All is Fair in Democracy & War
Burgeoning Democracy in Sri Lanka?

Can the rebel opposition movement succeed politically after surrender?

Scooter Stein

Can rebel opposition movements succeed politically after surrender? The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), known as the Tamil Tigers, want to prove that the shift from violence to governance can be successful. This September, the political proxy of the former rebel separatist movement, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), won a landslide victory in the first provincial poll taken in northern Sri Lanka in 25 years. TNA’s contestation of the provincial poll proved a spectacular success: 30 of 38 members elected to the provincial council belonged to the TNA. The political group believes that they now have a clear democratic mandate to represent the minority Tamil ethnic group. Yet, the path toward eventual Tamil governance appears riddled with pitfalls. For them to succeed, bargaining and negotiation between the two large political parties in the war-torn nation must progress further.

Five years ago, the possibility of peaceful elections seemed unattainable. The rebel Tamil Tigers were fighting to gain an independent state encompassing sections of the north, the ancient homeland of Tamil Eelam, from whom the rebel group derives its name. Velupillai Prabhakaran, the founder and spiritual leader of the Tigers, continued to order suicide bombings against the Sri Lankan army to break the spirit of the Sinhalese majority. The fighting exhausted both sides. The war cost an estimated 200 billion USD and between 80,000-100,000 casualties over a quarter century. Prabhakaran’s death in May 2009 brought an end to the war; most Tamils could only muster resolve to resist the military regime in Colombo from his unwavering spirit.

What a difference a few years can make, even in long-standing conflicts. The real LTTE agreed to a ceasefire and political rapprochement in August 2009, formally beginning their effort to gain political legitimacy. In a maneuver to build trust, President Mahinda Rajapaksa commissioned a truth and reconciliation study with the goal of building peace for the future. The TNA has become the unequivocal voice of the Tamil population, the largest ethnic minority on the island. As support among the Tamils shifts from the Tamil Tigers to the TNA, the Tamil population now fights the Sinhalese majority through the ballot box instead of on the battlefield.

The Tamil minority scored a decisive victory with the results of the recent provincial poll. Unable to gain political or military recognition throughout the civil war, they have at last found a way to voice their concerns. Gone are the Tamil battle cries for independence; instead of on the battlefield.

Can rebel opposition movements succeed politically after surrender?

The vote acts as a guide to discovering what the Tamils do not want. Various attempts by the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party to restore critical infrastructure since the end of the civil war have been unpopular among the Tamils. The government has attempted to placate the masses through economic development; roads, ports, and hospitals have come to the north, restoring what was destroyed in the bloody civil war.

Can rebel opposition movements succeed politically after surrender?

The leader of the TNA, C.W. Wigneswaran, remains optimistic about future success. Neither the West nor the Sri Lankan government should discount the TNA’s chances of gaining political legitimacy. With more than 75% of council seats won by the TNA, the Tamil voice will certainly be present in its recommendations to the central government. Yet even with a majority in the provincial council, the Tamils must still convince the national government, which legally controls the province through an appointed governor, that their voice should be considered legitimate. The members of the provincial council make local decisions, yet they are subject to budgetary appropriations from the governor, who also holds the right to reject decisions made by the provincial council. Rajapaksa and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party are leery of granting too much control to the TNA, which still favors autonomy in the Northern Province.

Rajapaksa can validate the residual skepticism of the Tamil minority by denying the provincial council a strong voice in daily affairs. On the other hand, the government has a proven track record of reconstructing the devastated Northern Province. Even so, the Tamils do not trust the Sinhalese to govern. The violence and war crimes wrought by government armed forces remain fresh in the minds of those affected. A winning government strategy to ensure national cohesion may be to grant legitimacy to the council’s decisions. The TNA will face initial political struggles, as do most parties at the inception, but they will ultimately learn how to manage the region.

“The TNA won 81% of the popular vote, despite armed soldiers guarding the voting booths, regarded by some as a government intimidation tactic.”

The leader of the TNA, C.W. Wigneswaran, remains optimistic for the future of peace in the north. While winning more than 75% of the seats on the provincial council, the TNA won 81% of the popular vote despite armed soldiers guarding the voting booths, regarded by some as a government intimidation tactic. Wigneswaran believes these numbers are proof that Tamils have put their faith in a political struggle, rather than a military one. His plea to President Rajapaksa: “They [the Sri Lanka Freedom Party] must trust us.”

Despite a successful election with no reported violence, peace in Sri Lanka rests in a precarious position. Neither side trusts the other, while each claims the right to govern the formerly war-torn Northern Province, further jeopardizing the possibility of peace. Yet, even in this environment of profound distrust, the successful implementation of a free election has nudged Sri Lanka down the path toward future success. Neither the West nor the Sri Lankan government should discount the TNA’s chances of gaining political relevance; their proficiency at working the democratic levers to gain legitimacy cannot be denied.

All is Fair in Democracy & War
Burgeoning Democracy in Sri Lanka?

Can the rebel opposition movement succeed politically after surrender?

Scooter Stein

Can rebel opposition movements succeed politically after surrender? The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), known as the Tamil Tigers, want to prove that the shift from violence to governance can be successful. This September, the political proxy of the former rebel separatist movement, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), won a landslide victory in the first provincial poll taken in northern Sri Lanka in 25 years. TNA’s contestation of the provincial poll proved a spectacular success: 30 of 38 members elected to the provincial council belonged to the TNA. The political group believes that they now have a clear democratic mandate to represent the minority Tamil ethnic group. Yet, the path toward eventual Tamil governance appears riddled with pitfalls. For them to succeed, bargaining and negotiation between the two large political parties in the war-torn nation must progress further.

Five years ago, the possibility of peaceful elections seemed unattainable. The rebel Tamil Tigers were fighting to gain an independent state encompassing sections of the north, the ancient homeland of Tamil Eelam, from whom the rebel group derives its name. Velupillai Prabhakaran, the founder and spiritual leader of the Tigers, continued to order suicide bombings against the Sri Lankan army to break the spirit of the Sinhalese majority. The fighting exhausted both sides. The war cost an estimated 200 billion USD and between 80,000-100,000 casualties over a quarter century. Prabhakaran’s death in May 2009 brought an end to the war; most Tamils could only muster resolve to resist the military regime in Colombo from his unwavering spirit.

What a difference a few years can make, even in long-standing conflicts. The real LTTE agreed to a ceasefire and political rapprochement in August 2009, formally beginning their effort to gain political legitimacy. In a maneuver to build trust, President Mahinda Rajapaksa commissioned a truth and reconciliation study with the goal of building peace for the future. The TNA has become the unequivocal voice of the Tamil population, the largest ethnic minority on the island. As support among the Tamils shifts from the Tamil Tigers to the TNA, the Tamil population now fights the Sinhalese majority through the ballot box instead of on the battlefield.

The Tamil minority scored a decisive victory with the results of the recent provincial poll. Unable to gain political or military recognition throughout the civil war, they have at last found a way to voice their concerns. Gone are the Tamil battle cries for independence; instead of on the battlefield.

Can rebel opposition movements succeed politically after surrender?

The vote acts as a guide to discovering what the Tamils do not want. Various attempts by the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party to

All is Fair in Democracy & War
Burgeoning Democracy in Sri Lanka?

Can the rebel opposition movement succeed politically after surrender?

Scooter Stein

Can rebel opposition movements succeed politically after surrender? The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), known as the Tamil Tigers, want to prove that the shift from violence to governance can be successful. This September, the political proxy of the former rebel separatist movement, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), won a landslide victory in the first provincial poll taken in northern Sri Lanka in 25 years. TNA’s contestation of the provincial poll proved a spectacular success: 30 of 38 members elected to the provincial council belonged to the TNA. The political group believes that they now have a clear democratic mandate to represent the minority Tamil ethnic group. Yet, the path toward eventual Tamil governance appears riddled with pitfalls. For them to succeed, bargaining and negotiation between the two large political parties in the war-torn nation must progress further.

Five years ago, the possibility of peaceful elections seemed unattainable. The rebel Tamil Tigers were fighting to gain an independent state encompassing sections of the north, the ancient homeland of Tamil Eelam, from whom the rebel group derives its name. Velupillai Prabhakaran, the founder and spiritual leader of the Tigers, continued to order suicide bombings against the Sri Lankan army to break the spirit of the Sinhalese majority. The fighting exhausted both sides. The war cost an estimated 200 billion USD and between 80,000-100,000 casualties over a quarter century. Prabhakaran’s death in May 2009 brought an end to the war; most Tamils could only muster resolve to resist the military regime in Colombo from his unwavering spirit.

What a difference a few years can make, even in long-standing conflicts. The real LTTE agreed to a ceasefire and political rapprochement in August 2009, formally beginning their effort to gain political legitimacy. In a maneuver to build trust, President Mahinda Rajapaksa commissioned a truth and reconciliation study with the goal of building peace for the future. The TNA has become the unequivocal voice of the Tamil population, the largest ethnic minority on the island. As support among the Tamils shifts from the Tamil Tigers to the TNA, the Tamil population now fights the Sinhalese majority through the ballot box instead of on the battlefield.

The Tamil minority scored a decisive victory with the results of the recent provincial poll. Unable to gain political or military recognition throughout the civil war, they have at last found a way to voice their concerns. Gone are the Tamil battle cries for independence; instead of on the battlefield.

Can rebel opposition movements succeed politically after surrender?

The vote acts as a guide to discovering what the Tamils do not want. Various attempts by the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party to restore critical infrastructure since the end of the civil war have been unpopular among the Tamils. The government has attempted to placate the masses through economic development; roads, ports, and hospitals have come to the north, restoring what was destroyed in the bloody civil war.

Can rebel opposition movements succeed politically after surrender?

The leader of the TNA, C.W. Wigneswaran, remains optimistic for the future of peace in the north. While winning more than 75% of the seats on the provincial council, the TNA won 81% of the popular vote despite armed soldiers guarding the voting booths, regarded by some as a government intimidation tactic. Wigneswaran believes these numbers are proof that Tamils have put their faith in a political struggle, rather than a military one. His plea to President Rajapaksa: “They [the Sri Lanka Freedom Party] must trust us.”

Despite a successful election with no reported violence, peace in Sri Lanka rests in a precarious position. Neither side trusts the other, while each claims the right to govern the formerly war-torn Northern Province, further jeopardizing the possibility of peace. Yet, even in this environment of profound distrust, the successful implementation of a free election has nudged Sri Lanka down the path toward future success. Neither the West nor the Sri Lankan government should discount the TNA’s chances of gaining political relevance; their proficiency at working the democratic levers to gain legitimacy cannot be denied.