

Five Years on – The Eastern Province of Sri Lanka

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“In reality the east remains an occupied territory.”

Introduction

Whenever I ask a Sri Lankan living abroad what they think of Sri Lanka, they immediately point out that the roads in Sri Lanka have been upgraded and improved; they directly link the kilometers of smooth, tarred roads with the development of the peoples of Sri Lanka. However, those living in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka view the roads as a means of pillaging their land. One respondent from Batticaloa captured the sentiment succinctly;

“People travel on the good roads and they think everything is like the road, smooth. If you step just 100 meters to the side of any road then you see the bumps. That is clearly the situation here.”

This article explores the economic, political and social developments in the Eastern Province during the past five years. The research for the article was carried out in the eastern cities of Batticaloa, Ampara, Trincomalee. It is based on one to one interviews with 20 stakeholders. Respondents were grouped into six categories; former Eastern Provincial Council Members, academics, journalists, businessmen, civil society actors and women’s groups. All quotations are left anonymous to protect respondents.

Background

The Eastern Province of Sri Lanka consists of three Districts - Ampara, Trincomalee and Batticaloa, and has a combined population of roughly 1.5 million people. The province is unique because it is the home to all three ethnic communities with approximately 40% of the population Tamil, 38% Muslim and 22% Sinhalese (Department of Census and Statistics, 2007).

The Government militarily took control of the Eastern Province in 2007. Amidst exuberant fanfare the first Provincial Council elections were held in early 2008. Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan a young, former LTTE cadre from the village of Pethalai, in the Batticaloa District, was elected Chief Minister. While the Government pointed to the election as an example of its commitment to democracy and pluralism, political observers and the international community remained cautious. The election process was deemed corrupt and the new Chief Minister was untested and had no knowledge on how to govern a Province.

Within a few months it was clear that the Government had no intention of devolving real power to the Eastern Provincial Council, the body mandated to govern the province. The Central Government appointed ex-military officers as Government Agent and Governor, and increased military presence, even in the absence of high levels conflict.

Waves of conflict, militarization and displacement have fatigued local populations. People, especially the rural Tamil communities have low expectations when it comes to their economic well-being and political rights. A sense of hopelessness is apparent in the Tamil community and morale remains low. However, the absence of killings and the reduction of high levels of violence are seen as a step in the right direction.

Economy

While the absence of conflict is a positive conduit, the presence of the military among the civilians, nominal power devolution and real and perceived fears, especially among the Tamil community has stunted economic development in the real sense. The economic erosion that has occurred due to prolonged conflict, multiple displacement and the tsunami dictate that development should be conflict sensitive,

“There are so many areas that have to be developed and this has to be done in a sensitive manner. We have to accept that we are on fragile ground, so we have to take these steps very slowly and in a sense more concretely.”

However development is perceived as ad hoc, and urban centered. Locals observe that Sinhalese villages get prominence over Tamil and Muslim villages when it comes to infrastructure development.

The political upheaval in the Eastern Province is reflected in the economy. Under the grip of the LTTE structure local communities led ostentatious lives. With the falling of these structures and the opening of the markets, goods and services have flooded the region. People are exposed to more choice than ever before. However, the rising cost of living has sharply diminished the buying power of the consumer. This has led to growing frustration among the local communities.

People point out that local economies are not nurtured. National level banks and big supermarket chains are insidiously eroding local small-scale vendors and eating into the local economy,

“When Cargills and Keells, two large chains of supermarkets, come to Batticaloa the local vegetable vendor goes out of business, raising unemployment levels.”

They point out that the local industries must be given time to gain momentum and thrive before it can compete with national and multinational companies that have economies of scale.

Development is clearly demarcated by the urban and rural. The Central Government has laid more emphasis on urban infrastructure development. The Eastern Province boasts of unparalleled roads, so much so that some local residents liken the Central Government to the British, who developed the road network to take resources such as tea, rubber and spices to the harbor during colonial times. Infrastructure development has undoubtedly improved the transport system in the east, however it is merely one indicator to measure development. The poorer communities live in the rural areas and these areas have undergone nominal infrastructure development.

In addition there is rampant resource exploitation in the Eastern Province. Paddy, fisheries, dairy and the coastal belt are seen as the main resources of the east. Instead of developing these resources and adding value locally, these resources are processed in other provinces, resulting in unemployment, and labour migration in the Eastern Province.

The Eastern Province accounts for 163,000 hectares or 42.9% of the agricultural lands (Eastern Provincial Council 2012, 4). Annually, the Province produces around 840,000 metric tonnes of paddy in both seasons; equivalent to 25% of the national production (Eastern Provincial Council 2012, 4). However the province does not have sufficient rice mills and as a result approximately 75% of the paddy is husked and milled outside the Eastern Province.

The majority of the local fishermen still use canoes and single motorboats, while trawlers from other parts of the country fish in the eastern seas at a much larger scale. Locals also point out that there are no fisheries processing plants in the Eastern Province, as a result fish caught in the east is taken to Colombo or Negombo for processing.

Sri Lankan milk production meets only 17% of the country's requirement (Eastern Provincial Council 2012, 77). The Eastern Province has approximately 30% of the cattle and buffalo population of the country (Eastern Provincial Council 2012, 77). As such there is great scope for expanding and adding value to this sector. Multinational and national companies continue to collect the milk from the east and take it outside the province for processing depriving the Eastern Province of employment opportunities and higher revenue through value addition.

The tourist sector has taken root in the Eastern Province, however there is little community level participation. After the tsunami local fishing communities were asked to move inland, purportedly for their own safety. While a few fishing communities have returned to their villages, prime coastal land has been taken over by the Central Government. Massive tourist complexes are now developed in these areas with the blessing of the Central Government.

“There is a hotel called Maalu Maalu that charges \$400 a night, but what does it give to Batticaloa? There maybe another 100 hotels like Maalu Maalu, but it does not give anything to the people of Batticaloa. It's nothing to do with Batticaloa.”

Unemployment among the graduates in the Eastern Province is a burgeoning problem. Graduates cannot compete in the private sector therefore, teaching and the Government sector remains their only potential source of employment. However Tamil communities allege that the Government favours Sinhalese graduates and that Sinhalese graduates from outside the Eastern Province are employed at the cost of local Tamil graduates. Although some new employment opportunities have been created with the expansion of the private sector such as banks and supermarkets, local Tamil communities claim that these businesses also prefer to employ Sinhalese.

However the trend towards self-employment has been positive. The relative security has spawned confidence among the urban population and they are keen to start their

own businesses. However limited marketing opportunities, small markets, and the language barriers are major constraints. Self-employed women face further hurdles in the market and some have to sell their produce on credit, with low repayment rates from buyers.

Politics

The east is politically fragile. Although the LTTE was less popular in the Eastern Province in comparison to the Northern Province, some nostalgically point out that there is a leadership vacuum within the Tamil community with the death of LTTE leader, Prabhakaran. In addition there is some anger at the Tamil politicians who are seen as 'emasculated'. Confidence in local Tamil politicians is low. People say they have no real authority and that they are controlled by the Central Government.

Tamil youth are increasingly wary of engaging in local politics. Most feel that the Tamil politicians do not represent their interests. In addition the Government views young people involved in politics as a potential security threat. Since political backing and manipulation are needed even to gain employment, some Tamil youth have resorted to aligning themselves to Muslim or Sinhalese politicians for their survival. There is an underlying frustration with the situation but they are aware that there is no immediate solution.

With the Eastern Provincial Council elections looming ahead, people have few political options. The incumbent Chief Minister, whose political party is a coalition member of the ruling party, headed by President Mahinda Rajapakse has struggled to deliver anything tangible and is seen as a lackey of the Central Government. Other Tamil political parties contesting the eastern elections such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and the Eelavar Democratic Front (ADF) are also coalition members of the ruling political party. As such they also lack credibility among the local Tamil population. A more independent political group, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), campaigning for Tamil self-rule, remains the only option for Tamil voters who want representatives who are not connected with the Government.

The non-implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution – to make Tamil an official language and English a link language, and for the establishment of Provincial Councils - has disillusioned the Tamil community,

“As a Tamil person when the Government is not even willing to implement what is already provided for in the Constitution then we become even more disillusioned”.

The power devolved to the Provincial Council is tokenistic,

“To people the Provincial Council means nothing, except for holding elections the Provincial Council can do nothing.”

The Chief Minister himself has complained that he is powerless and does not have funds to implement development programs. Members of the Provincial Council point out that the Central Government maintains its control over the Province through the Divisional Secretariat.

Some in the Sinhalese and Muslim communities however have reservations about the full implementation of the 13th Amendment. They point out that Tamil politicians will favour the Tamil communities at the expense of other communities. Further the devolution of land and police powers to the Provinces is seen as betraying the majority, Sinhalese population nationally and some point out that it could spark unrest. As an alternative they point out that independent police and land commissions should be reinstated.

Reconciliation

Although many hoped that Sri Lanka would embark on a process of reconciliation, which would engender equality among all communities, the road to reconciliation has been tokenistic. The Government has failed to convince the Tamil population that they will be treated fairly under a united Sri Lanka.

From time to time the international community has made some rumblings about the lack of a credible reconciliation process. The UN sponsored Darusman report, which was a brief and initial assessment of post conflict Sri Lanka, recommended that a more thorough international investigation be held. However Sri Lanka opposed this and initiated its own investigation. The resulting Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) report was made public in 2011. However there is no evidence that these recommendations will be implemented. The United Nation Human Rights Council Resolution on Sri Lanka, passed in March 2012 is yet another attempt by the international community to make the Sri Lankan Government accountable for its actions.

Although the LLRC recommendations are seen as falling short of any real means of reconciliation, political observers point out that it could pave the way for confidence building among the Tamil community,

“The Government is not willing to talk about the past. Yes they have been wronged and they in turn have done wrong. They need to talk. They have to start with the basics. What will benefit the people? First people will have to start having some confidence in the Government.”

The Government is seen as consolidating its military victory and marking territory in the Eastern Province. Some actions of the Government are interpreted as provocative and arrogant rather than aimed at reconciliation and building peace.

The demolishing of the LTTE graveyards is a case in point. In 2010 the Government bulldozed some graveyards, one graveyard was converted into a playground and another had a military base built on it. The LTTE ritualized honoring their fallen cadres. The Heroes Day was celebrated with great pomp and pageantry and the families of the fallen cadre were encouraged to visit the graves, beautify the tombstones and propagate the cause. With the destruction of the graveyards Tamil families have no physical place to remember their dead,

“These are sons and daughters of the soil. Their kin are living and when their graves are desecrated this won't be seen as a goodwill gesture.”

The obsessive hunt for LTTE supporters by the Government is yet another cause for concern among the Tamil population. Even those who supported the LTTE over a decade ago are questioned and are under a halo of suspicion. The Government also maintains a close watch on ex-LTTE cadres returning to their villages from the rehabilitation camps, making reintegration harder for ex-combatants. According to reports, some families and wider community shun ex-LTTE cadre, and this has led some to commit suicide. This phenomenon is yet to be more thoroughly researched and addressed.

The Government's inability to reign in and disarm paramilitary groups in the east has also impeded reconciliation. Although many paramilitary groups have entered the democratic process by registering political parties, violence is endemic within these new structures. The lack of distinction between the political and military divisions within these groups has made it almost impossible to bring perpetrators to justice. The case of Iniya Bharrathi is one example. Bharrathi has been accused of human rights violations and child recruitment for the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict 2009, 7) and is the Ampara District Coordinator for President Rajapaksa. Although the LLRC has been provided with evidence to implicate Bharrathi, the commission has failed to take action. (Sunday Leader 2012)

The Government seems fairly confident that there will be no return to conflict on the scale of the last thirty years. Therefore instead of building confidence among the local communities and paving the way for building peace the Government has taken defensive, myopic steps to stabilize the Eastern Province. Reconciliation and genuine peace building therefore remains elusive to Sri Lankans. As one observer pointed out, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions styled on the South African model are a distant dream, the Commissions worked in South Africa because the 'stars' came together and aligned at the right time. There are no such 'stars' in Sri Lanka, no statesmen, just politicians.

Colonization and Militarization

It is clear that the Government is encouraging Sinhalese migration to the Eastern Province to change demographics and influence voting patterns. Increasing the Sinhalese population in the East would also reduce the resistance to establishing more army camps that would be fundamental in maintaining control over the Tamil and Muslim populations.

Sinhalese migration to the east is stimulated by multiple methods. Tamil and Muslim communities allege that Government officials and Buddhist monks give land parcels and financial support to Sinhalese. In 2005 the Government pledged to build 50,000 houses for soldiers (The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2005). As a part of this policy the Government is building houses in the Eastern Province to encourage soldiers and their families to migrate to the Eastern Province (Api Wenuwen Api 2012). In addition the Government is establishing new army camps between Tamil villages, resulting in more surveillance and control over the Tamil community.

The socio-cultural contour of the Eastern Province is changing to accommodate this Buddhist Sinhalese population shift. New Sinhalese schools are being established and Buddhist temples are either newly established or 're-discovered' to cater to the

spiritual needs of the Sinhalese Buddhist community. There are claims that Buddhist monks together with the military are identifying ‘historical Buddhist sites’,

“Buddhist monks are running havoc, they are going to various sites with the army and claiming that these are historical Buddhist sites. They dig up ruins to prove this.”

The local community harbours a healthy skepticism about these re-discovered religious sites, with some even saying that the ‘ruins’ could have been planted the day before. Irrespective of whether the sites are genuine, the claims to the land are ill-timed.

The ownership of the public sites has become increasingly contentious, with both Tamil and Sinhalese communities claiming a stake. The Trincomalee Koneswaram temple is one example. Both Tamils and Sinhalese stake claim to the religious site and draw on mythology and historical documents to prove it. As the Sinhalese population in the east receded during the three decades of the war the Koneswaram temple has mainly been a site of Tamil worship. This has changed with the return of Sinhalese communities to Trincomalee post 2007. The Tamil community alleges that the Government has plans to erect a statue of Lord Buddha at the site to reclaim it.

The seven hotwells in Kanniya is yet another example. They were previously managed by the Urban Council – the local Government body for the area, however recently they have been transferred to the care of the Government Agent, a Sinhalese with a military background. There are allegations that tickets printed in Sinhalese are being sold at the hotwells for ten rupees. The majority of the Tamil population does not read Sinhalese and as a result is not able to understand what is printed on the ticket. It appears that the ticket sales are a source of collecting funds to build a Buddhist temple near the hotwells.

According to local communities, Sinhalese fishermen from other provinces are colonizing the Eastern Province coastal belt. While it has been a long time practice for fishermen from other parts of the country to come to the Eastern Province, it has been a seasonal migration. However it seems that since 2010 Sinhalese fishermen from Negombo are setting up more permanent settlements in coastal cities such as Thalemannar.

The rapid demographic and socio-cultural changes that are taking place in the Eastern Province have caused frustration and tension among the Tamil population. They view the sudden changes as threatening to their values and culture.

“The people are highly suspicious and the confidence that they have in the Government erodes further when they feel that the Government is changing history. This is typical of an occupying force, which is trying to set up its symbols. - the marking of the territory”.

The Sinhalese enter the east as the victorious community having vanquished the Tamil insurgents. As more Sinhalese migrate to the east, the relationship between the communities becomes intertwined and complex. The Tamil community fears that the

dominant victorious Sinhalese will overwrite the Tamil historical perspective of the Eastern Province.

Ribbons of tarmac roads and elegant bridges have pushed the deeper issues of grief, loss and reconciliation to the periphery. Will large-scale infrastructure projects heal the wound of a mother whose 15-year-old son disappeared ten years ago? Is it possible to re-build a nation that respects rule of law and democratic principles without addressing the past 30 years and what it meant to all communities? Would not the same faulty cracks appear again to disrupt future generations?

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