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Tamils want an end to Sri Lanka discrimination after election

Discrimination dominates ethnic group's voting for this week's elections

Jason Burke *in Jaffna*

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Vanaja Uma Khanta is waiting for the 794 bus to Kodikamam. It has been a long time coming. The queue for the bus stretches all the way down the yellow concrete shelter and mixes with that for the 794 for Kanakamuydady. Despite the crushing heat and the delay - in part caused by the arrangements for a political rally attended by newly re-elected president Mahinda Rajapaksa - the crowd waits quietly.

Khanta, a 45-year-old seamstress, has not attended the rally, which comes ahead of parliamentary elections on Thursday. "I am not interested in politics," she says, before contradicting herself with long and impassioned sentences. "We must have our rights. In whatever system, our rights must be safeguarded."

"We" are Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, between 10 and 15% of the country's 22 million inhabitants. The "rights" are an end to decades of what Tamils say is discrimination in employment, culture and language, as well as freedom of speech and association. Almost a year after the final defeat of militant separatists the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the question for Sri Lankan Tamils now is how these aims should be achieved.

The Tigers' answer had been a separate state - Tamil Eelam - in northern and eastern areas of the island where the Tamils, who are predominantly Hindu, largely live. The Tigers emerged in the 1980s as deep-seated Tamil grievances against the largely Buddhist Sinhalese majority boiled over into violence. They systematically eliminated all potential opposition in the areas they controlled. This, along with the Sri Lankan government also targeting Tamil politicians, means, independent analysts in Colombo say, that there is no one to fill the gap the disappearance of the separatists has left.

Dozens of interviews in Jaffna reveal that few continue to endorse the demand for a separate Tamil homeland, the key aim of the LTTE and one recently endorsed by a "referendum" of the Tamil-origin population overseas organised by activists.

"There is peace now. Before there was war and times were very difficult," said Bimal, a 26-year-old clothes seller in Jaffna's busy bazaar. "We don't want to go back to all that."

Almost all interviewed, some by a local reporter, said a Tamil homeland was now "impossible". Talking about it was "a waste of time", said P Theepan, a 40-year-old administrator.

Many still have deep concerns, however. Some fear a loss of identity. Already, there is resentment at tourists coming from the south."Jaffna is being invaded by Sinhalese. We are losing our culture," said S Kandasamy a 65-year-old farmer.

Others worry what development might mean, saying that "the arrival of mobile phones and CDs" had led to a rise in "unmarried pregnancies and abortions". Almost every interviewee felt that Tamils needed to be represented by Tamil parties and politicians, that their rights needed to be protected and that a federal system was the only solution.

Explicitly calling for separatism is a serious offence in Sri Lanka, but key political leaders have also now distanced themselves from any demands for an independent Tamil homeland. The veteran leader of the moderate Tamil United Liberation Front, 77-year-old Veerasingham Annandasangaree, told the *Observer*: "If that nonsense starts up again it will be the end of the Tamils."

The main Tamil opposition group, the Tamil National Alliance, long considered close to the LTTE, has said it would accept a "federal structure" in the north and east provinces of Sri Lanka. Only the splinter Tamil People's National Front, launched a month ago, reportedly remains committed to "the Tamil nationhood, homeland, sovereignty and right to self-determination".

However, though some minor reforms are possible, President Rajapaksa has made it clear he prefers economic development to heal the nation's ethnic divides. He told the rally in Jaffna that he had ordered the reconstruction of rail and road links, as well as water projects. It is a recipe that has brought the populist president much support in Sinhalese areas, and Jaffna - depopulated by decades of war and emigration - is well behind the rest of the country in economic terms.

"There are no religious or racial problems. There are no racial politics. You all have a bright future," Rajapaksa assured the crowd.

In the provinces that have suffered decades of conflict - and a terrible climax to the war, with fighting that allegedly saw indiscriminate artillery bombardments of civilians held by the LTTE as human shields - redressing grievances may take more than economic investment. The coming poll will be a test of Tamil sentiment. No one doubts Rajapaksa's ruling coalition will win. However, analysts will be watching to see which parties emerge in Tamil areas as potential voices for their disoriented community.

Whatever the result, the wait in Jaffna - for the 794 bus and for much else - is likely to be long.

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