

Developments in Sri Lanka – The View from Tamil Nadu

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Summary

On 28 October 2018, Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, sending the country into political turmoil. While the parties in Tamil Nadu have decided to adopt a wait and see policy about the recent developments in Sri Lanka, they are watching closely how these developments would affect the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Muted Response

Events in Sri Lanka have been moving rapidly in the last one week. On 28 October 2018, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was sacked by President Maithripala Sirisena and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was sworn in as the Prime Minister. This was followed by further drama with the Speaker of the Parliament Karu Jayasuriya refusing to recognise Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister. As of now, Rajapaksa has announced his cabinet, while there are agitations in the streets in favour of Wickramasinghe.

At initial reading, the media is commenting that this strengthens the influence of China in Sri Lanka's domestic affairs and weakens the role of India in the country. The Chinese Ambassador to Sri Lanka was one of the first to meet with Rajapaksa.

In Tamil Nadu, there has been only a muted response to the events in Sri Lanka. There are several reasons for this. First, the current All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam regime in power has been busy with consolidating its position and tackling a number of inner party issues, feeling constantly threatened both by the opposition parties as well as the central government. Neither the Chief Minister, Edappadi Palaniswami, nor the Deputy Chief Minister, O Panneerselvam, have ever been stridently advocating any Sri Lankan issue, and have not been active in this debate.

The issue that occurs regularly is that of South Indian fishermen, who stray into Sri Lankan waters, and are sometimes rounded up by the Sri Lankan navy. The fishermen, as well as the government in Tamil Nadu, know that the complaints of straying into Sri Lankan waters are not without substance, but the livelihood of thousands of fishermen on this coast depends on this catch, and such incidents are bound to continue. Every Tamil Nadu government needs to protest against actions taken by Sri Lankan authorities against its fishermen. Other than this, the present Tamil Nadu government has not been vocal about the current developments in Sri Lanka.

Second, the other parties in Tamil Nadu, which have been supporting the Sri Lankan Tamil cause, have also been silent about these developments. This could perhaps be due to the fact that these smaller parties are fighting for relevance in today's context in Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka is not an immediate cause for local political concern. It could also be because the Tamil leaders in Sri Lanka themselves have not come out to articulate any views on the developments, and that the parties in Tamil Nadu are waiting for a cue from them. Even the

major opposition party in Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, has been content with adopting a wait and see attitude.

Spillover Effect

Third, there is an administrative element as well. There is an apprehension that disturbances in Sri Lanka may lead to an increase of refugee flows from the country to Tamil Nadu. The Indian state has been encountering the problem of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees for the past three to four decades, and several have settled down permanently in Tamil Nadu. In the years after the end of the war in 2009, there has been lesser number of people coming in to Tamil Nadu, and trade has increased, even from southern Tamil Nadu to northern Sri Lankan Tamil-speaking areas. The port of choice is Tuticorin, which is only about four hours away from the ports in Jaffna.

It is not clear whether this trade traffic will be affected. A large number of tourists from Colombo as well as the Northern Provinces visit Trichy, Chennai and Madurai on a regular basis, and there is considerable consumer spending and small goods purchase that takes place as these tourists take back goods from Tamil Nadu. It remains to be seen whether this trade will be disturbed.

There is yet another anxiety. The Indian government had promised a large housing programme in northern Sri Lanka as an aid measure. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been reviewing this and has been critical of the delays in implementation. There is an apprehension that these projects would get stalled or slow down, thus affecting the image of India even more.

Tamil Nadu-Sri Lanka relations are based, at one level, on the Sri Lankan Tamil cause and, at another (the informal level), on the substantial trade, both legal and otherwise, that happens between the two coasts. The current developments would be viewed in Tamil Nadu from the point of view of how they affect the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and further whether there would be any political mileage available to the Tamil Nadu parties from these events. Tamil Nadu would be less concerned with larger geopolitical issues of Chinese influence, the Indian Ocean security and anxieties that may emanate from New Delhi.

Political developments in Sri Lanka are likely to further unfold in the days to come. The current scenario in Tamil Nadu is, therefore, a wait and see scenario.

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