

# ISAS Insights

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## The Expanding Shadow of States over Centre in India

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Recent developments in Tamil Nadu politics over the Sri Lankan Tamil issue have highlighted the pressures that regional issues can bring to bear on national politics. There have been agitations in colleges and universities against the alleged human rights violations by the Sri Lankan Army towards the end of the operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. There are posters in Chennai and in other towns in Tamil Nadu, alleging that Prabhakaran's son was shot down in cold blood, and demanding a commission of inquiry.

The start was a proposed resolution in the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, sponsored by the United States. The US had supported the Sri Lankan war on terror till the very end of the war against LTTE, and it was sympathetic to the efforts of the Sri Lankan Government to rebuild the war-torn nation. It was only when the US felt that the Sri Lankan Government was violating all norms in dealing with the Tamil minority that the decision to move the resolution was made. The Americans must have consulted Sri Lanka itself beforehand.

This set in motion a chain of political events in Tamil Nadu. The opposition Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), in association with local pro-Eelam parties, decided to use this as a plank for agitation. They had been losing political space of late, with the All India Anna DMK (AIADMK) Government firmly in the saddle. At the same time, there were several

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overseas Tamil Diaspora organisations willing to fund these activities. Interestingly, DMK was the ruling party in Tamil Nadu when the war in Sri Lanka entered its final phase in 2009, and, at that time and even subsequently, remained curiously silent about the developments there.

## **Sri Lankan Tamils Issue**

The AIADMK, on the other hand, has been very vocal about Tamil minority rights, and the Tamil Nadu Assembly passed a resolution on 28 March 2013 asking the Government of India to take up the Sri Lankan Tamil issue at the UN Security Council and propose a referendum on Tamil Eelam.

This is not in the hands of Government of India to accomplish. India's External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid has dismissed the resolution saying that individual state assembly resolutions cannot become national foreign policy strategies.

This is not the first time that South Block in New Delhi, which houses the Ministry of External Affairs, has been taken aback by the incursion of regional parties and local sentiments into what it regards as its exclusive turf, the formulation of external strategy. In 2011, ruining the visit of India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Bangladesh, the West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee dropped out of the delegation. She said that West Bengal had issues with the discussions on the sharing of Teesta waters with Bangladesh. The matter of Bangladeshi enclaves in West Bengal is yet to be resolved, again due to the local government's sentiments in India.

Some years ago, the government of Punjab suddenly decided to be friends with their counterparts across the border in Pakistan, and there were numerous business and cultural exchanges, catching South Block by surprise.

The Constitution of India allocates foreign policy to the Union Government, with no role for the states. However, the nature of coalition politics, the lack of a unified ideology for governance at the centre, and the need for regional parties to assert regional issues for political gain, are starting to change this model. The mandarins at the foreign office are necessarily concerned, for this disturbs the ensconced belief that they alone know what is right for foreign policy. The statement of the External Affairs Minister is a reflection of this sentiment that states should not dabble in foreign policy.

However, it is increasingly clear that local issues would affect politics in the states significantly. The problem of fishing rights for Tamil fishermen is a local issue, as they are agitating for access to what they call "traditional" fishing rights. It has become an international matter since Sri Lanka claims that the fishermen are violating international

boundaries. The emergence of a large number of regional-language TV channels is helping to sensationalise issues for the viewers. For the local parties, this is a local issue; and it surprises them that in all the negotiations with the Sri Lankan Government about fishing rights and disputes, the State Government or its representatives are not present.

## **Federal versus Local Concerns**

This is a political paradigm shift that will increasingly impinge on the federal nature of Indian governance. It is quite clear that for quite some more years to come, government at Delhi will be an amalgam of several political parties, whose strength lies in their states, not at the national level. This will have to be taken into account in strategy and decision-making, even in foreign policy.

Even at the state level, issues of governance are changing. The presence of a vocal regional-language press and visual media is focusing attention on local problems that demand the attention of state governments. The announcement by the Tamil Nadu Finance Minister in this year's budget that the government would enable the setting up of a FM radio station in every town above 100,000 population is likely to enhance political and media attention towards local issues. The Tamil Nadu channels are full of local issues every day. There is also the element of funding by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that is feeding into these agitations. It is suspected that there is some overseas funding of some of the agitations. The Kudankulam nuclear power plant issue and the Sri Lankan Tamils issue are just some of the recent examples of such suspicions.

These developments are likely to mark a significant departure in the way governance is delivered. Industry bodies and entrepreneurs are already aware of the significant differences in doing business in the different states – government rules and regulations, distribution and marketing channels, payment systems vary from one regional culture to another. In addition, there is the fact that regional parties are going to be increasingly concerned with local issues. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Tamil Nadu. The southern districts of Tirunelveli, Madurai etc. were at the core of India's nationalist movement during the British colonial rule. Somewhat 'militant' by nature, the population lends itself to extreme views. It is likely that present-day agitations in the state grow from this tradition, possibly fuelled by some extremist elements. Other states could well follow.

The worry is that this would affect cohesion and coherence in national policy and the reach of the central government. During the final days of Mughal rule in India, it was said that the rule of Emperor Shah Alam extended from "Alam to Palam" (Palam is on the outskirts of Delhi.) That is scary!