's chief minister.

That would be sadly appropriate. The government stands accused of committing dire human-rights and other abuses through its TMVP proxies. On election day independent observers reported many cases of voter intimidation and ballot-stuffing by still-armed Tamil militants. Curiously, in an election marked by widening ethnic and communal tensions, the TMVP's candidates won in several areas dominated by Sinhalese and Muslims.

In the two years since the government informally reignited the civil war—partly in response to terrorist attacks by the Tigers—several hundred young Tamil men have "disappeared" in eastern and northern Sri Lanka. The government says they must be among the war-displaced, of whom there are several thousand in India, 30,000 in the east, and perhaps 90,000 in the Tigers' remaining northern enclave. But human-rights groups and diplomats suspect that the government, through its militant proxies, is murdering its citizens.

Sumadhy, a fugitive living in a camp beside Trincomalee harbour, fears her husband is a victim. She says that on the evening of May 9th two men arrived and muscled him into a white van—the archetypal vehicle of abduction in Sri Lanka—in full view of a nearby army checkpost. Sumadhy says the soldiers there told her to report her husband missing at the local police station. "But I'm afraid they have killed him," she says.

Amid such atrocities, it is hard to celebrate the east's maiden provincial election. And as an exercise in power-sharing, it falls far short of the minimum demanded by Tamils and Muslims, even assuming the government acts in good faith. Under a reform introduced in 1988, provincial assemblies are supposed to control land and policing. But these powers have not been relinquished by the government in Colombo, and there is little reason to think they now will be. The government will even pick the east's chief minister, either Mr Chandrakanthan or a defector from the SLMC, M. L.A. Hisbullah. Before the poll, it promised the job to both.

Unsurprisingly, many Tamils think the government is trying to subjugate them, not win them over. That is certainly its objective in the north. After declaring the ceasefire over, senior officials, including the army chief, General Sarath Fonseka, said the Tigers would be defeated this year. Perhaps that will be possible: the army is pitting 160,000 well-equipped soldiers against perhaps 10,000 self-trained LTTE rebels in a conventional war.

Yet after ten months of laying siege to the Tigers' enclave, the army has gained a few kilometres in the south-west, and little else. As a sign of its frustration, perhaps, on April 23rd the army launched a ground attack—which it called a counterattack—on the LTTE's northern defences. It failed as miserably as had several previous attacks. Insiders suggest 185 soldiers were killed.

With its superior numbers, the army can bear such costs. Meanwhile, General Fonseka says he is shelling the Tigers into extinction. Having estimated their strength at less than 5,000 fighters, the government claims to have killed around 3,400 Tigers this year. The remainder—however many they are—must be feeling the pinch. In the past 18 months the government may have sunk the LTTE's entire fleet of around ten cargo vessels. India has also redoubled its efforts to stem the supply of arms from its southern state of Tamil Nadu. In addition, shorn of the east, which supplied most of its ferocious child soldiers, the LTTE is reported to have doubled the levy it raises per family, to two recruits.

Under such pressure, the Tigers' appalling leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, might try more drastic measures. Some fear a big increase in terrorist attacks—like the blast in a café in eastern Ampara that killed 12 people on May 9th.

The government might also try more spectacular attacks—for it, too, is under strain. According to a recent poll by the

Centre for Policy Alternatives, a think-tank, a strong majority of Sinhalese supports the war. Only 16% said the government should negotiate with the LTTE. Yet this support is perhaps predicated on the government's promise to crush the Tigers swiftly. With much else to complain about, including soaring corruption and inflation at 25%, even the Sinhalese will not back this painful war indefinitely.

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