

Sri Lanka's Presidential Election 2019: A 'Wait and See' Approach by Tamil Nadu Parties

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Summary

With the Sri Lankan Presidential election being just a few days away, there is still not much visible excitement and momentum in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. The main political parties in the state have adopted a similar approach as the central government – wait and see.

There is not much visible excitement in India over the Sri Lankan president election, scheduled for 16 November 2019. Political parties, especially those in Tamil Nadu, which are constantly concerned about the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils, appear to be quiet about the forthcoming elections, and there could be several reasons for this.

First, the central government in Delhi, including the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the various agencies, has decided to adopt a 'wait and see' approach to the election. Of late, India has not been monitoring the day-to-day activities in Sri Lanka, as it was often earlier accused of, especially in the United Progressive Alliance days. The MEA is certainly of the opinion that it should be prepared to work with whoever is the winner and the Indian High Commission in Colombo shares this opinion as well. It is to be hoped that the other Indian agencies, often accused of intervening, get this message as well.

Second, the political parties in Tamil Nadu appear to be unclear about the stand to take. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) has been the supporter of Tamil sentiments and activism in Sri Lanka for decades but has always taken a nuanced position during the different local and state elections to ensure that there is no depletion of its voter base due to a strident position. Late M Karunanidhi was ideologically committed to the [Tamil cause](#), though he stopped short of Eelam demands. The DMK has been considered to be pro Sri Lankan Tamils, much more than the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. However, under the leadership of M K Stalin, the party appears to be hesitant about taking a stand this time, and there has been no strong statement from the party about the candidates that it would want to support. This could be due to the fact that Indian government is adopting a 'wait and see' approach.

It could also be attributed to the fact that neither of the main candidates, Gotabaya Rajapaksa or Sajith Premadasa, have offered any robust promises on the Tamil demands. The recent resolutions, spearheaded by the Jaffna students' council (which is supported by the Tamil diaspora overseas) and the Tamil Makkal Kootani, which has demanded, among other things, a federal structure with considerable autonomy for the north. However, this has been firmly rejected by Gotabaya. Sajith has also not promised that he would fulfil these demands if elected. For the DMK, then, the choice is difficult – it would not like to see Gotabaya in the chair, having reviled him for spearheading the final assault on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

The other Tamil Nadu leaders, most importantly, Vaiko of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Thol. Thirumavalavan of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, who have always been vociferous about the rights of Sri Lankan Tamils, are also silent, since they are not clear about how the different sections of the Tamils in Sri Lanka will vote.

All the parties under the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) have finally decided to [support](#) Sajith instead of Gotabaya. The TNA may have waited for the main parties to release their respective manifestos before announcing its final decision. The alliance has also withdrawn its 13-point demands, including releasing of political prisoners, release of land appropriated by the military and revocation of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Interestingly, not all Tamil parties are rooting for Sajith. Three smaller Tamil parties – Ceylon Workers’ Congress, Eelam People’s Democratic Party and Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal have expressed their support for Gotabaya.

The Muslim Tamils have been very unhappy about the crackdown and rising anti-Muslim sentiments following the Easter Sunday blasts, and have no great liking for current Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe at this time. They have no particular affinity to Gotabaya as well. They may be hoping that Sajith, being a new candidate, would move away from the Wickremesinghe policies to a more middle ground, and they might, therefore, be inclined to vote for him. The Muslim Tamils of Sri Lanka neither have a spokesperson in Tamil Nadu, nor have the Tamil Nadu political parties been vociferous about their grievances – they have focused much more on the Jaffna Tamils.

The third group of Tamils, the up-country plantation Tamils, are less organised. They are not within the ambit of the politics of the other two groups of Tamils and may, therefore, feel that this is yet another election where their demands would remain unheeded. The fourth group, the Colombo Tamils, or the urban Tamils, may well vote for stability and growth, which would mean that they would not be totally averse to voting for Gotabaya.

It is clear to both Gotabaya and Sajith that they would need the votes of the Tamil electorate to cross the 50 per cent figure. At the same time, neither would like to alienate the Sinhala voters by promising to heed to the Tamil demands. In fact, they would like to ensure Sinhala votes even at the risk of rejecting all the Tamil demands (Gotabaya more so than Sajith). The political parties in Tamil Nadu are cognisant of this dilemma and, at present, are keeping quiet.

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