report

Minority Rights Group

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

Divided and weakened: The collapse of minority politics in Sri Lanka

Farah Mihlar

A Muslim woman displays her ink-marked finger after casting her vote at a polling station during the presidential election. Colombo, Sri Lanka, 21 September 2024.
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Abbreviations

ACMC	All Ceylon Makkal Congress
ACTC	All Ceylon Tamil Congress
AITC	All India Trinamool Congress
CWC	Ceylon Workers' Congress
DPF	Democratic People's Front
EPDP	Eelam People's Democratic Party
EROS	Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students
EPRLF	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front
ITAK	Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NPP	National People's Power
NUA	National Unity Alliance
NUW	National Union of Workers
OISL	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Investigation on Sri Lanka
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
PA	People's Alliance
PLOTE	People's Liberation Organisation for Tamil Eelam
SJB	Samagi Jana Balawegaya
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
SLPP	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna
SLPFA	Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance
TPA	Tamil Progressive Alliance
TELO	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation
TMVP	Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
TU	Tamil United Front
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UNF	United National Front
UNP	United National Party
UPFA	United People's Freedom Alliance
UCPF	Up-Country People's Front
UNFGG	United Front for Good Governance
UN HRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
WPF	Western People's Front

Terminology

An introductory explanation of the terms used in this report may be helpful to enable the reader to clearly understand the early sections of the report. All these terms and concepts are explained in more detail in different parts of the report.

National mainstream parties – these are the major national level political parties that usually contest elections in all parts of Sri Lanka, such as the United National Party (UNP), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its fronts, and the newly formed National People's Power (NPP).

Ethnic minority parties – these are political parties representing different ethnic minority communities. These would include parties such as the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and others.

Minority political representation refers mainly to electoral representation and in the context of this report to parliamentary elections.

Minority politics refers to the national level political priorities of minority groups, which include conflict related ethnic issues, self-determination, political autonomy, anti-discrimination and equality, especially in relation to language, cultural and religious rights and justice, as well as accountability for war-time atrocities.

Executive Summary

'Nothing! No one gained by it, not a single MP has achieved anything. We have no other solution, we have no option, we have to do this politics,' said a former Tamil militant who gave up arms in 1989 to become an elected Member of Parliament (MP), in response to a question regarding whether he believes he and other Tamil militants who joined the democratic mainstream benefitted from the decision.

The minority politics that has existed in Sri Lanka since independence is disintegrating, on the one hand crushed by structural majoritarian nationalism and on the other stunted by a lack of vision, identity and leadership within minorities' own political parties.

Representatives elected to parliament from ethnic minority parties explain that since independence majoritarian nationalism, functioning for example through state organs such as the military and civil service, has limited their effectiveness. This same nationalism partly contributed to the ethnic conflict and Tamil militancy which led to three decades of civil war in the country from 1983 to 2009. Extremist Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism rose within the government particularly under the presidencies of Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015) and his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2019-2022), whose credibility is now severely damaged by their policies of subjugation and oppression. Their terms in office are seen as especially suffocating for minorities, whose political representatives were restrained from serving their communities at different levels. This included a number of different strategies ranging from allegedly buying out minority MPs and sowing division in ethnic minority parties, to completely curtailing these parties from acting in the interest of the communities they represent.

An old guard of national political parties with a history of fielding minority candidates has, in the recent past, shifted tactics to form alliances and coalitions with ethnic minority parties while offering less space inside their own parties for both minority representatives and minority issues. Minority representatives who have been elected from the former two major parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and their various fronts have felt isolated, with little opportunity to take up minority issues in national party agendas.

The strong and vibrant political landscape that ethnic minority parties once enjoyed in Sri Lanka, though not totally diminished, is both collapsing from within and being destroyed from without. Ethnic minority parties from all three minority communities have splintered into several factions, and the larger, more popular ones are internally deeply divided. These divides have been caused in part as a consequence of majoritarian nationalism, but also due to weak leadership and allegations of corruption within parties.

Extremist positions espoused by some groups belonging to minorities have also contributed to this worsening situation. The most prominent Ceylon Tamil party, Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) (literally, 'Sri Lanka Tamil State Party'), has struggled since the end of the war to define its political path, given the prevalence of Tamil ultranationalism in the areas formerly affected by the civil war. Ethnic minority parties from among the second largest minority, Muslims, and the smaller Malaiyaga Tamil community (of recent Indian origin), present a story of disarray, division and lost credibility. These parties have erratically switched allegiances with nationalist mainstream parties trying to capitalize on shifting alliances and coalition formation, which eventually damaged them deeply. Their own lack of openness to new leadership and progressive reforms, amidst allegations of corruption, has not helped their cause.

The strategic undermining of minority political actors and the dwindling returns of representation have together starved minority politics, leaving minority ethnic and religious communities with little in terms of political solutions to their grievances, including their need for recognition of identity, demands for autonomy and access to justice. In a stunning victory, the centre-left National People's Power (NPP) has significantly shaken up minority politics by successfully ousting the old guard in the 2024 parliamentary elections and becoming the only party without an alliance to have gained a two-thirds supermajority under Sri Lanka's current proportional representation electoral system. The two-thirds supermajority is needed to make constitutional changes; having reached this majority on their own, the NPP has the power to amend the Constitution without the support of other parties.

The NPP has 18 MPs from minority communities, winning a high number of seats in every minority district.

However, their popular stance of equality for all, though progressive, risks undermining ethnic minority claims, including ethnic grievances and conflict related justice. Though it is too early to analyse the broader effect on minority politics, the NPP's defeat of majority and minority parties has already transformed political representation, offering minority voters an unprecedented third option for which many were desperate.

This report also demonstrates tensions between representation and power. It raises questions about what can be achieved through electoral representation and whether some compromises are needed to translate legislative positions into executive ones. Ethnic minority parties have had to rely on different strategies to manage these tensions. Some choose to contest alongside other parties, form alliances and be part of ruling coalitions, which gives them a role within government, and access to more resources which they can use to help their communities. This is not without its downsides: in power, ethnic minority parties face restrictions and have been compromised for supporting governments unfriendly to minorities. Those who choose to stay in opposition are not just limited in what they can do but are often made to fail, particularly in the north and east where military occupation continues, and violations of minority rights are high. Nearly every one of the former opposition MPs from Tamil parties in the north who were interviewed for this report, explained that at best they are merely preventing the worst from taking place, which raises serious questions regarding the value of electoral representation for them.

An important finding of this report is also that minority electoral representation cannot be separated from minority rights. The unaddressed concerns of all ethnic minority communities remain a significant justification for the existence of minority politics. However, the failure of national parties to address these grievances, with or without ethnic minority parties, is a major contributing factor to the crumbling of minority electoral representation. It undermines their purpose and raises questions as to why their candidates should be elected if they cannot address fundamental minority rights issues and grievances. The fact that the national parties have not offered a lasting political solution to the ethnic conflict that is acceptable to all ethnic groups, alongside the continuing suppression of minority rights, demonstrates their moral bankruptcy and delegitimizes minority politics in Sri Lanka.

Many of the report's findings, such as the fracturing of parties, the forming and breaking of alliances and coalitions, poor leadership and corruption, are also features of the two older national parties. However, by nature of representing the country's majority, the effects of these issues on their politics are less destructive. With Sri Lanka's history of violent conflict, it is critical to ensure that minority communities benefit from the democratic process and are successful in their political aspirations. Whilst some of the findings in this report may be part of a passing pattern, others will need urgent attention to ensure minority protection, prevent future conflicts and build a lasting peace in Sri Lanka.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background – Sri Lanka's minorities

Sri Lanka has a plural society. The majority group, the Sinhalese, speak Sinhala, and are mainly Buddhist. There are two groups of Tamil speakers: 'Sri Lankan Tamils' (also known as 'Ceylon' Tamils) and Malaiyaga Tamils (also but increasingly less frequently known as 'Up Country', 'Indian' or 'estate' Tamils), who are descendants of recent immigrants, including labourers brought to the island by the British to work on tea plantations. Both Tamil groups are predominantly Hindu with a small percentage of Christians.

Muslims (including Sri Lankan Moors, Malays and other smaller religious sects like Bhoras and Khojas) live in the north and east, particularly the latter, where they constitute about a third of the population. The remaining Muslim community is dispersed throughout the urban centres of Sri Lanka. Muslims speak both Tamil and Sinhalese depending on the area where they live. Muslims in Sri Lanka now rarely identify as Moor or Malay, although the census department continues to use these categories, instead frequently identifying themselves simply as Muslims.

The forest-dwelling Wanniyala-Aetto comprise a very small community of indigenous people. The entire community is in danger of extinction. Sri Lanka also has other, smaller communities, such as the Burghers who are of Dutch and Portuguese origin. The north and east of the island are the traditional homelands of Tamils and Muslims.

Religion is intrinsically linked to ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Buddhists are mostly Sinhalese, Hindus are mostly Tamil, and to be Muslim is both an ethnic and religious identity. The Christian community, comprising Roman Catholics, traditional Protestant Christians and non-traditional or evangelical Christians, encompasses both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups. Sri Lanka's religious minorities face violations in many forms of their constitutional right to religious freedom, including hate speech, discriminatory practices, threats and intimidation, destruction of property as well as physical violence. Hindus, Muslims and Christians, who together make up just under 30 per cent of the population, are affected to varying degrees. Other religious minorities, including Parsis and Baha'is, are also present in the country in smaller numbers.

Post-independence, Sri Lanka's 75-year track record on protecting and upholding minority rights has not been a positive one. Decades of oppressive policies and practices by majoritarian governments since independence led to thirty years of armed conflict.[1] These policies included: undermining the linguistic, cultural and religious rights of minorities; making communities stateless; and reducing employment and education opportunities for them. The country's armed conflict (Sri Lankan civil war) saw large-scale human rights violations committed against minorities, and two subsequent UN investigations found the state military, which ended the war in 2009, responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity targeting minorities.[2] The bitter legacy of this decades-long conflict is particularly felt in the north and east of the country, where a large proportion of the country's Tamil minority reside. Over years of fighting between the forces of the Sinhalese majority government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), these regions experienced huge upheaval due to large-scale violence, multiple waves of displacement, thousands of extra-judicial killings and increasing militarization – some of these issues still affect daily life in these areas today.

While the civil conflict was primarily between the majority Buddhist military and Tamil militants, Sri Lanka's Muslim community was also deeply affected. Northern Muslims were forcibly evicted by Tamil militants in what was the country's largest single case of ethnic cleansing during the conflict. Since the end of the conflict, a hate campaign led by Buddhist extremist organizations has targeted Muslims focusing particularly on the community's religious and social practices, such as their dress codes, prayer rituals and halal slaughter methods. These groups also instigated several violent attacks on Muslim businesses and neighbourhoods in 2018 and 2019.

1.2 Minority politics in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's track record on minority electoral politics presents quite a different picture, one of active minority party and individual representation, at times capable of making and breaking governments, even during the armed conflict.

Table 1: Sri Lanka ethnic and religious population statistics[3]

Ethnic group	Percentage
Sinhala	**74.9**
Sri Lankan Tamils	**11.1**
Muslims (Sri Lankan Moors and Malays)	**9.5**
Malaiyaga Tamils (Indian Tamils)	**4.1**
Other	**0.3**
Religious group	**Percentage**
Buddhist	**70.1**
Hindu	**12.6**
Muslim	**9.7**
Christian	**7.6**

Sri Lanka's ethnic minorities, together constituting nearly a quarter of the population, have had representatives elected from the mainstream national political parties and their own ethnic minority parties in successive elections since independence.

Tamils in the north and east elected their own ethnic minority parties throughout the post-independence period, with numbers significant enough to form the main opposition in at least two parliaments.[4] In some periods during the war, even when large numbers of Sri Lankan Tamils were unable to exercise their right to vote in areas governed by the LTTE, who were fighting for a separate state in the north and east, their representatives continued to be elected from the districts still under the control of the Sri Lankan government.

The Muslim community accounts for nearly a tenth of Sri Lanka's population. Muslims have historically been aligned with national mainstream parties, which continued to gain support from a sizeable proportion of this electorate in spite of the emergence and success of Muslim minority parties since the 1980s. The story of the Malaiyaga Tamils, who comprise about 4 per cent of Sri Lanka's population, has been a slightly different one. Disenfranchised for nearly 30 years, this community has, since the 1980s, similarly played an influential role in the country's political landscape, especially in the collapse and formation of coalition governments. Sri Lanka also has a very sizable religious minority population of Christians, about 7 per cent, belonging to either the Tamil or Sinhala ethnic groups. Their political representation has been divided along ethnic lines. Sinhalese Christians have elected representatives through national parties. In Tamil areas, Christians have been elected through ethnic minority parties. Smaller ethnic and religious groups such as the Burghers, Parsis, Baha'is and the indigenous Wanniyala-Aetto population have had no notable representation in national politics.[5]

This effervescence of minority politics as against Sri Lanka's failings on minority rights more generally presents an anomaly that this report seeks to interrogate. This is the first of a series of publications that are part of a wider two-year *Minority Empowerment for Democracy and Pluralism* programme aimed at strengthening minority political participation in the country, with special focus on women and marginalized groups.[6] As the flagship publication of this project, and in the absence of any recent analysis on minority politics in Sri Lanka, this report will offer an overarching analysis of the challenges faced by minorities in relation to political representation at the national level. Inevitably a report of this nature cannot present the entirety of issues facing minority politics; many details, especially on the diversity of the political context in Sri Lanka, will be left out. Nevertheless, the focus on the big picture and a broad analysis of minority electoral representation and politics can hopefully make a significant contribution to policy and practice.

Sri Lanka is a unitary state with a weak system of provincial governance introduced in 1987 as part of the

Indo-Lanka Peace Accord, negotiated between India and Sri Lanka and aimed at addressing the ethnic grievances of Tamils that ultimately led to the armed conflict.[7] The country had inherited a legislative system of governance from the British, but in 1977 introduced a French-style powerful executive presidency. There are four types of elections that take place in Sri Lanka: presidential, parliamentary, provincial and local authority.[8] This report will mainly focus on parliamentary elections as these provide a useful framework for a national level analysis. There will also be some analysis of presidential polls to show the role of minority communities in the election of the executive, especially in instances where they have opposed the incumbent. Whilst provincial council elections are important for minority politics and representation, they have not been consistently held and so using the limited data from these elections could skew this report's findings. A separate analysis of this in the form of a briefing is expected to be produced later as part of the *Minority Empowerment for Democracy and Pluralism* programme. The second report from this project will specifically focus on minority women's political representation and for that reason this report does not focus on these issues. This is not in any way to undermine the importance of minority women's political experience, rather, its criticality is acknowledged through the dedication of an entire report towards the topic. A terminological clarification is required at this introductory stage. This report recognizes the problematic historic association of the Sri Lankan nation-state with its nearly 75 per cent Sinhala-Buddhist majority, therefore, it is important to note that reference to 'national politics' is used more as a unit of analysis to denote a countrywide level rather than in relation to what constitutes the nation. Political parties representing ethnic minorities are of course, also 'national', but due to the complexities of who forms the nation, they are identified in this report as 'ethnic minority parties.' Sri Lanka has a few ethnic parties from the majority community as well, such as the Sihala Urumaya, which has been at the forefront of majoritarian nationalistic governance and can be hostile towards minorities. Hence the distinction between 'ethnic minority parties' and 'ethnic parties' is important in Sri Lanka. There are a number of minorities whose representatives continue to be elected under the two major national parties of Sri Lanka: the UNP and SLFP. As *Table 2* illustrates, in recent years, these parties have divided and contested under different names as part of various coalitions. Though Sri Lanka can no longer claim to have a clear two-party system, it is possible to loosely categorize the different groups into two camps: those that align with or have a history connected to the UNP and SLFP, and those that do not. In this report, 'mainstream national parties' refers to the UNP, the SLFP, parties aligned with them and the newly successful left-wing NPP. There are a number of other major parties including Sinhala ethnic parties and several leftist parties that sometimes contest elections independently or align with these parties.

The research for this report employed three main methods: a desk review of academic and policy literature on minorities and political representation in Sri Lanka; quantitative analysis of selected election results; and field research in the form of discussions and qualitative interviews with key informants, conducted between May

Table 2: Synopsis of parliamentary electoral results since proportional representation was introduced

Year	Election	Result (113 out of 225 seats needed to form a government)
1989	Parliamentary	UNP wins 125 and forms the government. SLFP forms main opposition.
1994	Parliamentary	SLFP-led coalition, People's Alliance (PA), wins 105 seats and governs with support of SLMC, CWC and smaller parties. UNP forms main opposition.
2000	Parliamentary	PA wins 107 seats and governs with support of smaller parties. UNP forms main opposition. PA struggles to hold the coalition together. SLMC exit causes a collapse; President Chandrika Kumaratunga dissolves parliament and calls an election.
2001	Parliamentary	United National Front (UNF), a UNP front, together with CWC and some SLMC MPs, wins 109 seats and forms a government with the support of five SLMC MPs who contested under their own party. Chandrika Kumaratunga from PA remains as President.

Table 2: Synopsis of parliamentary electoral results since proportional representation was introduced *(continued...)*

Year	Election	Result (113 out of 225 seats needed to form a government)
2004	Parliamentary	United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), SLFP-led coalition with left-wing parties, wins 105 seats and forms a minority government with EPDP support. UNF, consisting of UNP, CWC and some SLMC members, gain 82 seats. SLMC and CWC subsequently defect from UNF to UPFA.
2010	Parliamentary	UPFA, now including CWC and SLMC, wins 144 seats. UNF wins only 60 seats and forms opposition.
2015	Parliamentary	United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG), an expanded UNF under UNP leadership, wins 106 seats. SLFP-led coalition United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has 95 seats. SLFP Central Committee forms a national government with UNFGG causing a split in UPFA. TNA leader becomes opposition leader.
2020	Parliamentary	Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance (SLPFA), SLPP-led coalition (formed by Mahinda Rajapaksa after SLFP split from UPFA) including CWC and TMVP wins 145 seats. Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) ('United People's Power'), a breakaway group of the UNP, wins 54 seats.
2024	Parliamentary	NPP wins supermajority of 159 seats, becoming the largest number of seats won by a single party. SJB forms opposition with 40 seats.

and September 2024. Key informants consisted of minority representatives in national politics, within national and ethnic minority parties and political analysts. Some of those who were interviewed preferred not to be publicly identified; hence, they have not been named when quoted.

This report commences with a historical overview of the situation of minorities in Sri Lanka and the major political changes affecting these communities. There is very little documentation of the electoral history of minorities, and, as this is critical to assess the recent changes that have taken place, this section will be presented in detail. It then offers a brief statistical analysis of electoral results in territories with significant minority populations, to pick out major voting and representation patterns. The quantitative analysis in this section is used to strengthen the qualitative interviews conducted with past and present minority political representatives across the political spectrum. The report then proceeds to identify the main challenges that affect minority politics and concludes with a set of recommendations to key political actors.

1.3: Timeline of major political events and government changes in Sri Lanka

1923	**49 elected and appointed members constitute the legislative council of Ceylon**.
1944	**Soulbury Commission introduces a Westminster parliamentary model** consisting of the Queen's representative, the Governor-General, the Senate (30 members) and the House of Representatives (101 members).
1931	**Universal franchise introduced.**
1948	**Independence**
1948	**Citizenship Act No. 18**

1.3: Timeline of major political events and government changes in Sri Lanka *(continued...)*

1956	**Official Language Act No. 33** makes Sinhalese the only official language. **Anti-Tamil pogrom**: Sinhalese mobs attacked a Federal Party-led peaceful protest in Colombo followed by looting of Tamil-owned businesses.
1957	**Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam pact**
1958	**Anti-Tamil pogrom**: first island-wide ethnic violence, which specifically targeted Tamils and resulted in hundreds injured and killed.
1965	**Dudley-Chelvanayakam pact**
1972	**Constitutional changes give Buddhism a privileged position.**
1976	**Formation of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)** **Vaddukoddai Resolution**
1977	**Anti-Tamil pogrom**
1979	**Enactment of Prevention of Terrorism Act** proscribing militant groups and 'other similar organizations'; the law went on to be used to oppress Tamils and later Muslims.
1981	**Destruction of Jaffna library**, the most prestigious hub of Tamil culture containing over 95,000 volumes of irreplaceable Tamil literature, scorched by organized Sinhala mobs.
1983	**Black July**: country-wide attacks on Tamils, leading to widespread killing and destruction.
1987	**Indo-Lanka Peace Accord**
1990	**Withdrawal of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF)**
1990	**LTTE attacks on Muslims** in the east and forcible eviction of entire Muslim population from the north.
1991	**Assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by LTTE suicide bomber**
2002	**Norway-facilitated ceasefire and peace process**
2005	**Mahinda Rajapaksa elected President.**
2009	**End of war** declared on 18 May 2009, with the killing of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and the Sri Lankan Army seizing control of the remaining LTTE territories.
2011	**United Nations (UN) Panel of Experts (POE) appointed by Secretary-General releases report** finding credible evidence of war crimes committed by both parties to the conflict.
2012	**UN Human Rights Council (UN HRC) adopts first resolution on accountability in Sri Lanka** leading to an investigation by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR-OISL) in 2013.
2015	**New reformist coalition government** comes into power and initiates transitional justice process.
2019	**Easter Sunday attacks and return of Rajapaksas**
2022	**Mass protests, known as Aragalaya**
2024	**NPP wins presidential and parliamentary elections.**

2 Historical overview

2.1 Independence and emergence of majoritarian nationalism

Ethnic relations between Sinhalese and Tamils were already fraught by the time Sri Lanka gained independence after over 400 years of colonial rule, first by the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and finally the British. During British rule, Sri Lankan Tamils gained a stronghold over the Sinhalese majority in administrative positions and Muslims in trade and commerce. The translation of these positions into commensurate political influence was significantly challenged with the introduction of universal franchise in 1931, due to their minority status. The main Tamil political party at the time, the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), led by G. G. Ponnambalam, sought a 50-50 representation for the majority and minorities in the upper house of Ceylon's parliament, the Legislative Council of Ceylon. This was rejected by the British.[9] Nevertheless, when the United National Party (UNP) won the largest number of seats in the House of Representatives (the lower house), it fell short of a majority and was only able to form a government with the support of the seven Ceylon Tamil MPs of the ACTC. In protest against the cooperation of the ACTC with the UNP, in 1949, S. J. Chelvanayakam, one of the most prominent Tamil political figures of independent Sri Lanka, formed the Federal Party or the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK).[10] The ITAK became the dominant Tamil political group, challenging and contesting burgeoning Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, mainly through non-violent protest.

Sinhala-Buddhist political, religious and professional elites, who had been marginalized by centuries of colonialism, came to power in 1956 under a new party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The SLFP spearheaded the 'Sinhala Only' language policy, which replaced English with Sinhala as the sole official language of Ceylon to the exclusion of Tamil, with an act passed in 1956. In later years, the SLFP went on to bring in quotas that reduced educational and employment opportunities for Tamils. During his time in office, Chelvanayakam signed agreements with two Prime Ministers offering language rights and some political autonomy to Tamils in their homeland of the north and east, but both were annulled due to pressure from majoritarian nationalist political forces.[11]

In 1972, all Tamil political parties, including those representing Malaiyaga Tamils, went on to form the Tamil United Front (TUF), aiming to confront the rising tide of majoritarian nationalist policies that discriminated against minorities. Some years later the TUF became the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which, in a significant turn of events, at its party convention passed the Vaddukoddai Resolution, calling for the 'restoration and reconstitution of the free, sovereign, secular, socialist state of Tamil Eelam'.[12] This resolution is seen as a turning point in minority politics, paving the way for the formation of militant groups who, with the support of neighbouring India, would go on to arm themselves to fight for a separate state for Tamils in the north and east.

In 1977, the TULF gained 18 seats to become a formidable force within the opposition in parliament. However, in 1983, President J. R. Jayewardene passed the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution which made it a criminal offence to advocate for secession. This led to the resignation of all TULF MPs, who refused to renounce their call for an independent state. There was no parliamentary election between 1977-1989. In 1982, after his election for a second term as President, J. R. Jayewardene called a national referendum to seek the extension of parliament for an additional term without an election.

2.2 Armed conflict, the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord and consolidation of ethnic divides

In the early part of the armed conflict, Tamil militancy comprised a number of different armed groups with varying political affiliations that were also violently in competition with one other as well as fighting the Sri Lankan state.[13] The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was no doubt one of the most dominant groups, alongside numerous others such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Eelam Revolutionary

Organisation of Students (EROS) and People's Liberation Organisation for Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

Country-wide attacks on Tamils known as 'Black July' took place in July 1983 with state support and patronage, killing thousands and injuring and displacing tens of thousands. The mass violence is widely seen as one of the darkest moments in Sri Lanka's independent history and one that precipitated the civil war.[14] Through much of the conflict, militants and the state instituted two parallel systems of governance in the north and east, while in areas under state control, elections were conducted routinely. However, such ostensibly democratic processes were often controlled by militants and the Sri Lankan army through violent means; the former frequently attacked and killed political opponents, which the latter also did whilst restricting political and civil activity.

In 1987, the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord resulted in all militant groups, apart from the LTTE, joining the democratic mainstream. As part of this deal, the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed in parliament, devolving administrative powers from the centre to the provinces and allowing for some form of self-governance, through a provincial council system that would be elected at the local level.[15] The amendment was a far cry from the separate state that militant groups had fought for, but, battle-fatigued and under the powerful influence of India to accept, most groups caved in. Former militants turned-political leaders interviewed for this report expressed a level of regret that they bowed to Indian pressure and relinquished their separatist demands in exchange for minimal devolution. 'The Indo-Lanka Accord was forced upon us as Tamils, I don't think any Tamil political party, I don't think anyone believed it was a solution to the Tamil national question,' a former Tamil militant turned political leader said in an interview.

Although introduced in the 1978 Constitution, the new proportional representation electoral system first came into effect in 1989, resulting in monumental changes to minority politics. Several ex-militant groups contested and won seats in the north and east, whilst the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), a trade union and political party led by Arumugam Thondaman representing Tamils of Indian origin, and the newly formed Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) also made their mark on national politics.

2.3 Overview of Muslim politics

Muslim politics is distinct from that of the other two main ethnic groups primarily because the community is geographically dotted across the country and lives side by side with Tamils and Sinhalese. Even prior to independence, Muslims had a steady representation in successive legislatures.[16] In 1924, the British created a Mohammedan (archaic term for Muslim) constituency for all Muslims across the country, and, although only few were eligible to vote, three representatives were elected. With the introduction of universal franchise, it became more challenging for Muslims to be elected; nevertheless, an average of five MPs made it to the legislature in successive elections between 1947 and 1977. Although Muslims, since independence, were aligned with different political groupings including the All-Ceylon Muslim League, their representatives mostly contested elections as part of the two main national parties. From 1947, numerous prominent Muslim politicians have been elected and taken on cabinet positions while affiliated with the UNP and SLFP and its various fronts. These include, though are not limited to: T B. Jayah, who represented the Malay community and held the position of Minister of Labour (1947-50); Badiuddin Mahmud, Minister of Education (1960-63, 1970-77) and Health and Housing (1963-65); M. H. Mohamed, Speaker of Parliament (1989-94); A. C. S. Hameed, the first Sri Lankan Muslim Foreign Minister (1977-89); A. H. M. Fowzie, various portfolios including Health and Highways (1994-2015); Kabir Hashim, Minister of Higher Education (2001-04) and Public Development (2015-19); and Ali Sabry, Foreign Minister (2022-24).

A significant proportion of Muslims living in conflict-affected areas felt unrepresented by these national party representatives, particularly in the east where one-third of Sri Lanka's Muslim population resides. The fear among eastern Muslims of being subsumed by Tamil nationalism and separatism led to the creation of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and its meteoric rise to success. This was a landmark event that permanently changed the face of Muslim politics with the emergence of a distinct Muslim political identity and party.[17] In an interview conducted for this report, Nizam Kariapper, General Secretary of the SLMC, explained: 'We were happy with ad hoc relief given to us as part of good relationship with the Sinhalese rulers, we hadn't realised what it was to have rights. The eye opener was the Tamil struggle, we realized governance is more than being in [a] national party.'

Much of the SLMC's success is down to its charismatic and visionary first leader M. H. M. Ashraff, who galvanized support from within his community and strategically developed the party to gain electoral success. In 1989, he successfully negotiated with the then-president to reduce the share of votes necessary at the district level to have MPs elected from 12 to 5 per cent. This had a significant effect on the electoral success of smaller parties. That year, his own party had three MPs elected to parliament. This rose to seven in 1994, when Ashraff was invited to join Chandrika Kumaratunga's coalition government.

Ashraff's unexpected death in 2000 caused the first major fracture within the party. Segments of the SLMC wanted the party to be led by his widow Ferial, but his prodigy Rauf Hakeem made a claim for the leadership and was eventually supported by a majority. The acrimonious leadership struggle was gendered, with Ferial Ashraff fundamentally facing opposition on the grounds that a woman could not lead a Muslim political party. Eventually, Ferial together with some allies took over the leadership of the National Unity Alliance (NUA), which Ashraff founded just before his death, reportedly because he recognized the limitations of ethnic minority politics.

The subsequent two decades has seen numerous splits and crossovers to other parties by members of the SLMC. In 2002, failing to oust Hakeem as leader, three MPs led by A. L. M. Athaullah quit the party.[18] Two years later, Rishad Bathiudeen, originating from the community of northern Muslims internally displaced by the civil war, split from the SLMC, taking two other MPs with him. He went on to form the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC), which has become a strong ethnic minority party contender, particularly in the north and east.

2.4 Defeat of the LTTE and the rise of majoritarian nationalism

Chandrika Kumaratunga's presidency (1994-2005) is seen as a comparatively minority-friendly period when Muslim and Malaiyaga Tamil minority parties had powerful roles, and Ceylon Tamil parties were involved in a constitutional reform process which aimed at offering greater devolution of powers to provinces than the Thirteenth Amendment. In 2002, Norway negotiated a ceasefire agreement between the government and the LTTE that brought about a pause in active warfare for nearly three years. This process offered the LTTE exposure to non-militant options and saw the strengthening of the LTTE's political wing, which represented the group in peace talks in different locations, including Switzerland. Yet the ceasefire did not hold. By 2004, signs of a return to fighting became evident.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) was formed in 2001 as a proxy of the LTTE through an alliance attempting to unify north-eastern Tamil political representation. It soared to success in the 2004 parliamentary election. Since then, its main constituent party, ITAK, has remained a formidable electoral force.[19] The 2004 election also saw the rise of SLFP leader Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose alliance won a majority, and would a year later sweep the presidential election on a strong Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist agenda. As leader, Rajapaksa pursued a military strategy against the LTTE. On 18 May 2009, when LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was killed by the Sri Lankan army, Rajapaksa declared the war over, amidst credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity. A major reason for his military success was that he instigated the defection of the LTTE's eastern commander, Vinyagamoorthy Murlitharan (Colonel Karuna Amman), who formed the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) ('Tamil People's Liberation Tigers') and played a divisive role in the politics of the east.

The post-war era, dominated by members of Rajapaksa's family including his brother Gotabaya as Defence Minister, could be described as a dark age for minority rights and politics.[20] His rule was symbolized by a general shift to authoritarianism, marked with nepotism, corruption and large-scale human rights violations.[21] His government's repeated denial of war-time atrocities and a lack of accountability for past and continuing human rights violations drove Sri Lanka onto the agenda of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2012. The rights of minorities were at the centre of related UN investigations in 2011 and 2013 into allegations of enforced disappearances, torture, extra-judicial killings of Tamils and state-supported attacks on places of religious worship of Christians and Muslims.[22] During this era, Tamil and Muslim political representatives were unable to yield much political influence to afford even minimal protection to their communities let alone to promote rights or achieve political autonomy.[23]

In 2015, a UNP-SLFP coalition government with support of minority parties defeated the Rajapaksa-led United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and swiftly introduced a range of policies to support minorities, including: initiating a transitional justice process; offering a truth commission, prosecutor mechanism and offices to investigate missing persons; offering reparations for war-time atrocities; and instituting a constitutional reform process in response to the ethnic conflict. Also in the 2015 election, the ITAK gained 16 seats in the north and east to command the opposition in parliament with its leader R. Sambandan becoming the opposition leader. This was a historic moment where the Sri Lankan Tamil MP bloc held a powerful place within the legislature. However, soon after a constituent party of this bloc, the EPRLF, broke away, citing ITAK dominance within the coalition as an issue, and in 2020, two other partners, the TELO and PLOTE, also pulled out.[24]

The new government in 2015, though seen to be minority friendly, did not tackle the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist extremist forces that had burgeoned under Rajapaksa's rule. Violence against minorities, targeting

mainly Muslim places of worship and business establishments, intensified under this new government.[25] On Easter Sunday in 2019, nine Muslim suicide bombers attacked Christian places of worship and Colombo hotels, killing over 250 people. The bombings destroyed perceptions of the historic position of non-violence that Muslims had tried to maintain by largely rejecting militancy. Their community was left more vulnerable than ever to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist attacks. The events also once again presented minorities, this time Muslim rather than Tamil, as a threat to the state which clamped down on minority rights under the pretext of national security. Within days, laws came into force restricting religious freedoms, while dozens of Muslim neighbourhoods were attacked.[26]

These events paved the way for the electoral victory of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Mahinda's brother and a former Defence Minister, who presented himself to the majority Sinhala voter base as the only politician who could ensure their security. Elected without minority support, Gotabaya went on to tighten the noose on minority politics in unprecedented ways. His downfall eventually came not due to his minority rights record but because his government drove the country into an economic crisis, which was worsened by his nepotistic and corrupt political rule.[27] Just two years into his term in office, mass public protests in the capital city Colombo ignited a grassroots movement for change, better known as the *Aragalaya* ('struggle'), which led to his government resigning and his fleeing the country.[28] Then-Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe became President. Though eventually crushed by Wickremesinghe, the Aragalaya nevertheless led to changes to political thinking and culture in Sri Lanka and to the strengthening of the centre-left NPP. In September 2024, NPP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake was elected President of Sri Lanka; his party subsequently won a super-majority in a landmark result which signalled public desire for change and a defeat of the political old guard.[29]

2.5 Malaiyaga Tamil history and background

Despite having recently played a significant part in government formation, the history of the Malaiyaga Tamil community is unique because of the large-scale disenfranchisement they long faced. The most prominent party representing them, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), was born out of the Indian Workers' Congress in 1950. Soon after the CWC's formation, one of its founding members, A. Aziz, broke away to form the Democratic Workers' Congress (DWC). Meanwhile, the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC) had very early electoral success with six representatives elected in 1947 to the first parliament of Sri Lanka. This success was cut short when the entire community was disenfranchised soon after independence with the passing of the Ceylon Citizenship Act. There is limited research on the reasons for this, but political analysts suggest that there were concerns among elite Sinhala Buddhists, particularly those from the high-caste Kandyan background, that their representation would be seriously altered by Indian Tamil voters. Newly independent Sri Lanka also feared that India would exert influence through this community and was uneasy with the possibility that the Indian Tamil base within the plantation sector might allow for a swing to left-wing politics.

The most obvious result of this process of disenfranchisement was that for some 35 years Tamils of recent Indian origin had no voting rights in Sri Lanka and were unable to elect any representatives to state political bodies. It was only in the elections of 1977 that some early change became noticeable, but due to procedural difficulties and confusion with all the different agreements, many continued to be excluded from the electoral list. In the years to come, the Malaiyaga Tamil community slowly strengthened their voter base, but their numbers were significantly lower than what they could have been, due to the various repatriation programmes with India. The economic and social effects of years of statelessness also limited the community's political growth.[30]

The Malaiyaga Tamil community has the lowest levels of socio-economic development indicators in education and health and remains the poorest ethnic group in Sri Lanka, despite their profound and ongoing connection to the tea industry, one of the highest contributors to Sri Lanka's gross domestic product.[31] Although only some 10 per cent of the Malaiyaga Tamil population remains working in the tea plantations, many still live in the 'line homes' built by the British for plantation workers, which are now overcrowded, in a state of disrepair and without adequate access to sanitation, running water, medical facilities or schools. Their wages are low, and many are attached to plantation companies in a form of bondage labour, unable to enjoy basic, constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and rights.[32]

Since the community gained franchise and until recently, the CWC dominated elections. Savumiamoorthy Thondaman led the CWC from 1939-99; in 1977, he became a cabinet minister in the UNP government and pioneered the model of minority representation translating to executive control. At the time of his death in 1999, he had been a member of the cabinets of four presidents through a period of some 21 years.

From the 1980s, the political representation of the Malaiyaga Tamil community began to split. In 1989, P.

Parliamentary Acts and India-Sri Lanka agreements on the citizenship of Malaiyaga Tamils

1948: The Ceylon Citizenship Act stipulated that to be a citizen of the country, one had to prove their father was born in Sri Lanka. This was an impossible feat for most Malaiyaga Tamils, who traditionally went to India to give birth. As a result, only 5,000 or so were able to become citizens, making another 700,000 (11 per cent of the country's population) stateless.

1949: The Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act No.3 amended the law to provide citizenship to people who met an income qualification and who had continuously resided in Sri Lanka for seven years, if married, or ten years, if unmarried. This similarly barely made a difference, since many Malaiyaga Tamils periodically returned to Tamil Nadu, did not have the documents to prove uninterrupted residence, or were unable to meet the income qualification.

1954: The Nehru-Kotelawala Pact was the first of three agreements between India and Sri Lanka in the years following independence, offering Malaiyaga Tamils some repatriation opportunity to India and citizenship status within Sri Lanka. The Nehru-Kotelawala Pact was signed in 1954, between India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Sri Lanka's Prime Minister John Kotelawala. It offered the possibility of repatriation but was not effectively implemented.

1964: The Sirima-Shastri Pact was signed between Indian Prime Minister Lal Shastri and his Sri Lankan counterpart, Sirimavo Bandaranaike. India agreed to repatriate 525,000 Malaiyaga Tamils, Sri Lanka provided citizenship to 300,000, whilst the situation for a remaining 150,000 was unresolved. In 1982 India abrogated the Sirima-Shastri Pact, rendering over 150,000 people who had not gone through the process of gaining Indian citizenship stateless once more.

1988: The Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons Act was passed by the Sri Lankan parliament, making all who had not so far applied for Indian citizenship entitled to Sri Lankan citizenship, but did not fully resolve the issue of statelessness among Malaiyaga Tamils.

2003: The Grant of Citizenship to Persons of Indian Origin Act No. 35 finally resolved this by granting citizenship to all Tamils of Indian origin, including those who had remained in Sri Lanka but held Indian passports obtained through a previous agreement improperly implemented.

Chandrasekaran left the CWC and went on to form the Up-Country People's Front (UCPF), which maintains at least one MP in parliament. Mano Ganesan, a trade unionist, who first entered politics through the Democratic Workers' Congress (DWC), went on to form the Western People's Front (WPF), to galvanize the support of Malaiyaga and Sri Lankan Tamils living in Colombo and its vicinity. Ganesan then converted the WPF to the Democratic People's Front (DPF), which joined the UCPF and the National Union of Workers (NUW) to form the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) to represent Tamils living outside the north and east.

3 Interpreting election results in the north and east

The section that follows offers a summary of the major changes in political representation that have taken place in the north and east, the homeland of Sri Lanka's main minority communities, Tamils and Muslims, looking only at parliamentary elections between 1989, the first implementation of the proportional representation electoral system, and 2024, the time of writing. This section will discuss the challenges ethnic minority parties and minority candidates face in national politics and analyse how minority voter constituencies are evolving and influencing national politics.

3.1 Northern Province

The performance of political parties in the north has varied significantly in the 35 years since most Tamil militant groups joined the democratic process. One notable change was a notable decline[33] in electoral participation in the 2010 election, just after the end of the civil war in 2009. The lack of updated electoral lists, mass displacement and some level of disappointment and apathy towards national politics contributed to this low number. In the long term, however, the defeat of the LTTE is associated with a significant rise in voter turnout in these key Tamil districts after the defeat of the LTTE.

From 1989, the political spectrum began to diversify in the Northern Province with the entrance of former militant groups, although in the first two elections in Jaffna, many former militants contested as independents. These groups got more than two thirds of the vote in 1989 and 80 per cent in 1994. The Vanni, which at the time included Vavuniya, continued to present a mixed response with votes divided between the TULF or DPLF (PLOTE), SLMC and the UNP. Both Jaffna and the Vanni produced different voting patterns in 2000. In Jaffna, the EPDP made a major mark taking four seats, with the rest divided between the TULF, the ACTC and the UNP. The next year in Jaffna, the EPDP was down to two seats, and the TULF came in with a significant six. In the Vanni, the TELO replaced the DPLF in power, and the rest of the seats were divided between the NUA and national parties. The following year in the Vanni, the TULF took three, the DPLF one and the UNP two seats. The TNA made a remarkable entry into mainstream politics in 2004 with the LTTE's blessings. It swept the north, gaining 90 per cent in Jaffna and nearly 75 per cent in the Vanni. Following the defeat of the LTTE, its successor ITAK has since maintained 3-5 seats in Jaffna though their seats in the Vanni have been successively dropping. The electoral picture in the Vanni began to shift after 2009, with the remaining seats divided between

Fig. 1: Voter turnout in a Parliamentry election (%)

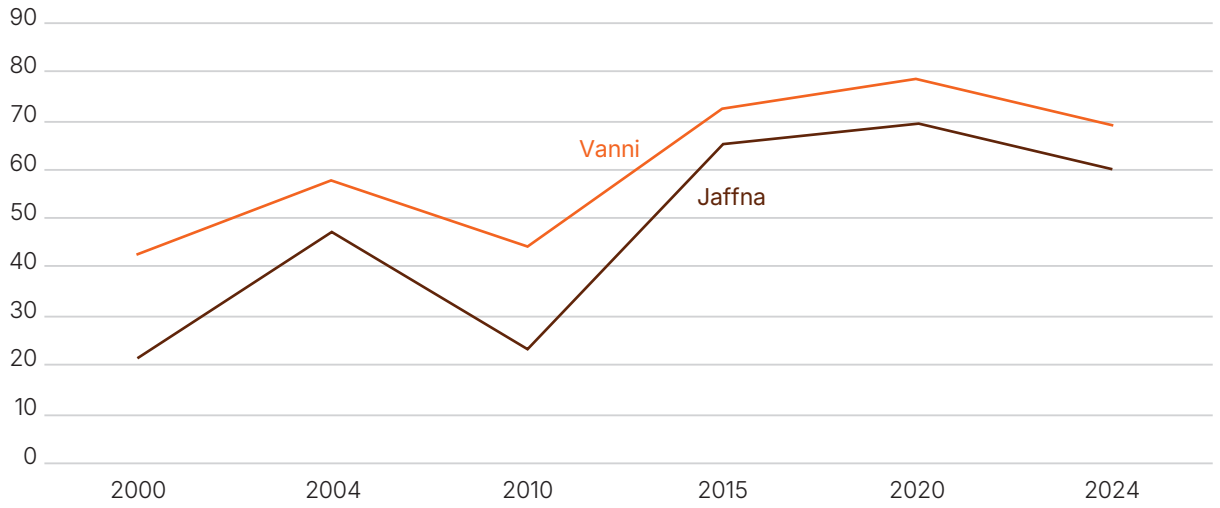


Fig. 2: Seat Allocation in Vanni

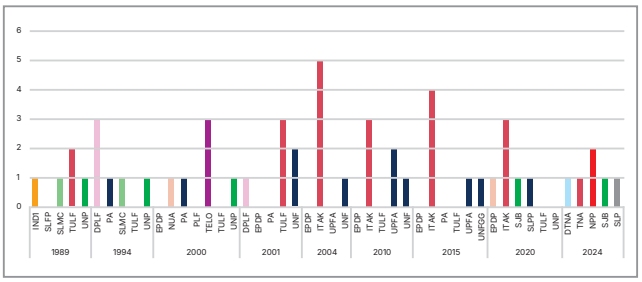
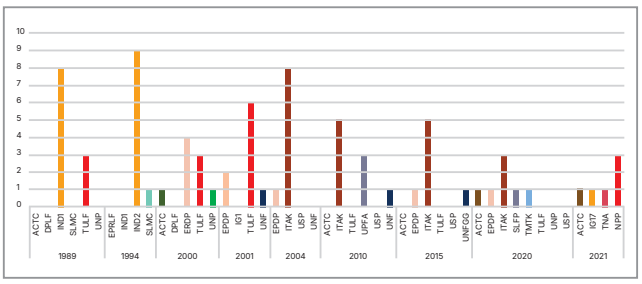


Fig. 3: Seat Allocation in Jaffna



national parties or their affiliates. Notable here is that in both districts, in spite of the widespread criticism of the Rajapaksa's handling of the war, his party, the UPFA, held around 32-35 per cent of the vote bank in both districts, thanks to its alliances in Jaffna with the EPDP and in the Vanni with Muslim candidates who gained the votes of Muslim returnees. Irrespective of this oddity, overall, the parties opposing the Rajapaksas consistently gained a higher number of total votes than those supporting them.

In 2020, a shift occurred in the northern electoral landscape. For the first time, the pro-Rajapaksa SLFP candidate Angajan Ramanathan received the highest number of preferential votes (36,365). Ramanathan and fellow Rajapaksa ally Douglas Devananda of the EPDP together captured close to 26 per cent of the total vote. Nevertheless, the ITAK held the middle ground. Ideological divergences became more apparent than ever before, with the election of G. Ponnambalam of the ACTC and C. Wigneswaran of the TPA, both known for their more Tamil ultranationalist positions. In the Vanni too, the pro-Rajapaksa EPDP gained a seat, reducing the ITAK's total to three. Together with the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna's (SLPP) ('Sri Lanka People's Front') own candidates, they gained over 33 per cent of the vote. It is also important to note that in the Vanni, two of the six elected MPs were Muslims, even though the population in the area is majority Tamil. This suggests that Muslim candidates from ethnic minority parties such as the ACMC or the national parties, the SLPP for instance, are bagging some Tamil votes. In 2024, the NPP swept three of the six seats in Jaffna and two out of six seats in the Vanni, becoming the only national mainstream party to outweigh Tamil minority parties in the Northern Province.

3.2 Eastern Province

The larger diversity in the east complicates the political landscape significantly, requiring separate district level analysis. In Trincomalee, voting patterns were also majorly affected by the war and displacement. The total number of registered voters rose from 224,307 in 2004 to 421,133 after the war ended in 2010. The number of votes polled was similar in pattern to the north, generally high with a spike in 2004 with the emergence of the TNA. Prior to this, groups such as the EROS and TELO contested as independent groups and held between one and two of the total seats. The others were divided between the national parties and their allies, including the SLMC, and were divided between Sinhalese and Muslim candidates. In 2000, although the TULF gained 11 per cent of votes, they were unsuccessful in getting a seat in parliament, resulting in no Tamil representative from Trincomalee. In 2004, the ITAK came in with 41 per cent of the votes and gained two seats but have since had no similar success in subsequent elections - only holding on to the one seat, which, until 2024, was held by their former leader, R. Sambandan. In 2010, 2015 and 2020, the remaining three seats were divided between the national parties and their allies, most often with two going to Muslim candidates and one to a Sinhalese contender. This corresponds to the ethnic ratio of the district.

Batticaloa represents a far more complicated scenario, affected mainly by the landmark break-ups of the LTTE in 2007 and the SLMC, with MPs from the latter shifting loyalty between the two national parties. In 1989 and 1994, two Muslims and three Tamils were elected to

Fig. 4: Seat Allocation in Batticoloa

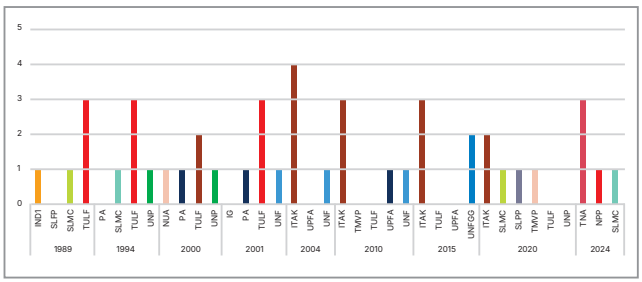
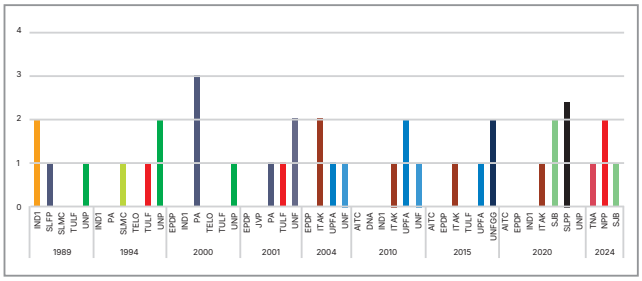


Fig. 5: Seat Allocation in Trincomalee

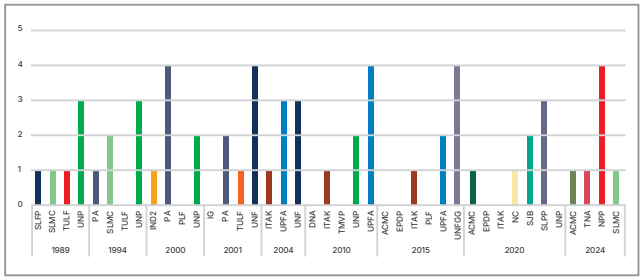


parliament for the district, with the TULF vote steadily increasing, and the SLMC and UNP gathering the Muslim vote. In 2000, the NUA gained ground and changed the ratio to two Tamils and three Muslims, though one of the latter was from the UNP. In 2004, the ITAK again swept the Batticaloa vote, gaining close to 70 per cent, and the SLMC was reduced to one seat. This result was affected by a split in the Muslim vote and suggests that Muslims in Batticaloa may also have voted for the ITAK in that election. In 2010 and 2015, the ITAK retained three seats and the remaining two were divided between national parties and their allies, with ratios of three Tamils to two Muslims. A major shift occurred again in 2020 when Rajapaksa's UPFA gained a seat; the TMVP, an ally of the UPFA, also gained a seat; the SLMC maintained one; and the ITAK was reduced to two. As with Jaffna, this was an unexpected outcome with ethnic minority parties taking a hit to Sinhala nationalist political allies.

In Digamadulla, Tamil minority parties have steadily held on to one seat in this multi-ethnic district, with the ITAK taking that seat from 2004 until 2020. As in Batticaloa, the remaining seats are divided between the national parties and the SLMC-NUA alliances, with a ratio of three Sinhalese to four Muslims. Here too, the 2020 election changed the district-level picture with four Sinhalese and two Muslims being elected, the former belonging to the national parties and the latter from the ACMC and a newly formed National Congress. No Tamil was elected from Digamadulla in 2020.

The NPP did extremely well in 2024 in all three eastern districts, gaining two seats in Trincomalee, four in Digamadulla and one in Batticaloa. The ITAK also had an improved performance in the east compared to the north, winning three seats in Batticaloa, one in Trincomalee and regaining a Tamil seat in Digamadulla. The east's changes and reversals portray a province in flux. What was exceptional in 2024 though, was that there were some 400 independent candidates contesting the election in this province, which was partly believed to be a strategy to divide votes but was also an indicator of the frustration with existing political options in this region.

Fig. 6: Seat Allocation in Digamadulla



3.3 Presidential elections

With the exception of those held in 2010 and 2019, presidential elections have tended to split the majority vote, resulting in candidates seeking minority support. In the inaugural election of 1982, J. R Jaywardane got over 50 per cent of the vote, but the ACTC's Kumar Ponnambalam, although bagging only 2.67 per cent of the national vote, was the most popular candidate in the north and part of the east. In 1982, Jayawardane became the first Executive President; his successor R. Premadasa was elected President in 1988, again with just over 50 per cent of the vote. As the electoral result map of 1988 demonstrates (see *Figure 2*), the third candidate Ossie Abeygunasekera of the left-wing Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) (literally, 'People's Liberation Front') was the popular candidate in the north, though Premadasa secured much of the Muslim and Tamil votes in other parts of the country.

Following Premadasa's assassination by the LTTE in 1993, the SLFP's Chandrika Kumaratunga swept the presidential election in 1994, obtaining 62 per cent of the vote. Voter turnout in the Jaffna peninsula was extremely poor and did not factor into the result; however, Kumaratunga's mammoth result, as compared to her party predecessors, was largely on the back of minorities across the country. During Kumaratunga's tenure, her failure to improve the situation of minorities, despite efforts on constitutional reform and minority protection, increased her unpopularity with them. The Sinhalese majority nevertheless saw her as a pawn in the hands of ethnic minorities. A failed assassination attempt in 1999, three days prior to elections, seriously injured Kumaratunga and elicited public sympathy. This resulted in a swing of votes from the majority community in her favour and secured her re-election. Contrarily, in all electoral districts, minorities voted for her opponent Ranil Wickremesinghe, apart from in Jaffna, which at the time was heavily under military and EPDP control.

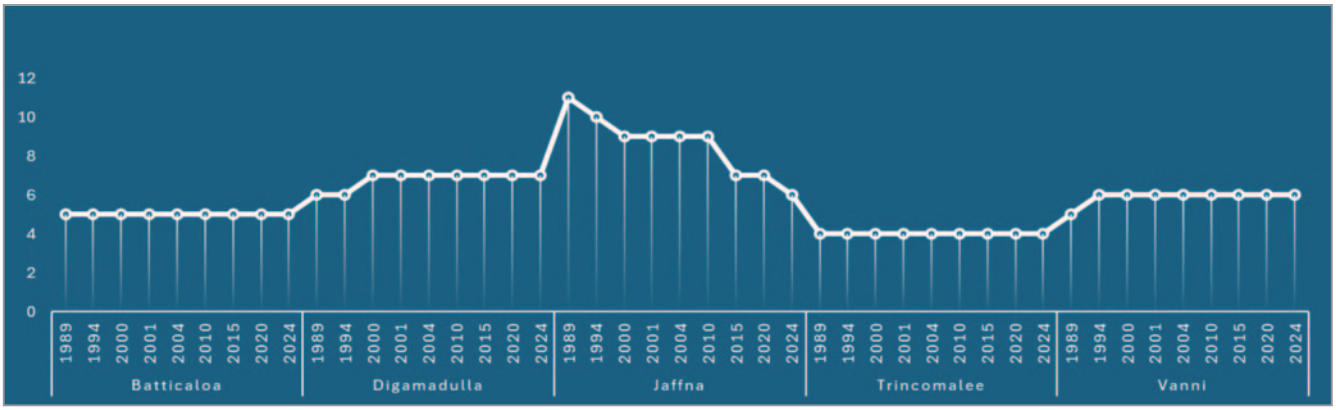
From 2005, with the emergence of the Rajapaksa brothers into the political fray, minorities repeatedly voted against them in every election: in 2005, in 2010, in 2015 and in 2019. In 2015, the minority vote helped defeat Mahinda Rajapaksa; however as will be seen, in all other elections the Rajapaksas gained power without overwhelming support of minorities.

In conclusion, analysis of successive presidential elections indicates that, apart from a few exceptions, Sri Lankan Tamils in the north, particularly in Jaffna, voted against the most popular candidate. In other parts of the country, minorities generally vote as one bloc. The individual matters as much as the party, as was the case with Chandrika Kumaratunga's election in 2004. During

the armed conflict, the candidates' conflict resolution offering, their position on war strategies and their minority rights record all contributed significantly towards capturing minority votes. In most instances, ethnic minority parties also took their voters with them when forming national coalitions; this was indicated by the EPDP strongholds bagging votes for the Rajapaksas, and when votes from the east aligned with the SLMC backing a particular presidential candidate. However, this was not always unambiguous; Malaiyaga Tamil areas voted against the Rajapaksas even as the CWC leader supported Mahinda and Gotabaya, which partly led to this party's decline.

Since the majority vote at the 2024 presidential election was expected to split between the three main Sinhala-Buddhist candidates – incumbent President Wickremesinghe, the SJB's Sajith Premadasa and the NPP's Anura Kumara Dissanayake – minorities seemed to have an important opportunity to determine its outcome. Dissanayake was seen by most minorities as a Sinhala nationalist and hence least preferable. Tamil nationalist parties put forward a common candidate, Pakkiyaselvam Ariyanenthiran, as a mark of distrust in the Sinhalese leadership's interest in resolving ethnic issues. The ITAK negotiated with all three candidates and eventually decided to support Premadasa, who was willing to offer slightly more than the Thirteenth Amendment. Malaiyaga Tamil and Muslim MPs criss-crossed between Wickremesinghe's and Premadasa's parties. Whilst Dissanayake was finally elected based on some minority votes, the larger percentage of minorities appeared to have supported the losing candidates.

Fig. 7: Total seats secured by districts across electoral years



4 Analysis of challenges to minority politics and representation

4.1 Extremist nationalisms

4.1.1 Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism

4.1.1.1 The phenomenon in relation to the state and politics

Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, which lies at the heart of the Sri Lankan nation-state, has always posed a significant challenge to the politics of minority groups. In 1956, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike campaigned on a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist agenda and won parliamentary elections. Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has prompted and shaped minority politics ever since. Its early manifestation was the main factor for the creation of Tamil political parties.

Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism inherently links the Sri Lankan state with Sinhala-Buddhist nationhood and thereby privileges the majority community over minorities.[34] It selectively interprets historical narratives to argue that Sri Lanka is the land of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation and that all other communities are immigrants or invaders. This position has been criticized and challenged by Tamil nationalists who trace their community's origins as far back as the Sinhalese, with some even arguing that their southern Indian links predate the arrival of Buddhism.

Various different Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist groups operate within mainstream Sri Lankan politics and society, actively conducting campaigns that identify state entities with the Sinhala ethnicity and Buddhist religion. They propagate policies against minorities, including acquiring and appropriating minority lands, sponsoring Sinhalese settlements in minority areas, damaging and destroying minority symbols and places of worship, and initiating policies that violate the rights of minorities. Although these forces occasionally receive state support or patronage, they often operate independently, apart from during the Rajapaksa era where they were distinctly and openly aligned with the government and state institutions. Minority politicians interviewed for this report identified three main ways by which Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism affects minority politics today: through heads of government, through state forces such as the military and through state bureaucracy.

Interviewees argued that most heads of government who have held executive powers in Sri Lanka have aligned themselves with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist groups, in policy and practice, though some less prominently than others. Contrary to her parents' hard-line nationalist positions, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga is seen as friendliest towards minorities, leading a coalition dominated by ethnic minority parties and with strong minority representation in her cabinet of ministers, including renowned Tamil lawyer and diplomat Lakshman Kadirgamar as her Foreign Minister. This reputation, however, is not firmly held in the northern city of Jaffna, which, under Kumaratunga, the military took from the LTTE, allegedly committing significant human rights violations as they did so.[35]

Former President Ranil Wickremesinghe is also seen by some as being supportive of minorities, as it was his government in 2015 that initiated the transitional justice and constitutional reform process. However, he was not only responsible for the failure of both processes but also protected the Rajapaksas from war crimes investigations.[36] His failure to intercept and prevent the Easter Sunday attacks, despite warnings from intelligence officers and Muslim community activists, and the subsequent lack of protection accorded to Muslims under his premiership, limited minority support for him. He has more recently been accused of contributing to divisions with the TNA by undermining some of its leaders and MPs.[37] Thus, even heads of state seen to be supportive of minorities have pursued policies against them, which in turn affects the trust and confidence of minorities in national political actors.

4.1.1.2 The Rajapaksa era

The three terms when the Rajapaksa brothers were in power were without doubt the most challenging for minorities. In his first term as President, Mahinda's quest to end the war via solely military means led to large-scale human rights abuses including: extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearances; arbitrary arrests and detention; and the denial of basic freedoms of expression and association. These violations were enabled largely by the Prevention of Terrorism Act which targeted minorities, especially Tamils.[38] Although his government was initially formed with the support of ethnic minority parties, they were later sidelined while coalition partners from Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist parties were given more prominence.[39]

His government responded to international pressure by presenting its military campaign as a humanitarian intervention to save Tamils from terrorism, but at the national level was wrapped in Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism that isolated minorities and increased their vulnerability.

The end of the war and its immediate aftermath was marked by war crimes and crimes against humanity targeted entirely against Tamils, leading to accusations of genocide.[40] In the last stages of conflict, Mahinda Rajapaksa as President and his brother Gotabaya as Defence Minister oversaw the killing of tens of thousands of Tamils, with estimates ranging from 60,000 to 140,000 as the military narrowed in on the LTTE, attacking civilian targets such as schools and hospitals.[41] The Rajapaksa brothers downplayed the number of civilians trapped in the fighting to some 30,000, when the real figure was over 300,000, and withheld medical and food aid from them.[42] When the war ended, virtually the entire population of the Vanni, amounting to over 300,000 people, were held in displaced camps, similar to internment camps, where human rights violations continued to take place.[43]

Defying the logic of proportional representation and winning largely on the majority vote, Mahinda Rajapaksa's second term (2010-2015) was notably more hostile to minorities and their rights. It was marked by heavy militarization of the north and east and severe restrictions to the freedoms of Tamils in these areas. In the rest of the country, violent Buddhist extremists were given free rein to target Muslims and Evangelical Christians in unchecked violence.[44] A minority minister who had been in both Kumaratunga's and Rajapaksa's cabinets explained: 'In C.B.K.'s cabinet [President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga] you had people like Lakshman Kadirgamar sitting there, who was going to be talking on Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism? With Mahinda Rajapaksa, the Sihala Urumaya came into cabinet, there were Buddhist monks there who wouldn't even look you in the face. There were still some moderates, there were Tamil and Muslim ministers, but it was shocking to begin with, it was tough.' 'In Mahinda's cabinet, the nationalistic view by some segments was already there in the minds of nearly all politicians, it is not something you would see openly, but it was there. They can't deny it. They hold the view – our country is Sinhalese, they have to be first; you [minorities] can be there but you are not a first citizen,' the minister added.

The Rajapaksa eras (2005-2015 and 2019-2022) had an extraordinary effect on the rights and politics of minorities. The sum of this is that minorities faced violations and repression at a significantly higher level than they had experienced before, while their political representation was systematically crushed through a range of tactics that heavily disempowered them. These tactics included: dividing up groups by favouring some representatives over others; sowing division by fostering extreme elements within minority political groups and parties; buying off MPs with promises of cabinet portfolios and (allegedly) bribery; and undermining and disempowering political representatives, whether working with Rajapaksa or in opposition, by preventing them from responding to the needs of their electorate. Gotabaya Rajapaksa's rule as President was strikingly anti-minority. He completely sidelined and undermined ethnic minority parties in his coalition, and, driven by Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, spearheaded policies that were repressive to minorities. These included opposing the transitional justice process, pulling out of the UN HRC resolutions, as well as policies affecting Muslims such as the 'One Country, One Law' policy, aimed at repealing some community-level laws (see Section 2.3), or the policy of forcibly cremating people who died of Covid-19, contravening Islamic religious practices.[45]

'When Sinhala Buddhism came under one banner it became apparent, they can do whatever they want. The legislature became insignificant. We also lost the hold we had on the executive; we had to depend on the agents of nationalist leader to get the work done,' a member of the SLMC said, explaining the effects of the Rajapaksa rule on minorities. 'The biggest shock we got was with regards to legislative power, they could get two thirds by buying our MPs and… pass constitutional amendments. They gave a message to the majority people, you can have politics, govern this country without being held ransom to minorities. They prove this is true,' he added.

4.1.1.3 Continuing manifestations

The nexus between ethnic and religious nationalists and the country's security forces is well known in Sri Lanka, and the latter play a major role in limiting the political representation of minority areas. This is done through various means that include denying the perpetration of violations against minorities, failing to protect communities and preventing minority political representatives from working in these areas. Tamil and Muslim politicians interviewed for this report presented numerous examples of how the state colludes with nationalist forces in projects to take over minority lands by, for example, planting Buddhist relics in their territories and claiming the locations as religious sites of archaeological importance.[46] In such instances, which occur routinely in the north and east, security forces often protect Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces and support them whilst restricting the access of and investigations by minority political actors.

Minority MPs and government ministers interviewed for this report also highlighted state bureaucracy as a major challenge. This is particularly a problem for minority representatives who become cabinet ministers and are involved in the executive branch. They explained that they have difficulties pushing forward policies that focus on their own minority community, even though there is general acceptance in Sri Lanka that minority political representatives join the government in part to serve their communities through policies that would benefit them. Interviewees suggested that the tactics used to suppress such policies were not always direct, as one minority cabinet minister explained: 'the biggest challenge is discrimination among officials and administration. They are all together, the bureaucracy, government officials, they may listen and give promises, but when it comes to implementation it is very very slow, worse than a snail.' This experience of discrimination was not shared by all former minority cabinet ministers who were interviewed: individual and party relationships with the government; ability to communicate in the Sinhala language; and previous experience within the executive were some of the factors that determine the experience of differential treatment or discrimination from state actors.

4.1.2 **Tamil nationalism**

4.1.2.1 The LTTE and its political legacy

The LTTE had a strong political wing through which it frequently engaged in political activities, including negotiating ceasefires, peace agreements and political solutions with international and national actors. While the group generally did not engage in national elections, it influenced and shaped these in different ways. Most prominently, in 2005, it forcibly implemented a voting boycott of the presidential elections which critically affected the outcome and eventually led to the LTTE's downfall.[47] That year, Mahinda Rajapaksa won with only a majority of 130,000 votes which his opponent Ranil Wickremesinghe, the more minority-friendly candidate, could easily have mustered if voters had been allowed to cast their ballots in the north. Only one per cent of the registered 700,000 voted in the Jaffna district, and only one vote was cast from among the 50,000 voters of the Vanni.[48]

The LTTE was well-known for its strategic elimination of moderate Tamil leaders and political opponents. The group has been accused of the killings of former Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and MP Neelan Tiruchelvam, both of whom were influential Tamil political actors working with national governments to secure political autonomy and greater freedoms for Tamils. In the north and east, the LTTE routinely targeted and killed political representatives, including MPs of other Tamil parties, which affected the political and electoral representation of these areas. These included: in 1989, the TULF's leader A. Amirthalingam; in 1997, A. Thangathurai, the TULF MP for Trincomalee; in 1998, S. Shamuganathan, the PLOTE MP for the Vanni; and, in 2000, N. Soundaranayagam, the TULF MP for Batticaloa. In 1994, the LTTE also assassinated Ossie Abeygunasekera, a Sinhala, who had been the most popular presidential candidate in the north. Former militants turned politicians explained in interviews how, even for Tamil nationalists, opposing the LTTE was difficult during the war years, as the LTTE cultivated a perception of any opposition to the LTTE as working against Tamil people. This perception continues to haunt politics today, where those who are seen to oppose the rebel group are not considered genuine nationalists. Most northern voters, even those who did not support the LTTE, do not accept any criticism of the group or its policies.

The major political effects of the LTTE's rule are: a normalization of authoritarianism, and especially a sense of intolerance for political opposition; a dearth of political actors holding alternative views; and a tide of public sympathy for the way in which it was eliminated. These factors continue to have a major impact on the politics of the north, challenging the emergence of a moderate political stance.

4.1.2.2 The impact of Tamil nationalism

Tamil nationalism is based on the ideological position that Tamils are a nation that is separate from the Sinhalese, with the north and east of Sri Lanka as their homeland. Based on this position, Tamils are only a minority because of a unitary state structure which does not recognize a Tamil nation. Thereby, Tamil nationalists would not consider themselves as belonging to a minority, though some among them may agree to identify as such for as long as they are forced to live within the current unitary state. Key demands are self-determination and political autonomy articulated through a range of different governance models from secession to a confederate state to federalism. Importantly, Tamil nationalists see the entirety of the north as the Tamil homeland, which would leave Muslims and a few Sinhalese in border areas and the east as minorities within the Tamil nation.

Like its Sinhala counterpart, Tamil nationalism is also a force that operates both independently and through party politics. At its most extreme, it was expressed through violent militancy, and even since the defeat of the LTTE, aggressive strands of it remain active in politics. From its inception, Tamil nationalism has been the backbone of Tamil politics, albeit with varying approaches

among different political parties. This has led to most Tamil minority parties remaining in opposition, and even the few, such as the EPDP, that have joined Sinhala nationalist governments maintain their support for the self-determination and self-governance of Tamils. Tamil nationalism continues to dominate the politics of both Sri Lanka's north and the diaspora. Ideologically, political parties in the north manoeuvre and compete to align with Tamil nationalism, though some are more extreme and vocal than others. Whilst the electorate appears to be fluid in its support, as indicated by the election of non-nationalist Tamil candidates in the 2020 and 2024 elections, Tamil political parties such as the ITAK struggle to distance themselves from Tamil ultranationalist positions. This affects their relationship with each other, exacerbating factions (discussed below) as well as shaping their cooperation with national governments. Those who work with the state, either contesting elections alongside national parties - by supporting them, joining coalitions or even working with them - can be accused of betraying Tamil nationalism. Part of the challenge has been that after the LTTE, those Tamil parties and individual MPs who do not want to pursue a two-state solution still hold strong aspirations for federalism, even when it remains far too distant from any solution that a national government has presented. This not only compromises the ideological and political positions of these parties and individuals, but also questions the purpose of cooperating with a state that is unlikely ever to offer federalism.

Tamil ultranationalists and LTTE sympathizers within the diaspora community also play a major role in northern politics. During the armed conflict, many Tamils who went as refugees to Western Europe and North America funded and supported the LTTE.[49] With the conclusion of the war, this diaspora continued to influence politics in the north, mainly through funding and other forms of support such as research, publications and online campaigns. Opinions on this were mixed among northern Tamil political actors interviewed for this report. Those who do not align strongly with Tamil nationalist groups insisted that diaspora funding is significant and dictates the stances of nationalist groups, whilst those strongly aligned with nationalism denied the existence of such funding except for the purposes of international development. Although it has been difficult to ascertain how nationalist groups are funded, there is evidence of diaspora funding for Tamil nationalistic political campaigning, visible in the meetings and events held to support such positions.

4.1.3 Extremist interlinkages

The Easter Sunday bombings in 2019 that were carried out by nine Muslim suicide bombers in Christian churches and hotels in Colombo unearthed the presence of Islamic violent extremism in Sri Lanka. Muslim community activists had warned the country's security establishment of this trend, but their warnings had gone unheeded. Muslims across the country paid a massive toll for the attacks as the government arbitrarily arrested hundreds under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and clamped down on Islamic education centres and places of worship.[50]

Following the attacks, Buddhist extremist groups, with state support, went on a rampage in different parts of the country attacking Muslim neighbourhoods and places of worship. The Buddhist monk and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist politician Athuraliye Rathana Thero embarked upon a fast unto death, calling for the resignation of two Muslim governors and one minister for their alleged involvement in the attacks. Within days, large groups of Buddhists began demonstrations in the Central Province capital Kandy by the Dalada Maligawa, a Buddhist sacred site, demanding that the government issue an ultimatum for the resignations.[51] Despite having opposed Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism for decades, a former TNA MP in the eastern district of Batticaloa, Sathasivam Viyalendiran, joined in the fast together with other Buddhist monks.[52] Viyalendiran came into parliament through the TNA, but in 2018 crossed over to the government and in 2020 contested the election as an SLPP MP. The apparent contradiction of Viyalendiran's having joined in the fast illustrates the significance of the tensions between Muslims and Tamils that could unite actors from opposite poles of Sri Lankan nationalism around a common cause. Tensions between Muslims and Tamils in the east originate from a Tamil militant perception of the development of Muslim politics as antithetical to their separatist struggle, and are frequently triggered by conflict-related competition for land and resources. On 3 June 2019, all Sri Lankan Muslim ministers and their deputies, nine in total, resigned en masse in protest against the violence and hate campaigns against Muslims.

Though the longer-term effects of Islamic violent extremism on Muslim politics are yet to be seen, its immediate impact on national politics was notable in that it contributed to the election of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2019. Three years later, however, evidence emerged linking state forces with the bombers.[53] Muslim and Catholic leaders have since demanded an independent investigation into these allegations and greater accountability. The implications of these events for minority rights, co-existence and reconciliation have been acute. The Islamic extremism card is frequently played by Buddhist extremist groups during elections. Many Muslim political figures have been tarred by hate campaigns online, which have not necessarily affected their status within their own community but have blemished their

image at the national level. The authorities' failure to ascertain the truth of Easter Sunday through an independent investigation has left Muslim political figures repeatedly defending their personal and political profiles and being undermined at the national level.

4.2 Issues relating to minority status, identity and conflict

'A Sinhalan MP and Tamil MP are not equal, a Sinhala MP can do his democratic function more easily than us. If a Sinhala MP is stopped by the forces, will he accept it? I can't do that,' a former Tamil MP from Jaffna said in an interview for this report. Findings suggest that irrespective of whether an elected representative from a minority decides to work with the government or not, there are limitations they face due to their minority identity and status. Though few referred explicitly to discrimination, many described differential treatment in relation to the state and within national parties.

Regarding access to the state apparatus, the experience of minority MPs depended on whether their party has aligned with the government or not. Importantly, both categories of MPs explained they faced limitations due to their minority identity, but those whose parties were not aligned with the government were clearly more affected. In the case of those in government the issues were (as discussed earlier) mostly in relation to bureaucratic barriers and dependent on the space afforded by the government to raise minority issues and find solutions from within. 'Even minority community political representatives holding ministerial positions in sectors such as education, land and housing face challenges in securing adequate budget allocations for their communities,' an MP from the Malaiyaga Tamil community said in an interview. These challenges are always present at some level but worsen when Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces are especially influential in government. For those not aligned to the state, obstacles were encountered at multiple points, for example in responding to issues faced by their electorate; in dealing with the military in the north and east; or in obtaining and spending economic development funding. This was mainly an issue for MPs in the north and east, who faced continuing challenges from state entities when responding to their constituents' needs. Generally, language is also a significant problem for minority politicians as the state sector, especially as organs of the central government function largely in the Sinhala language. Minority politicians who make it to cabinet posts have to be able to communicate at some level in Sinhalese, especially with administrators such as ministry secretaries. This also extends to communication with heads of state, all of whom have so far been Sinhalese. Moreover, the main national political parties also function almost entirely in Sinhalese. All of the minority political representatives who contest elections through these parties, such as the UNP and SLFP, cannot do so in their mother tongue. This is also the case with the NPP, even as they promote equality and non-discrimination as one of their key policies.

4.3 National parties dealing with minorities and their issues

National mainstream parties have influenced minority politics in two critical ways. The first is via their position on minority issues, rights and grievances. How these parties and their representatives, as heads of state or parliamentarians, have dealt with these, has influenced ethnic parties and minority politics. The second way is the space within the main national parties for minorities to be represented or raise their issues.

4.3.1 National level solutions to the ethnic conflict

Comprehensively addressing minority rights or grievances has become a rare feature of the agendas of national mainstream parties. Presidential candidates of these parties have often had to offer, if not a position on minority issues, then a vision of inter-ethnic relations. Parliamentary elections on the other hand see these issues politicized and problematized, rather than offering any moves towards resolution.

As the Rajapaksas rode the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist wave, candidates opposing them often had the guaranteed support of minority voters and had to do little to entice them. Consequently, presidential and parliamentary candidates of the UNP and its inter-linked parties have put more effort into canvassing the majority population, either by catering their campaigns to them or by refraining from openly taking pro-minority positions. Even in the 2024 presidential election where the minority vote was essential for victory, the offerings of the main candidates all revolved around the lowest common denominator – the effective implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution and guarantees of equality. No candidate publicly committed to pursuing accountability for wartime atrocities. This is indicative of the level of political bankruptcy on the part of the national parties and their candidates regarding a long-term negotiated solution to the ethnic conflict.

The relationship between what is popularly referred to in Sri Lanka as a 'political resolution to the ethnic conflict' and minority politics is important and requires further scrutiny. Ethnic minority parties, especially among Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims, were in part created as a response to conflict-related grievances; their existence and subsequent downfall have also been affected by their ability to negotiate on and place themselves in relation to the issue of a political solution to ethnic conflict. That the major national mainstream parties have in the last 35 years regressed from their commitments to political autonomy for minorities has had a significant impact on ethnic minority parties, particularly those representing Sri Lankan Tamils. Northern and eastern Sri Lankan Tamils have been left with the devolution of police powers to the provinces and the provincial council system: far from the federalist solution that would satisfy them. There has also been little consensus among minority communities and national parties on what could be offered to Muslims and Sinhalese who live in the north and east. In the 1980s, the SLMC proposed an autonomous political unit for Muslims within the east, but this was not accepted by Tamil or mainstream national parties.

Irrespective of the effect of Rajapaksa rule, the dominance of extreme Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism over the politics of Sri Lanka has no doubt resulted in a decrease in space and motivation afforded to conflict resolution. The Rajapaksas successfully presented the conflict as concluded, yet minorities have been clear that ending the war did not result in an end to the underlying ethnic conflict.[54] There is presently little appetite among the Sinhala polity to resolve the conflict, evidenced in the weak position on this question of even the NPP, which has otherwise been spearheading transformative policies. Failings at the national level to offer more to minorities have had major implications on national party politics and the survival of ethnic minority parties. Many of the divides within northern Tamil parties in particular are related to their inability to offer their constituents more than basic protection from violence and serious minority rights violations. For instance, part of the failure of the SLMC (as discussed below) is also blamed on the lack of their relevance for minorities.

4.3.2 Minority representation in national parties

The established national political parties and their associated fronts have always fielded ethnic minority candidates, especially from among Muslims. They have done so not only in minority populated areas, but in others too, where minorities have successfully been elected with support from the majority community. Table 3 demonstrates how minority candidates from the major parties have had strong and consistent results in line with their party performance. Minority candidates such as Kabir Hashim, A. H. M. Fowzie or Imthiaz Bakeer Markar have had to rely on the votes of the majority

Table 3: Performance of individual candidates from each party outside of the north east

	NPP	NUA	PA	SJB		SLFP	UNF		UNFGG	UNP					UPFA			
Candidates & their Parties	**2024**	**2000**	**2001**	**2020**	**2024**	**2010**	**2004**	**2010**	**2015**	**1989**	**1994**	**2000**	**2001**	**2015**	**1994**	**2000**	**2004**	**2010**
Colombo																		
A. H. M. Fowzie			103817												72294	100200	49719	51641
Kunjupille Sivakanthan							19396											
Mohamed Mahroof							55919					65400	85988					
Mano Ganesan				62091			51508						54942	69064				
Mohamed Jabir Abdul Cader										30252								
M. H. Mohamed							62959			47451	44527	49239	64783					
Mohomed Hanifa Ishak																	2236	
Mohomed Shafeak Rajabdeen							42319											
Mujibar Rahuman				87589	43737									83884				
Muthu Sangaralingam Sellasamy										36480								
Nobel Vethanayagam																	2630	
Praba Ganeshan								42851										
R. Yogarajan							39321											
S.M. Marikkar				96916	41482									92526				
Thiyagarajah Maheswaran							57978											
Rizvie Salih	73018																	
Kalutara																		
Imthiaz Bakir Markar										35433	68519	74555	89147					
Kandy																		
Faizer Mustafa						44648											40475	
Rauf Hakeem		28033		83398	30883			54097	102186									
Riyaz Faruk	64043																	
Mohomed Pasmin	57716																	
Kegalle																		
Kabir Hashim				58716	36034		69372	48344					53046	109030				

population as well as their own communities, making them formidable national level candidates for their parties.

This pattern has, however, recently undergone change, especially within the Rajapaksa-led parties. In the 2020 election, Mahinda Rajapaksa's SLPP did not field a single minority candidate in the minority-populous Colombo district. The NPP's predecessor, Jathika Jana Balavegaya, nominated only two candidates with minority backgrounds out of 22 in the Colombo district, while the SJB, a breakaway party from the UNP, nominated six out of 22. Except for the north, east and CWC strongholds elsewhere, the SLPP displayed a similar pattern which was notably different to the SJB, which fielded at least two minority candidates even in districts which are majority dominated. Interestingly, where the SLPP/SLFP fielded their own Tamil candidates in the north and east, they were often controversial and divisive figures, such as Sathasivam Viyalendiran in 2020 and Angajan Ramanathan in the same year. Minority MPs who contest elections from within the former mainstream national parties explain that opportunities for them are diminishing, as these parties now prefer to form coalitions with ethnic minority parties. Although coalition politics became more prevalent in the mid-1990s, ethnic minority parties maintained their individuality and mainstream national parties continued to field minority candidates for at least a decade. Changes occurred after 2005, with crossovers from ethnic minority parties to mainstream ones increasing significantly. The effect was a weakening of ethnic minority parties and minority politics.

'By making these coalitions, national parties can secure a block of votes from the minority community, supporting one or two of their demands in return. Consequently, national parties do not feel the need to consider the political representation of minority communities, as they can achieve their goals through these strategic alliances,' described an MP from the Malaiyaga Tamil community who contests elections with a national party. Minority politicians who are affiliated with national parties also discussed facing challenges in accessing funding and resources within these parties. They highlighted this as a factor that stems from differential treatment within national parties as well as a lack of minorities in party leadership. 'These parties prioritize the Sinhala people in societal matters and Buddhism as the primary religion. This prioritization poses significant challenges for minority community representatives within national parties. It becomes difficult for these representatives, particularly those from the Tamil minority, to advocate effectively for their community's rights, growth and needs. Furthermore, raising their voices against injustices faced by their community is an uphill battle,' the same MP added. Minority MPs within national parties also explained that whilst they may appear to have some influence within these parties, they are often marginalized within party structures. 'They often find themselves merely executing party directives, making it challenging to genuinely voice and address the concerns of their community,' one such MP said in an interview.

4.3.3 The NPP factor

The NPP transformed the country's political landscape in 2024. The 2024 parliamentary election saw 18 minority MPs elected through the NPP from several districts across the country, including Jaffna and the Vanni. This was exceptional for two reasons: first, it shifted the pattern of mainstream national parties opting to include minorities through alliances and coalitions, and second, it dented parts of the vote bank of ethnic minority parties. Though it is too early to analyse the deeper effects of this on minority politics and electoral representation, the immediate change is remarkable and requires at least a preliminary analysis.

Having 18 minority MPs elected was itself a first for Sri Lanka. Mahinda Rajapaksa's UPFA parliament in 2010 had close to 10 per cent of its MPs from minority communities, but some of them were alliance partners rather than from the party itself. The only other party to command such a high majority under the proportional representation system was the SLPP, under President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, but they only had four elected MPs belonging to minorities. The NPP brought in seven Muslim MPs out of a total of 18. The SJP had nine Muslim MPs in the previous parliament, but at least two of them were affiliated with ethnic minority parties. Dr. Rizvie Salih, the NPP's only Muslim MP in Colombo and Deputy Speaker of Parliament explains how the party won the Muslim vote: 'Muslims were let down by the other two main parties, they were ostracized, they were being used, they didn't benefit in any way. Muslim parties were already condemned by our people, what did they do all these years when anti Muslim sentiments arose? They were unable to use the votes they got to help people. It is time we put an end to "political sparring" and get together to rebuild this nation. This is clearly what the electorate wants.'

The NPP was not only responsible for crushing the old guard of national parties, but their triumph also dented ethnic minority party representation. Most significant was their success in Jaffna, where they took votes from the ITAK to bag three seats. The ITAK's leadership contender M. Sumanthiran lost his parliamentary seat here, as did many other prominent figures, such as the EPDP's Douglas Devananda and PLOTE's Dharmalingam Siddharthan. Overall, ethnic minority parties contesting

on their own managed to maintain close to 12 seats in this parliament, as they did in the previous one. However, the number of votes they received was lower, and there were notable district level variances.

Though the NPP had a similar effect across the country, its electoral victory in the Jaffna district was exceptional; no other majority Sinhalese party has achieved a similar feat. As the analysis in Section 3.1 above demonstrates, at least one parliamentary seat in the districts in the north has been held by a national mainstream party for decades, and this has recently increased, even with the Rajapaksa affiliates. The NPP garnered an additional 20 per cent or so of votes from the SLPP, which means a larger percentage of northern Tamils were willing to support a Sinhala majority party than their own ethnic minority parties. Interestingly, this occurred despite the NPP not offering any substantial policies on minority rights, political autonomy or justice.

'For 76 years the Tamil people were cheated and defeated again and again, people were fed up with those things. We don't want to make this country worse and worse and the NPP has a leftist position, which is generally quite popular in the north,' Rajeevan Jeyachandramoorthy, a newly elected NPP MP for Jaffna said in an interview. He added that the NPP campaigned on a strong equality and non-discrimination agenda and, at various political meetings, leaders of the party have also given guarantees of pursuing justice for wartime atrocities. The shift in allegiance of northeastern voters to the NPP in both the presidential and parliamentary elections suggests that they wanted to join this wave of change sweeping the country. Whilst it is important to recognize that the party engaged in a very effective social media campaign on the promise of change, this victory also denotes a move by voters away from Tamil ultranationalism towards wanting to cooperate with the state, in a context where progress on equality and non-discrimination may be a possibility. Whether this can be a more lasting change in the north is likely to be determined by how the NPP performs in the next few years.

4.4 Disintegration of ethnic minority parties

Though powerful and decisive between the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, ethnic minority parties are now weakened and struggling. Although division among minority political groups was a feature from their inception, at present, nearly all of them have splintered, which has weakened their political positioning. There are a number of different external and internal factors that often combine to result in this fractioning. These could be framed as follows: instrumentalization of ethnic minority party representatives by majority parties, leaders and governments; poor leadership of minority parties and corruption and nepotism within them; and differences in ideological and political stances among individuals.

4.4.1 Strategic instrumentalization by majoritarian politics

Many minority political actors believe that majority party elites have pursued policies of divide and rule that hark back to the colonial era and strategically worked towards dividing ethnic minority political parties. This was in line with their pre-existing majority interest while also driven by extreme Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces. The Rajapaksas, for example, instrumentalized a split within the LTTE, gaining the support of the group's eastern commanders Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (also known as Colonel Karuna Amman) and Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (Pillayan), who went on to form the TMVP and hold key positions within government. The TMVP has since been one of the main opponents to the TNA in the east.

The Rajapaksas also contributed significantly to splits in the SLMC, when, on at least two occasions, MPs from the party defected to join their alliance. In 2018, President Maithripala Sirisena caused a constitutional crisis by appointing Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister, while Ranil Wickremesinghe was already in the role. The latter argued that he commanded a parliamentary majority and refused to resign, following which the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka held Sirisena's move to be unconstitutional. According to SLMC sources, Rauf Hakeem flew his MPs to the Muslim holy city of Makkah to force them to pledge their support to Wickremesinghe.[55] However, a year later, all of the SLMC MPs, apart from Hakeem, broke ranks and supported the new government on the controversial Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution, which increased the powers of the President – a landmark constitutional change that undermined democracy. This is seen as one of the darkest moments of Muslim politics in Sri Lanka.[56] The decision by these Muslim MPs to act against the position of their party leaders and support an anti-minority government was viewed by the public as being influenced by financial and other benefits from the Rajapaksa ruling elite.

Ethnic minority party activists see this as a strategy of majoritarian political parties, especially those aligned to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, which deplored the power commanded by parties like CWC and SLMC in the 1990s and therefore sought to break them up. Party representatives interviewed for this report explained that ethnic minority parties are splintered through multiple

tactics targeting leading members, including offering them government positions, ministerial perks and, by some anecdotal accounts, paying huge sums of money in exchange for specific forms of support or to cause splits on political stances. Majoritarian parties also use other methods such as selectively recognizing leadership and undercutting those they disapprove of. A third method is to suppress or undermine the work of ethnic minority party MPs in their electorates.

4.4.2 Minority party leadership issues

Linked to this strategic instrumentalization are internal issues of poor leadership, corruption and nepotism that have damaged ethnic minority parties. Repeated crossovers by minority MPs, which come with a ministerial portfolio, office, staff and other perks, often in contravention of party positions, have led to reputational damage across ethnic minority parties and allegations of large-scale corruption. Whilst bribery and corruption in such cases are difficult to prove, the direct correlation between such moves and the resulting political and individual gains is noticeable and has provoked repeated criticism within minority communities.

Leaders of these ethnic minority parties have also been blamed for their failure to hold parties together. Most parties were either founded or held together by powerful leaders who did not ensure similarly strong successors. The TNA, constituting the TULF, TELO, EPRLF and ACTC within it, came together under the leadership of R. Sambandan in 2001, and, although his leadership skills and pro-LTTE stance led to breakaways, he managed to hold his own party, the ITAK, together for close to a decade. Sambandan was leader of the TULF and the TNA, but, around 2004, the President of the TULF, V. Anandasangaree objected to its pro-LTTE stance and split from the coalition; Sambandan went on to take over the ITAK. A leadership void left by his death in 2024 resulted in a struggle within the party marked by ideological political divides. Human rights lawyer and former Jaffna MP, M. Sumanthiran was tipped to win the January 2024 leadership contest. However, partly due to a last-minute procedural change, Kilinochchi MP S. Sritharan gained 57 per cent of the vote and defeated Sumanthiran. Sumanthiran, though well known within civil society and diplomatic circles, is Colombo-based and seen to be not as connected to the politics of the north as Sritharan. Moreover, both hold very different ideological and political positions.[57] Sritharan is openly sympathetic to the LTTE, leans towards separatist stances and identifies himself as an ardent Tamil nationalist. Sumanthiran on the other hand, distinguishes Tamil nationalism from separatism and identifies it with non-violent struggles leading to a federalist outcome. The divide was further exacerbated during the 2024 presidential election with Sumanthiran supporting the SJB candidate and Sritharan the common candidate.

With the Malaiyaga Tamils too, the successive weakening of the CWC leadership has been a significant issue. After the death of S. Thondaman, the party leadership went to his grandson Arumugam, who was reportedly very different in his leadership style. 'Senior Thondaman was a visionary; he was a born leader and had a mission for people. His grandson was a shadow of him. He was also a good negotiator, but his style was not to reason out, he tried to play the role of a hero like in the Tamil movies. He was a strong character, people looked at him with awe,' a former CWC member said in an interview. Arumugam's strong support for the Rajapaksas cost his party electoral defeats in parts of the Central Province, particularly in the Nuwara Eliya district in the 2015 and 2020 elections. Following his untimely death in 2020, the party leadership moved on to his son Jeevan Thondaman, who at the time was only 26 years old and without political experience. Although Jeevan has had sympathy among party members, he, too, is losing popularity due to controversial decisions such as to remain loyal to the Rajapaksa-aligned party. He has also been criticized for abrogating a collective agreement to negotiate workers' pay between plantation companies and unions. Confident that he could get a higher wage for plantation workers through the government wages board, rather than in negotiations as part of the collective agreement, he took the brash move of abrogating the latter, which is yet to pay off.[58] In 2024, Jeevan was the only CWC member elected to parliament with his own voter base in the Nuwara Eliya district falling from 109,155 to 46,438. Dominance of the Thondaman family within the CWC, among other factors, has led to numerous splits in this party. In 1989, Chandrasekaran moved out of the party and formed the UCPF, which remains a dominant political force within the community. Following several power battles, including legal ones, M.S. Sellasamy lost his leadership struggle of the CWC to Arumugam Thondaman.[59] Other MPs such Ramiah Yogarajan and Murugan Satchidananda broke away from the party and stayed with the opposition over Arumugam's loyalty to the Rajapaksas. In 2010, CWC MP Velusamy Radhakrishnan, broke away from the party due to differences, running as an independent candidate of the mainstream UPFA and later taking over the UCPF.

Similarly, the unexpected death of the charismatic and powerful SLMC leader M. H. M. Ashraff threw the party into chaos and, after a series of legal battles, his widow Ferial Ashraff led the NUA, also formed by Ashraff, leaving Rauf Hakeem to lead the SLMC. The verdict on

Hakeem's leadership is mixed; some interviewees found him weak and unable to hold together party members, leading to the colossal and embarrassing crossovers in favour of the Rajapaksas. Others argued that if not for his leadership the party would have disintegrated further (see further analysis below).

4.4.3 Geographical and identity differences within minority communities

Alongside the internal issues of leadership within minority parties, there are the geographical and identity divergences within ethnic and religious minority groups. For example, among both Sri Lankan and Malaiyaga Tamils, many of their political representatives are from dominant castes. Caste-based discrimination remains both in political party structures and at the everyday level, including within tea estates, limiting people from non-dominant groups entering and thriving in politics and public spaces. Regionality can also play a significant role. Eastern Tamils live alongside Sinhalese and Muslims and have opinions and concerns regarding the conflict that are different from those Tamils who live in the north. Similarly north-eastern Muslims face many diverging issues to those in the rest of the country. Though the TNA has representatives from the east, and their long-term leader R. Sambandan was an MP for the eastern Trincomalee district, the party is seen to be more representative of the north. Even within the north, divergences exist. Vavuniya has a mixed population and sits close to the border of the Sinhala-dominated North Central Province, which results in its being deprioritized by northern Tamil politicians who hail from the Jaffna district. Kilinochchi was the LTTE's administrative capital and therefore has a poorer and more war-affected population than Jaffna, which also affects its electoral outcomes. 'Think about whoever comes, if a diplomat comes, they go past here to Jaffna, if an Indian official comes, he goes past here to Jaffna, does he know there are Indian origin people, those people are discriminated, treated badly, how well do they know these issues?', a former MP from the Vanni said. The challenging situation described here for minority political representatives is partly caused by the limitations they face as MPs, which, as the next section explores, corresponds to critical issues of the meaning and impact of electoral politics and democracy itself for minorities.

5 What does representation mean? Difficulties in maintaining ethnic party politics

'What has this ethnic party representation brought? Has it contributed [to a] deepening of democracy? Has it contributed to the improvement of minority rights? After all, most elected members in these minority parties, particularly the Muslim MPs, voted for [the] eighteenth and twentieth constitutional amendments,' said a longstanding former member of the SLMC and civil society activist. In the 75 years since independence, 30 years of armed conflict and shifting trends in ethnic and religious extremism have put into question the very purpose and success of ethnic party politics and minority political representation. Two issues are fundamental. First, do ethnic minority parties serve a purpose for their communities or can minorities achieve the same or more by being represented within mainstream parties? Second, can ethnic minority parties achieve more for their electorates through gaining executive powers, i.e. aligning with the government, or does this necessarily implicate an unsatisfactory compromise on issues of identity and rights? This report's findings were divided on the responses to both questions.

The main parties within each ethnic group have strong reasons for their formation. With regards to the Sri Lankan Tamils, the divergence between Sinhala nationalism and Tamil nationalism was seen to be too wide for group needs to be met through the mainstream parties, which in policy and practice were aligning with the former. The unique challenges faced by Malaiyaga Tamils, especially in the 1960s when they were stateless, also required a distinct political force that could advocate for their needs, which were different to the Sri Lankan Tamils. Hence, the formation of the CWC arose through a trade union.

In relation to Muslims, the issue is more complex. Though the SLMC and ACMC have now grown into national parties, i.e. contesting in more than one region, their existential justification as ethnic minority parties is not necessarily shared by Muslims in Colombo and other southern areas, whose economic and social interests may also align with those of the Sinhala or Tamil community. Muslim politicians elected from mainstream national parties have depended on non-Muslim votes to be elected, and their success is seen as important for strengthening minority representation within mainstream politics, rather than through ethnic minority parties. The counterargument to this is that their dependence on non-Muslim votes and the fervour of national party leadership means they are unable to enhance the position of Muslims in a way that parties like SLMC and ACMC may be able to.

'So long as Sinhala political parties, or at least some of them, think on communal terms then we will be targeted. So, you need a party, you can't expect a Muslim who is part of a Sinhala electorate, such as Balangoda or Kegalle, to take a strong communal position,' a former SLMC MP said in an interview. Arguably, the geographical spread of Muslims across the country has forced them, more than other ethnic groups, to reckon with the necessity of ethnic politics, and here the verdict is far from straightforward. Proponents of Muslim minority parties hold firm that they have achieved far more for the community across the country than those within the mainstream parties have. They explain that as they are elected most often purely on the vote of Muslims, and they take that vote bank to the governing parties, they are able to negotiate for far more direct developmental and other support for their constituents.[60] Irrespective of the issues currently faced by the SLMC, its contribution towards Muslim political, economic and social development cannot be understated. The SLMC gave the Muslim community a political identity and profile that it had never had before. Its formation was pivotal to steering Muslim youth away from Tamil militancy. Ashraff's excellent Sinhalese language skills and ability to debate with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist figures helped to raise the profile of Muslims - and irk extremists within the majority. During his tenure, especially as Minister of Ports, Ashraff also initiated a number of development projects that enhanced the economic and social position of Muslims, especially in the east. This included the building of the Oluvil harbour and the creation of the South Eastern University. He was also responsible for increasing the employment levels of Muslims, controversially by flooding his own ministries and departments with Muslims, especially from the east.[61]

Additionally, although the party has been accused of dividing Muslims and Sinhalese in its pursuit of ethnic politics, Ashraff's repeated decision to use the SLMC's Muslim voter bank to be part of national governments,

aligning with the majority rather than Tamil militancy, strengthened a state under serious separatist threat from Tamil militants. For this however, the Muslim community in the north and east paid a major price: LTTE atrocities against Muslims rose heavily with the formation of the SLMC and led to the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the north. Nevertheless, the political profile gained by the SLMC yielded a level of influence and strength that gained the Muslim community prominence within the national polity and forced others to take it seriously.

All of these factors highlight the challenges of being Sri Lanka's 'second minority'.[62] The pursuit of a separate Muslim political identity is seen to have entrenched divisions between Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese. During Ashraff's lifetime, this was already becoming an issue, which he acknowledged through the formation of the NUA, indicating that he himself had recognized the perils of minority politics. 'He visioned that this sort of ethnic politics will not survive in the long run, which is why he formed [the] NUA. Ashraff realized you can't go on with this banner as you are also antagonizing the majority, where they felt you are using this banner in an unjustifiable manner,' Ferial Ashraff, his widow, former leader of NUA, MP for Digamadulla and cabinet minister said in an interview for this report. Ashraff's rise and demise coincided with a shift in Muslim religious identity which resulted in more overt expressions of Islamic adherence and led to accusations of a rise in religious fundamentalism and extremism associated with Muslim politics.[63]

More recently, Muslim political representatives have had little influence in reducing Buddhist extremist attacks and campaigns. This was concretized by the complete disregard of the views of Muslim political actors during the Covid-19 forcible cremation policy, which severely undermined their status and credibility in the eyes of their voter base: 'Covid time this was the hardest, very difficult, it was very disappointing, that our government was like this. We wanted to resign, we thought if we wait and stay inside and speak then we can at least change the position [and] get senior ministers to understand,' a former Muslim cabinet minister said. 'We weren't just doing nothing, but we couldn't be open, we had the freedom to explain our views even though we weren't listened to,' he added.

Opponents of Muslim party politics explain that these parties have ethnicized political discourse and made the community vulnerable to Sinhala-Buddhist attack. Representing not just their own community but also other ethnic groups in their locality could have strengthened their position and contributed to greater reconciliation, they argue. 'Not only Muslims, even Tamils are asking the question: should we have a political party with a tag of racism or religion, the younger generation is not sure. For this generation they haven't seen it, they are concerned,' Kariapper from the SLMC said. Such questions about the value of communal politics lead to questions about the value of being in opposition or in government. Although most Sri Lankan Tamil parties in the north and east have stayed in opposition, some, such as the EPDP and TMVP, have opted to be in government. A representative of the EPDP interviewed for this report explained that, apart from a few exceptions, all Tamil parties work with the government at some level by supporting them on particular legislation or accepting state funds for development. He believed that the socioeconomic needs of the northeastern Tamil community were greater than their political aspirations for self-determination and that working with the government was critical to meeting these.

Meanwhile, S. Thondaman always ensured his party and community gained politically through his various coalitions with mainstream national parties. For example, his close affiliation with and the support given to former President R. Premadasa resulted in The Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons Act of 1988. This had a trickle-down effect on the political participation of Malaiyaga Tamils; as a result of this increased political representation, many youths from the community were able to enter into politics and participate in local government elections at that time. In 1994, although Thondaman was with the UNP, he recognized that Chandrika Kumaratunga was very likely to win the presidential election and allowed the Malaiyaga Tamil community to vote freely. She in return invited him into her cabinet and created a ministry for tea estate infrastructure, which was the first of its kind. 'When he heard this ministry was created, Mr. Thondaman brought the gazette notification to Kandy and presented it to the party and he was in tears, he couldn't believe it had been done,' a former CWC member said. Under the ministry, the supply of electricity to people's homes in the plantation sector increased and some key roads were developed. The state took over the funding of infrastructure in the area such as electricity lines and pylons, which, though part of the national grid, were previously maintained by estates.

Indeed, some minority political actors see this form of politics as compromising the rights of minorities in order to meet their socio-economic needs. This in the long run, they argue, weakens the position of minorities. Underlining this discussion is the larger question of what political representation actually means for minorities and how much they can achieve for their communities through it. The majority of those interviewed for this report from the Sri Lankan Tamil community, in the north in particular, conceded that representation offers very little; at most, it is to prevent further atrocities taking place. The MPs from the north and east who have stayed

in opposition have been limited in making a significant contribution to their electorate. At times, they have received state funding which they disburse for development projects, but this has not met the level of the community's needs, particularly in the post-war context. Additionally, they have little influence with the government to be able to secure developmental or other support for their communities. Most importantly, they have made little headway in seeking solutions to conflict-related grievances that range from political autonomy to justice, accountability and reparations for war victims.

What the proponents of ethnic minority parties claim they are able to do is stop further violations from taking place, such as for example on land acquisition, appropriation or the settlement of Sinhalese colonies in Tamil areas. 'Because we face obstacles we can't just give up. If we keep hitting back at least we slow down the damage. People know the limitations, but within the limitations they can see who is working and not,' said Dharmalingam Siddharthan, leader of the PLOTE and former MP for Jaffna. 'If we all kept away the chances of greater central infiltration would be much higher, because of the fact that we are MPs, when the state wants to take over, expropriate a land, people stand up, show opposition, they know MPs are on their side. The military also has to take cognizance of this fact, they stop making it worse,' Wigneswaran, former MP for Jaffna and former Chief Minister of the Northern Province said in an interview. To this extent the role of these MPs is reactive rather than proactive, and their frustration and desperation was clear.

6 Changing constituencies and representation

The performance of the NPP in the 2024 parliamentary election has to a great extent pushed all political parties in Sri Lanka – national and ethnic – to rethink their politics and reconfigure their parties. Although the long-term effects of the NPP's transformation are unclear, the election will force parties, especially minority ones, to respond to many of the issues discussed above. This section traces the changing contexts within minority constituencies and politics that need to be seriously considered for any political reform.

6.1 Tamils in the north and east

The divisions in the northern political landscape are down to party ideology as much as individual approaches. Parties such as the ACTC and the TPNA are on the extreme spectrum of Tamil nationalism; they strongly oppose the unitary structure of the state, supporting political models from federalism to Swiss-style confederations for the north and east. These political positions were the reasons representatives of these parties left the TNA and contested separately. In 2024, the ACTC remained an outlier, for example, by refusing to join the common candidate representing most Tamil nationalist parties and calling for a boycott of the presidential polls. Within the TNA's former constituents, positions vary from federal models to stronger devolution, beyond the Thirteenth Amendment.

Under the oppressive shadow of both Tamil and Sinhala ethnic nationalisms, the TNA has not survived, while the ITAK has struggled to re-invent itself after the war. As previously explained, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has been manifested through the military and civilian branches of government in the areas of agriculture, land, housing and archaeology to present new problems of land acquisition, appropriation and colonial settlements in the north and east. This has occurred while the post-war economy continues to be devastated, and with no progress on truth, justice and reparations having been made, despite repeated UN HRC resolutions and lofty commitments made by the government in 2015. In the meantime, Tamil ultranationalist forces keep alive the possibility of an independent state for Tamils; for example, their promotion of a common candidate at the 2024 presidential election was intended as a precursor for a UN-sponsored referendum on secession.[64] They continue to conduct events across the north and east, calling on the public not to cooperate with or participate in the Sri Lankan state. They did this even while the transitional justice process was ongoing, pressing for a UN Security Council referral to the International Criminal Court for criminal prosecutions against Sri Lanka for war crimes and crimes against humanity.[65] The successive failures of the state towards minorities understandably explains the positioning of these groups, but they leave the northeastern Tamil population in a very difficult situation at the everyday level where they need to negotiate their daily needs with the state but may face serious consequences for engaging with its organs.

Determining ideological and political positioning vis-à-vis the state, particularly one that identifies with Sinhala Buddhism, coupled with the legacy of the LTTE, is the bane of moderate Tamil politics, especially in the north of Sri Lanka. Neither the ITAK nor its former allies, the PLOTE, EPRLF and TELO, have been able to successfully reach a position on these issues that appeals to voters. 'To be moderate is getting harder. During party elections when people say I am not a Tamil nationalist, for me to counter that, to communicate that kind of messaging requires far more effort,' M. Sumanthiran, of the ITAK explained in an interview. During the 2020 election, the voter base in Jaffna was broadly divided in thirds, with one third pulling towards ultra-nationalist parties, one third willing to cooperate with Sinhalese parties and one third floating in the middle. In the 2024 election, this transient middle ground was lost, with the vote split between the NPP on one hand and parties or MPs aligning with ultranationalism on the other.

Importantly, this election also suggests that there is now a larger number of people in the north who want to be part of the state, and who prioritize economic development as much as rights and justice: 'I used to be with TNA, [but] whatever village you go to no one says "I want my nationalism", "I want my rights", what they say is "we want a toilet", "we want a house, land, sorted out,",' a former TNA member and former MP under a national party said in an interview. Election results in the last several years from the east demonstrate a shrinking of

Tamil political representation. Due to LTTE policies, Tamils were unable to effectively engage in democratic policies, during which time, parties like the SLMC strengthened and gained significant ground. In the Vanni, the number of ITAK seats in parliament has diminished through the years from five in 2004 to just one in 2024. In 2024, the Tamil party old guard was able to maintain only one third of the Vanni vote. Despite its having been the stronghold of the LTTE 15 years ago, one third of the seats went to the NPP and one third to Muslims.

The repeated success until 2024 of the former LTTE Eastern commander Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (Colonel Karuna Amman) of the TMVP, who has been accused of large-scale human rights violations against Tamils and Muslims at the end of the war and in its aftermath, exposes the fact that there has been a substantial section of the Tamil voter base that is willing to elect politicians who either have a record of committing major human rights violations against their own community, or those who are aligned with parties that have. Muralitharan's political trajectory is not dissimilar to those of now well-established political figures like Douglas Davananda and Suresh Premachandran, who were also former militants and faced allegations of human rights violations. In 2020 TMVP leader and former LTTE militant Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (Pillayan) was elected in Batticaloa with a mammoth 55,198 votes. Like the tension between socioeconomic development and rights and justice discussed above, here we see a tension between minority politics, the pursuit of democracy over militancy, versus minority rights and justice, particularly in terms of insufficient accountability for wartime atrocities faced by Tamils. It seems that, as a political goal, the pursuit of minority rights and justice has been seen as too lofty in the face of the more pressing issues of daily life. 2024's swing to the NPP changed all this, though, as previously noted, this party also has a history of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and has not publicly made any major concessions to the people of the north and east.

Tamil parties in the east are still reeling from these challenges and face difficulties unlike in the north, as they are competing with other ethnic and political forces which are far ahead in the electoral game. In the east, Tamil political actors have also often felt controlled and dominated by northern actors, who try to claim superiority over them and present little understanding of their unique situation. In Batticaloa in 2024, the ITAK made a significant comeback, securing three seats, but continues to struggle in Trincomalee and Digamadulla, with just one seat in each district.

There are two concluding observations that need to be made in relation to the political representation of Tamils in the north and east. The first, is on the effects on intercommunal relations of the increasing number of Muslim MPs being elected from Muslim or national parties. This is particularly notable in the Vanni where, as already mentioned, Muslim representation supersedes their population ratio. Following the end of the war, Tamil-Muslim tensions have risen significantly. How Tamil politics responds to this will be important to watch out for. Parties like the ITAK have failed to meaningfully include Muslims, who have had to turn towards the SLMC, ACMC or national parties, thereby contributing to the ethnicization of politics. The second observation is on the steady encroachment of Sinhala-based national parties such as the SLPP into the north and east. Even when ethnic minority parties have dominated the politics of Sri Lankan Tamils, this never wiped out the occasional election of a Tamil candidate from the UNP. The SLPP on the contrary fielded disruptive figures from the Tamil community in the north and east, while also strengthening their Sinhala base in Digamadulla and Trincomalee. In 2024, much of these votes shifted to the NPP, but this slow encroachment of Sinhala political representation into the minority homeland is something that needs to be monitored.

6.2 Muslim political representation

Muslim ethnic politics has disintegrated to the point of being unrecognizable. Though the SLMC and ACMC remain and continue to gain seats, much of this appears to be due to individuals who have built strong political identities, rather than the parties themselves. Although during its peak the SLMC was successful in offering Muslim youth a political vision that held them together, particularly those from poorer segments of the community, there is now little in the way of ideology or political positioning which gives these parties, and in particular the SLMC, a sense of electoral identity. Overall, Muslim politics is facing a crisis of legitimacy. Whilst there is no evidence of the involvement of Muslim parties with Islamic extremist groups, it can be argued that the failure of Muslim politics paved the way for the rise of violent extremism.

Muslim political representatives were discredited by the Rajapaksa regime and have not fully regained their standing since that time. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the failure of an entire cohort of Muslim MPs and a cabinet minister to stop Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's forcible cremation policy questioned the overall efficacy of Muslim politics. The continuing alignment of Muslim parties and political actors with the SLPP has diminished their credibility further. This is aggravated by a failure in

leadership within Muslim politics. Rishad Bathiudeen, who heads the ACMC, faces numerous accusations of corruption, instigating violence and threatening the reconciliation process.[66] Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the SLMC, has been criticized for failing to offer the leadership or vision that could rescue the party from its current state of unpopularity.[67] He is also accused of heaping too much power on himself, including by maintaining a policy of allowing only one cabinet post be given to his party, and only himself to receive that post, when his party forms part of a national party coalition. There are few young Muslims emerging onto the national political landscape and virtually no women. This stands in contrast to the advances the community has made in education and socioeconomic development, especially among women.

Muslim minority parties have also frequently identified with dominant Islamic religious groups as a means of cultivating a distinct Muslim political identity. This has been especially disadvantageous to Muslim women, who, with the exception of Ferial Ashraff, have struggled to secure places within party structures and have been marginalized in their political positions.[68] This is illustrated by the fact that, despite appeals by Muslim women activists, both parties have not supported substantive reform of the controversial Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act that allowed for polygamy and child marriage.[69]

In order to win votes, Muslim minority parties have had to differentiate themselves from other ethnic political parties and advance the rights and needs of Muslims, often at the expense of Sinhalese and Tamil issues. This, in a context of rising ethnic nationalism, has negatively affected interethnic coexistence and reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka; ACMC leader Rishad Bathiudeen, for instance, poses a controversial figure in this regard, frequently accused by northern Tamil activists of claiming resources earmarked for Muslims.[70]

There are numerous challenges that Muslim political groups and representatives have to contend with in the coming years. Primary among them is the underlying threat of rising Islamic violent extremism, the ongoing existence of which is attested to community activists in the east of Sri Lanka, and which they cannot trust the state to tackle.[71] Any further acts of violent extremism, even if not on the scale of the Easter Sunday attacks, will have severe implications for the security and rights of Muslims. Certain Muslim political representatives have raised this issue and are working with community activists to deal with the internal causes of violent extremism, but there is no structural response to it.

Whether in ethnic minority or in mainstream parties, Muslim politicians have not succeeded in marrying the necessity of seeking political representation based on their distinct religious and ethnic identity, with interethnic collaboration, especially where coexistence is challenged and competition for resources is strong. Following the end of the war, Muslims have become isolated in politics by both the main ethnic groups. Although some political representatives have tried to forge good relations with their compatriots from other communities, this has not been widespread, nor has it changed the difficult ethnic positioning of Muslims as Sri Lanka's 'other minority' caught between two competing nationalisms. Finally, Muslim politics also has a capacity issue, which is heightened by the resistance to enabling women and young people to rise through the ranks. The 2024 NPP cabinet was the first that did not include a Muslim cabinet minister, even though a number of Muslim MPs were elected from the party. Party stalwarts argued that cabinet positions were offered to the most qualified candidates rather than on an ethnic basis, which raises the question why the party does not have a single Muslim appointable at that level. Though generally ineffective, Muslim politicians have demonstrated that they are willing to come together for a common community stance, irrespective of party affiliation for instance, the resignation of all Muslim ministers in 2019. Although currently discredited, Muslim party politics is unlikely to go away in the immediate to medium term.

6.3 Malaiyaga Tamil community

The Malaiyaga Tamil community faces certain unique factors that affects their political representation. First among these is that their main parties are also trade unions and have strong links to the estate sector, even though only some 11 per cent of their community remain working on tea plantations. The connection between the estates and the parties previously offered the strong voter base and financial benefits essential for the success of a political party. Although there is no clear financial link between trade unions and political parties, the connection enables party access to large numbers of 'captive voters,' as one expert described them, who can also be influenced financially through various developmental and corrupt activities within the plantation sector. 'The estate links make the voters sort of bound to the party and the parties take advantage of this. It can be development, it can be a bottle of toddy,' a Malaiyaga Tamil community expert explained.

The concentration of power within the Thondaman family has caused disappointment among many within the CWC. There are reports of corruption and nepotism within the leadership, although these are not possible to verify independently. There are also questions raised as to

what they have achieved in all the years of being within the executive, especially while often maintaining a dominant position. Trade unions within the plantation sector have still not secured a higher day wage for workers, and while there have been small gains on improving infrastructure, the standard of homes, schools and hospitals accessible to the Malaiyaga community remains poor compared to the rest of the country: 'They could have done wonders with their parliamentary strength, being kingmakers and with ministries they held, but service towards community was very poor. The CWC wants to have the community suppressed so then they have the importance,' a former CWC party member who later contested under the SJB said in an interview.

While not limited to this community, there have been concerns about the sinking standards of Malaiyaga political representatives. In August 2024, a fist fight broke out between two MPs from the TPA, Velu Kumar and Palani Thigambaram, during a TV debate over their support for two different presidential candidates. Velu Kumar was subsequently sacked from the party. The incident was indicative not only of the divisiveness of Malaiyaga Tamil politics, which has been a longstanding issue, but the level to which standards have declined, when elected MPs of the same party resort to violence on national TV. The reasons for such divisions and shifting alliances are in line with the general findings of this report. They are the result of weakening support for ethnic minority parties, pressures and enticements from mainstream national parties, corrupt practices on both sides and the dynamics of the proportional representation system.

The issue of translating representation into power is also acutely felt by MPs belonging to this community. 'My reasons for crossing over is that I didn't like the set up in the party, as opposition MP there is nothing you can do for the community, I represent a vulnerable community where from A-to-Z funding is needed. As a state minister I have access to those funds and can help my community,' a former cabinet minister from the community said in an interview.

A significant percentage of the Malaiyaga Tamil community are based outside of their traditional homeland, the Central Province, and even in the areas where they are concentrated, such as Kandy, Monaragala and Ratnapura, they are still scattered among the majority Sinhalese population. Community representatives explained that in such demographic contexts it can even be unsafe for them to support a non-Sinhala candidate, as they may face violence from the local Sinhala community and its representatives. Malaiyaga Tamils in such neighbourhoods have been subject to localized violence and feel high levels of vulnerability. As they are a small community and generally at a lower socioeconomic level than other groups, they have very limited political influence on the Sinhalese representatives of their areas, entrenching their marginalization. Part of the Malaiyaga Tamil community also lives in the north and east of Sri Lanka where again they become sidelined by Sri Lankan Tamil political actors due to caste-based discrimination, negative perceptions of their comparatively recent origin from India (as opposed to the longer history of Sri Lankan Tamils in the country) and the marginalization stemming from these prejudices.

In conclusion, ethnic minority parties within the Malaiyaga community are facing similar issues to those in other communities. They too have divided up and compromised their political identity through contesting elections alongside national political parties, especially those that worked against minorities. There are also more issues in relation to the credibility of the parties and the individual political actors within these groups. Despite individual Malaiyaga representatives having held positions within the executive since the 1980s and gone on to become prominent figures, this has not translated into any significant progress for their community at large. In some cities however, including in Colombo, the community's numbers are rising as is their education level and economic status. For nearly two decades at least one member of their community has been elected as an MP from Colombo and secured a steady 60-70,000 votes in the capital city. Although these MPs are probably also relying on Sinhalese and Muslim voters in the city, once elected they are able to support the wider community, including in areas where they are more numerous, such as the Central Province.

7 Other challenges to minority political representation

7.1 The electoral system and related issues

Sri Lanka's current proportional representation system offers minorities a far greater opportunity of being elected to parliament than the previous 'first past the post' system, under which electoral boundaries were based on small divisions where the candidate from the party with the highest number of votes was elected to parliament. In districts where minorities are the majority, such as in pockets of Colombo, the Central Province, and the north and east, they have been able to elect their own representatives, but in other areas where they are dotted amongst the Sinhala population, they had no such success. In 1978, the proportional representation system was introduced, and the existing administrative districts of Sri Lanka were turned into electoral ones. No redrawing of boundaries occurred, and these districts became multi-member units, rather than as they were under first past the post, where they were largely single-member units. Taking the district of Colombo for example, under this system each party can nominate up to 22 contestants for 19 seats. Parties that meet at least five per cent of the vote then get a proportional number of seats to the votes they received. If, for example, party A receives 20 per cent of the votes, they will receive approximately 20 per cent of the seats, which amounts to around four out of 19. The four MPs are decided based on the highest number of preferential votes, where the voter selects the party of their choice and up to three preferential candidates from the party nomination list. There is also a national list, which becomes proportionately divided based on the total number of votes each party gets.

'The overall benefit is that the results are a lot more proportionate – governments that are formed tend to be more representative. This was not the case under first past the post where the government that was formed did not always accurately represent the popular vote,' says Pasan Jayasinghe, a doctoral candidate at University College London researching Sri Lanka's electoral systems. Proportional representation also favours ethnic minority parties who have a better chance of mustering block votes in minority populous areas. 'Partly because of this, a minority ethnic community may potentially have bargaining power at the government formation stage as well as through the lifetime of a government – there have been instances where Muslim parties for example have utilized this,' Jayasinghe adds.

The challenges with proportional representation are that it is more complex, and, as the electoral districts are large, it impedes the formation of relationships between MPs and their voters. This results in a general lack of accountability on the part of MPs towards their constituencies. Despite a few notable exceptions (such as M. L. A. M. Hizbullah's being elected six times in Batticaloa district even despite two changes of party, or the initial electoral successes of A. L. M. Athaullah's National Congress party, founded in the wake of the power struggle after the death of the SLMC leader M. H. M. Ashraff), one of the major issues raised during the Aragalaya was the high level of disenchantment voters had with their elected candidates, whom they felt did not represent their interests in the legislative and executive branches of the state.

Proportional representation also leads to a proliferation of ethnic minority parties that encourages intra-group competition, which is important for diversity in representation but could also have contributed towards the splits in parties. Proportional representation means that candidates in particular areas are confident of their election, irrespective of their party, and thereby have less hesitation to leave an ethnic minority party and form another one, if they face challenges from within. As the electoral districts are multi-member it also causes a level of competition within rather than between parties; for example, if the SLMC can potentially get two MPs from Digamadulla into parliament, the party candidates within their district nomination list compete for those two positions. In some instances, individuals in ethnic minority parties with a secure voter base in a district may take a calculated decision to stand for election with a national party for other reasons, which could also affect the ethnic minority party. This is illustrated by SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem and Arumugam Thondaman of the CWC both contesting in Kandy and Nuwara Eliya with a mainstream national party, as they were assured that they would be selected through the preferential system. In the case of Hakeem in particular, it was less likely in a multi-member district like Kandy, which has a sufficiently sizeable Sinhalese population, that the SLMC would get a sufficient

number of votes to get an MP into power, whereas Hakeem could benefit from the national party total and guarantee his seat through the preferential system.

Arguably, many of the issues discussed in this report, such as the splits within ethnic minority parties and the crossovers of MPs as part of coalitions and alliances, are also partly attributable to the electoral system. While there is a clear consensus among minority political actors against reverting to a first past the post system, there was some openness to reforming the current one to address some of the challenges that currently exist. Three parliamentary select committees since 2001 have proposed reform of the current system, and, in March 2024, the cabinet of ministers approved reforms that will lead to a hybrid system. Under the proposed reforms, 160 members will be elected via first past the post, while 65 will be elected via proportional representation. The details of the changes have not been finalized, but, based on previous select committee reports, it appears that the reforms aim to address the weaknesses of both systems and ensure election outcomes that are more representative of voting patterns. There have nevertheless been concerns among ethnic minority parties regarding these changes, which, although intended to ensure the same outcomes as under the present system while addressing the problems with in-party divisions, in practice they may marginally affect ethnic minorities, depending on how electoral boundaries are drawn.

7.2 Lack of ethnically disaggregated data

Since its inception, the parliament of Sri Lanka has maintained records of all MPs. In most cases the religion of the MP is recorded, but the data is not easily available. Equally concerning is that there is no ethnically disaggregated data on election-related violence or violations of electoral laws. The head of Sri Lanka's election monitoring body, People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, said in an interview for this report that the ethnicity of electoral law offenders is not currently monitored. Reviewing the nature of the violations that have taken place in recent years, he added that there was no indication of any discriminatory or racist targeting of ethnic minority parties during elections, in what could be construed as a violation of election legislation. However, minority MPs interviewed for this report referred to specific election campaigns that clearly targeted Muslims in a discriminatory and racist manner. Ferial Ashraff explained that in her last election in the ethnically diverse Digamadulla district in 2010, public posters emerged explicitly telling people not to vote for Muslim candidates. 'I could see the campaign developing against us, in the last five days before the elections new posters came up saying whatever colour you vote for, give it to a Sinhalese. In the last three days we had to stop campaigning, lots of motorcycles with Bikkus [Buddhist monks] from outside our area went into villages and warned the people not to vote,' Ferial Ashraff said.

There is presently very little ethnically disaggregated data available on the political representation of minorities. Ethnic minority parties are clearly identifiable, and their electoral performance can be tracked through district and national level data on their performance. The success of minority candidates in national parties can also be tracked where their results are publicly available. Online data of the nominations lists of national mainstream parties in elections prior to 2015 was not easy to find, making it very challenging to track the minority candidates they put forward. When this data is available, it is not ethnically disaggregated, and findings often rely on identifying ethnicity through name. It is essential to identify and respond to minority rights violations and discrimination, for example when a mainstream party that has a record of fielding minority candidates suddenly ceases to do so. To achieve this, ethnic and religious data should be maintained at all levels, including by: state organs such as parliament and bodies like the election commission; national mainstream parties; and independent civil society organizations and monitoring bodies. Such records would also help to provide a clearer understanding of the factors that cause electoral law violations, for example, whether they occur as a result of the actions of political leaders or whether they are due to underlying systemic problems.

7.3 Hate speech

Hate speech targeting ethnic minority parties and candidates has risen in recent years during elections. Though very limited data is available on this, interviewees have explained that this is a growing concern for them during elections as it affects their political participation. The main data available on these issues are reports by Hashtag Generation, an organization that routinely tracks hate speech on social and other media in Sri Lanka. Their report on the 2020 parliamentary election found a total of 40 hate speech-related incidents in the run up to the elections, 66 per cent of which targeted Muslims and 7 per cent Tamils.[72] While the number of incidents was lower in the parliamentary elections than the presidential one the previous year, the report noted that 'the content of hate speech became more overt.'[73] Hashtag Generation state in their report that they have collated 500 pages of 'ethno-nationalist' content circulating 'divisive rhetoric'. with 'a "ready-made" audience that's receptive of hate

speech and ethnonationalist campaigns,'.[74] Examples of this content included personal attacks on Muslim MPs and ministers, racist stereotypes and prejudice extended towards the Muslim community more broadly, and claims of their posing terrorist or security threats to the majority population. Many such claims were made by extremist Buddhist nationalist groups and members of the Rajapaksa alliances on their own social media pages.

Hashtag Generation also recorded 60 incidents of misinformation or fake news, including some that were classified as having the 'potential to incite racial tensions.' Examples of these included where Sinhala candidates were accused of making statements in favour of the LTTE. In one instance, the Catholic Archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, was reported to have asked people not to vote for Muslims. This was denied by the church. The report also noted that, during the previous election, there was a substantial increase in reverence for the LTTE and their pursuit of a military campaign against the state among Tamil candidates in the north and east, whether ultranationalist or aligned with the former government.

States have a duty to prohibit the incitement of violence; however, tackling hate speech is more complex, as measures to do so can affect freedom of expression. This is particularly sensitive in election contexts where the political opposition can be suppressed on the grounds of banning hate speech, which in turn can significantly affect electoral processes and results. However, hate speech can also result in minorities and other identity groups being discriminated against and affect their right to freely participate in political processes and elections. Further research is necessary to understand the effects of hate speech in this context, especially as to whether hate speech and misinformation are resulting in discrimination against minority communities or affecting their freedom to participate in political processes.

7.4 Displacement and voter rights

During the armed conflict, significant numbers of Tamils and Muslims were internally displaced, which affected their voting rights. Following the return and resettlement of displaced persons to their homes, many have regained their political rights and are now able to participate in elections. Where this remains an issue is among the forcibly displaced northern Muslim population. In 1990, the LTTE ethnically cleansed the north of Sri Lanka, forcibly displacing its entire Muslim population of around 60,000 people. This population has now increased to close to 300,000; some have chosen to return to their homes, while others have made their host area, Puttalam, their new home. In 2019, as part of a government resettlement programme, some northern Muslims were registered to vote in their native area rather than where they were then living. According to local activists, some 1,500 people from the Mannar district and 2,500 from Mullaitivu were moved to voting lists in Puttalam. This situation is a challenge for some northern Muslims who see Puttalam only as a temporary abode and want to politically engage within their native areas such as Mannar or Mullaitivu. In 2019 the situation was reportedly exploited by Muslim MPs who, rather than trying to resolve the issue, simply transported hundreds of people from Puttalam to be able to vote in their native villages in the north. Overall this situation has diminished the electoral power of these displaced Muslims, as some have either lost their vote or do not vote as they are not interested in voting in Puttalam. Connected to this, when Sri Lanka switched to proportional representation, the three northern administrative districts of Mannar, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu became the single electoral district of the Vanni. The large-scale displacement of populations from within the Vanni has resulted in its having a smaller voter population, which could explain why it has been kept as a single electoral district. However, the ethnic character of this area is significantly changing and retaining it as one district could distort the voting patterns there.

Poor voter turnout is one factor affecting allocation of seats in minority areas. There are also questions on how electoral lists have been drawn up, resulting in lower representation in some areas of the north. In 2024, Jaffna district lost one of its seven seats reportedly due to lower numbers registered to vote there. As large numbers of Tamils left Sri Lanka as refugees during the armed conflict, the Sri Lankan Tamil community has been most severely affected by forced and other forms of migration. There have been increasing calls for Sri Lankans living outside of the country who remain citizens to be able to cast postal ballots. This could result in a larger representation for Sri Lankan Tamils, but conversely, the effects of diaspora politics, in relation to Tamil

Conclusion

This report is being published at a pivotal point in Sri Lankan politics. Minorities in large numbers are riding the wave of change and have elected a party that promises them little more than equality and non-discrimination. Like the rest of the country, they are also seeking an end to corruption, a change in political culture and economic security after the 2019 financial crash. The NPP has promised them this as well as an end to majoritarian racism. It is unclear if minority support for the NPP is tantamount to a change in priorities, amounting to a shift away from their longstanding demands of rights, justice and political autonomy which have until now shaped minority politics.

What is more apparent is that minority political representation as we have known it since independence in Sri Lanka is dramatically changing. The old guard national parties are being forced to transform themselves, and, in that process, opportunities can arise for greater minority representation and for issues affecting minorities to make it into their political agendas. Ethnic minority parties across all three communities in all parts of the country have disintegrated, and, barring a few familiar faces, are becoming largely unrecognizable. As this report highlights, each of the main minority communities is faced with its own set of unique challenges, including ideological disparities, poor leadership, corruption or the need for internal reforms. Even if the effects of the NPP victory are not permanent, its success has forced these parties to account for their own failings. The time is now ripe for them to consider new identities and reform processes.

Crucial in this process must be a vision that refrains from ethnic politics and contributes to co-existence and reconciliation among all communities in post-war Sri Lanka. For this outcome, ethnic minority parties will need to reconsider their own existential basis and re-envision their roles in the country's political scene. Increasing the space for women and young people will undoubtedly be a critical aspect of this process and will be dealt with in forthcoming publications under on MRG's *Minority Empowerment for Democracy and Pluralism* programme.

The NPP has a solid two-thirds majority. It has a historic opportunity to produce a constitution that represents all communities in Sri Lanka. Considering the many rights and justice claims that have a long history and were causes of the conflict, earnestly resolving them should be a priority for all political parties, mainstream national and ethnic minority ones alike, to ensure a just and lasting peace in Sri Lanka. This report therefore highlights the importance of securing rights and justice for Sri Lanka's minority communities, including socioeconomic rights, self-determination, language rights, political autonomy and accountability for wartime atrocities.

Recommendations

To the government of Sri Lanka

1 Based on the recommendations of the 2017 national consultations on constitutional reform and reconciliation:
   a Propose constitutional reforms that strengthen minority rights and non-discrimination; and
   b Find a political solution to the ethnic conflict acceptable to all communities that involves devolving power to minorities beyond the Thirteenth Amendment.
2 Until a new Constitution is developed, fully implement the Thirteenth Amendment and call for provincial council elections.
3 Take steps to advance justice, accountability and reconciliation for survivors and victims of the armed conflict by implementing recommendations of the 2017 National Consultation Task Force Reconciliation Mechanisms.
4 Through all-party negotiations, gain a broad consensus on proposed electoral reforms and ensure that changes strengthen the current proportional representation system rather than replace it.
5 Require all state institutions and bodies, especially the election commission and the parliament, to gather disaggregated data on gender, ethnicity and religion.

To national mainstream parties

1 Develop and implement policies on minority inclusion and anti-discrimination which include at least a 20 per cent quota for nominating minority candidates for parliamentary elections. Such a policy should have strong equality and anti-discrimination positions and guidelines that support minority candidates to climb party ranks and gain equal access to resources. Increased support should also be provided to minority women candidates and minority candidates with disabilities.
2 Ensure future party manifestos have clear positions on minority rights and a political solution to ethnic grievances beyond what has so far been offered.
3 Work together with ethnic minority party MPs to support the formation of a minority affairs caucus in parliament; it will be responsible for coordinating and discussing policies and legislation in relation to minorities.
4 Collect disaggregated data on gender, ethnicity and religion in the nomination and election of candidates, as well as on leadership positions at the local, provincial and national levels.

To ethnic minority parties

1 Form an all-party working group on minorities, consisting of one representative from all ethnic minority parties that are represented in parliament and mandated to:
   a negotiate a minimum collective position on minority rights and on a political solution to the ethnic conflict;
   b shadow the constitutional reform process and recommend strengthening it based on the recommendations to the government above;
   c act as a united platform to respond to events that seriously threaten minority protection in the country; and
   d work towards inter- and intra-minority reconciliation.
2 Develop and implement an equality and anti-discrimination policy and offer strict guidelines to prevent party members from ethnicizing politics and engaging in hate speech.
3 Review and reform internal party leadership structures to enable youth, women and persons with disabilities to take leadership positions.

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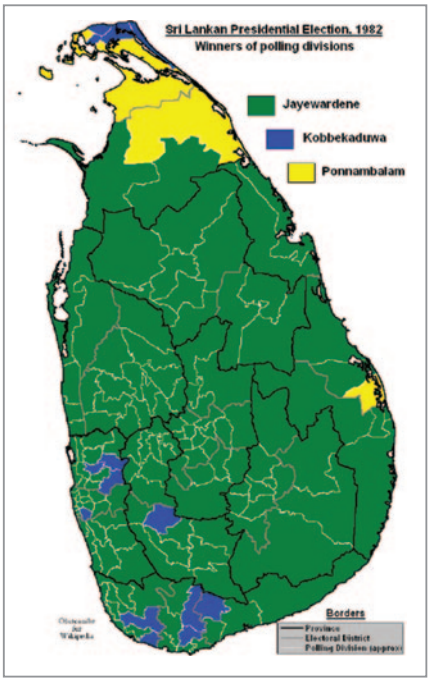
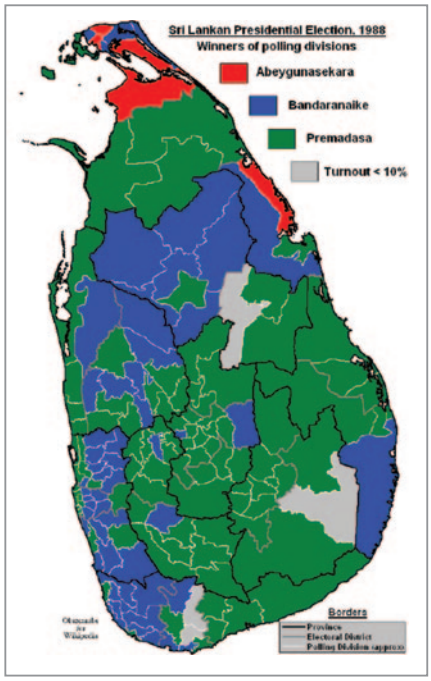
Appendix I: Maps showing Sri Lankan presidential election outcomes

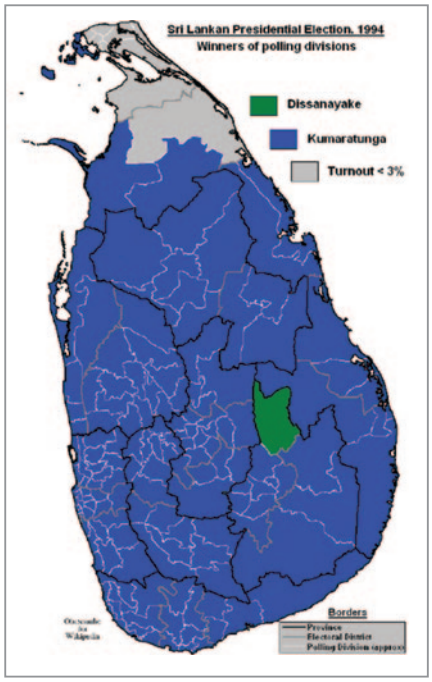
Map 1: Map showing winners of polling divisions in the Sri Lankan presidential election of 1982.



Map 2: Map showing winners of polling divisions in the Sri Lankan presidential election of 1988.

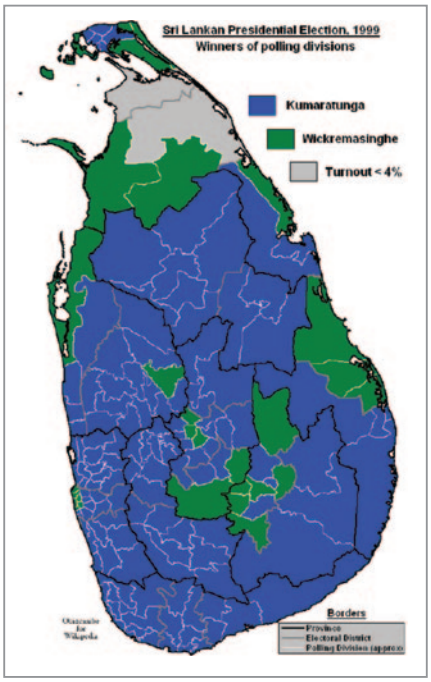


Map 3: Map showing winners of polling divisions in the Sri Lankan presidential election of 1994.

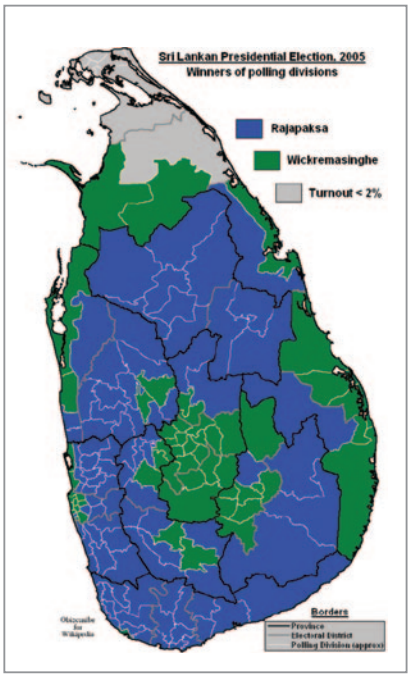


Credit: Maps 1-3 – Obi2canibe / Wikimedia Commons. Data taken from Department of Elections, Sri Lanka.

Map 4: Map showing winners of polling divisions in the Sri Lankan presidential election of 1999.

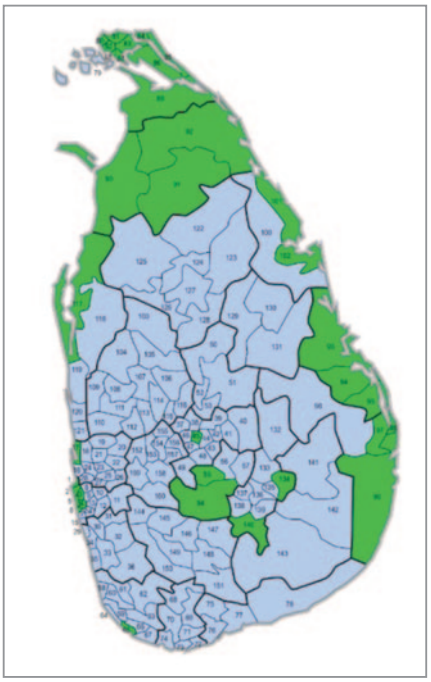


Map 5: Map showing winners of polling divisions in the Sri Lankan presidential election of 2005.



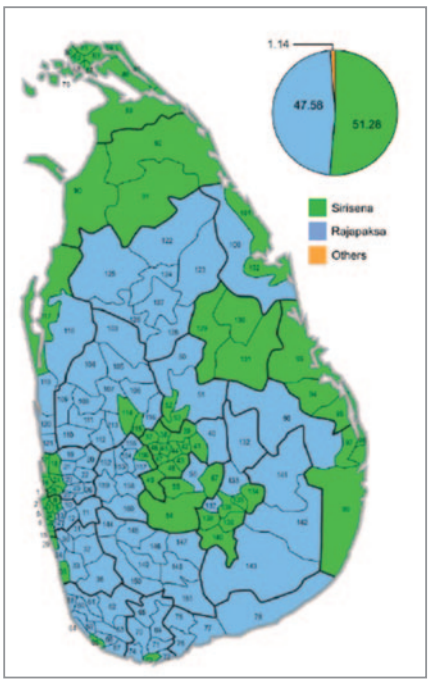
Credit: Maps 4-5 – Obi2canibe / Wikimedia Commons. Data taken from Department of Elections, Sri Lanka.

Map 6: Majorities in the polling divisions in the Sri Lankan presidential election, 2010.

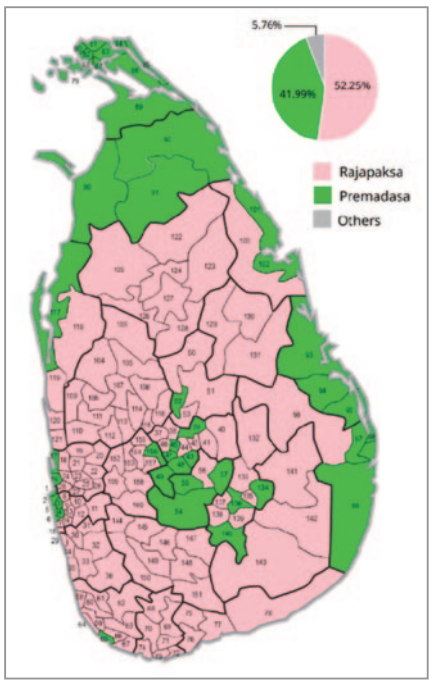


Credit: Furfur / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0). Blue: Mahinda Rajapaksa. Green: Sarath Fonseka.

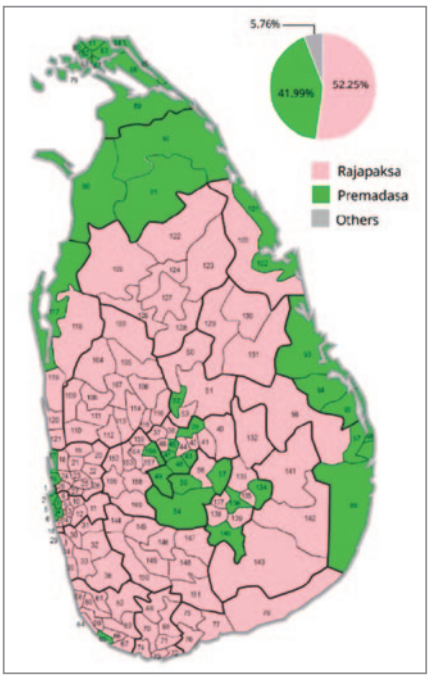
Map 7: Majorities in the polling divisions in the Sri Lankan presidential election, 2015.



Map 8: Majorities in the polling divisions in the Sri Lankan presidential election, 2019.



Map 9: Candidates with the most votes in the Sri Lankan presidential election, 2024.



Credit: Map 7 – Furfur / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0). Blue: Mahinda Rajapaksa. Green: Sarath Fonseka. Data taken from Department of Elections, Sri Lanka. Map 8 – Credit: Themanlk / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0). Data taken from Department of Elections, Sri Lanka. Map 9 – Furfur / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

Minority Rights Group

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

Divided and weakened: The collapse of minority politics in Sri Lanka

Minority participation is a key component of any well-functioning democracy. With Sri Lanka's history of violent conflict, it is critical to ensure that minority communities benefit from the democratic process and are successful in their political aspirations. The landmark victory of the National People's Power alliance in the 2024 parliamentary election has to a great extent pushed all political parties in Sri Lanka to rethink their politics and reconfigure their parties.

Yet Sri Lanka's previously vibrant and successful minority political landscape is collapsing, crushed by years of structural majoritarian nationalism and stunted by a lack of vision, identity and leadership within minorities' own political parties. Proponents of extreme Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism have successively implemented different strategies ranging from sowing division within ethnic minority parties to completely curtailing these parties from acting in the interest of the communities they represent. Minority parties have experienced fragmentation, driven by ineffective leadership, allegations of corruption, and ideological divergences among their members. These issues have resulted in disarray, division and a loss of credibility.

This report offers a detailed overview of Sri Lanka's electoral history since independence alongside unique analysis of minority representation. It discusses the challenges ethnic minority parties and minority candidates face in national politics and analyse how minority voter constituencies are evolving and influencing national politics. Among detailed recommendations, it warns that decisive leadership and firm commitments to minority rights are critical to ensure that transformations to minority political representation in Sri Lanka do not limit justice and equality and lead to new ethnic grievances.

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