

Transitional Local Governance and Minority Political Participation in Post War Sri Lanka

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Abstract

In 2011, two years after the end of Sri Lanka's bitter civil war that spanned three decades, there were more than 600,000¹ Tamil minority citizens in the country's Northern Province eligible to vote in local government elections, which took place for the first time since 1998². The Sri Lankan Tamils, the country's largest minority group, make up 15.9% of the total population and are geographically concentrated in the northern province where they make up 93% of the population. The northern province looms large in the contemporary socio-political history of Sri Lanka. It was not only the physical battleground between the state's army and the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but is symbolic of an *ideational* clash about how the state should deal with ethnic difference (*De Silva 1996; Uyangoda 2007*). The defeat of the secessionist LTTE which formerly administered³ parts of the northern province combine with the state's preference for a unitary and centralized structure, suggests that it is now in the realist parameters of decentralized local spaces that the elected representatives of Tamil minorities must realize the ideals of local self-government, facilitate the complex needs of minority citizens and engage the Sinhalese-Buddhist nation state. This paper analyses several key acts, the National Policy on Local Government (2009) combined with secondary

¹Source: Sri Lanka Department of Elections. In total, thirty (30) local authorities were established, of which twenty-six (86%)¹ were *Pradeshiya Sabhas*. Source: Department of Elections, (Accessed on August 11, 2017 - <http://www.slelections.gov.lk/>)

²Since the introduction of the Pradeshiya Sabha Act local government elections were held in 1997, 1998 in 17 authorities in the north, and in 2009, three local authorities; the Jaffna Municipal Council, Vavuniya Urban Council in the Northern Province were elected. The pattern of elections in the north has been sporadic. In 1983 an Emergency Regulation was used to suspend local government elections in the north and east. Elections were held in 1998 and 13 Pradeshiya Sabhas were elected in the north, then not again until the postwar period. Source: Sri Lankan Parliament.

³Stokke, Kristian (2006) Building the Tamil Eelam State: Emerging State Institutions and Forms of Governance in LTTE-controlled Areas in Sri Lanka.

and empirical research to explore the political underpinnings of decentralization. It argues that understanding the multiple and complex ways in which minority citizens interact with, and participate in, political processes is fundamental to understanding the practice of local representation and self-government at the sub-national level, and within the wider *polity* of post war Sri Lanka. It contributes to the paucity of empirical research on post-conflict local governance transitions (Shou and Haug 2005, Jackson and Scott, 2006).

Keywords: decentralization, Sri Lanka, local government, minorities, Pradeshiya Sabha, unitary states, post war, citizen participation

1. Introduction

In the immediate period of transition from the civil war (1983-2009), the Government of Sri Lanka exhibited a well-established proclivity, to adopt a *symmetrical* approach to the sub-national government. The government set about bringing the country's northern province, the last bastion of the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in line with the rest of the country, with no minority specific institutional provisions beyond those laid out in existing institutional frameworks. The fact that Tamils are territorially concentrated, and make up 93% of the population in the province means that Tamil citizens have the option of *descriptive* representatives, who mirror them in both ethnic characteristics and shared experience (Pitkin, 1967). Local government, the focus of this paper, is only one mechanism through which minority citizens can articulate their preferences, pursue their interests and engage in decision making on issues that affect their lives. As a result, minority citizen participation in this paper looks at three areas; democratic revitalization (participation in elections), participation in local representation and decision making structures (specifically the *Pradeshiya Sabha*) and in civic bodies (community based organizations). This paper explores two seminal questions: does the post-war transition represent a shift in state-citizen engagement and by extension, the modality and norms through which minorities organize themselves for collective action? How do minority citizens participate, and advance their interests at the sub-national level, and what is the demand for local democratic representation?

1.1 Local Government System

The existing political system is comprised of three tiers, central, provincial and local government. At the provincial level there are Provincial Councils and at the local level there are three structures which are referred to as local authorities, urban councils, municipal councils and divisional councils. The divisional councils are referred to as Pradeshiya Sabhas (Sinhala) and are the lowest tier of democratic government. In the Sri Lankan structure, the province is divided into districts is further divided into numerous divisions. There are no elected community or village level structures in Sri Lanka since the late 1970s. Administratively, each elected divisional local authority is shadowed by a non-elected Divisional Secretary district is headed by the District Secretary, a role that continues to be referred to since colonial times as a 'Government Agent'. The GA and Divisional Secretary are appointed by the central government. The Divisional Secretariat (DS) division is comprised of a cluster of GNDs and led by an appointed DS Secretary. divisional secretariat (DS) divisions. The Grama Niladhari Division (GND) is the lowest administrative unit,

typically composed of two to three villages and led by an appointed official also known as the Grama Niladhari (GN) in Sinhala, or Grama Sevaka in Tamil.

1.2 Area of Study: The Northern Province

Sri Lanka is a Democratic Socialist republic, and an island nation situated in the Indian Ocean, off the south-eastern tip of the subcontinent of India. According to the 2012 Census of

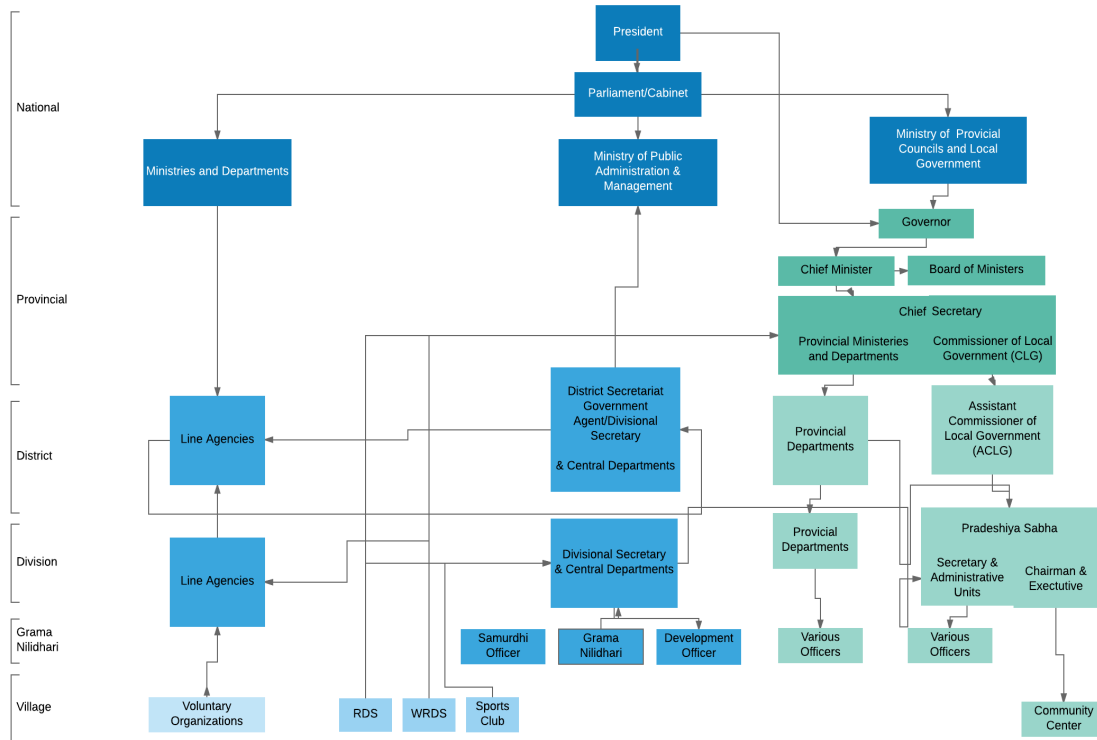


Figure 1. Administrative Structure showing Village Level Organizations

Population and Housing⁴, the country has a population of 20,359,439. The Northern province, which has five districts, has the lowest population of Sri Lanka's nine provinces, with just over one million (1,061,315) according to the 2012 Census. Within the province, the population breakdown by district is as follows: Jaffna 583,882; Mannar 99,570; Vavuniya 172,115; Mullaitivu 92,238 and Killinochchi 113,510. The province is ethnically homogenous with a Tamil population of more than 90% (Census of Population and Housing). The research was concentrated in an area within the Northern Province known as The Vanni, in the mainland area of the Northern Province and which spans an area of 7,650 square kilometres (2,950 square miles).

⁴Department of Census & Statistics Ministry of Policy Planning and Economic Affairs

2. Sub-National Policy & Reform

Since 1987, the year when the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution established Provincial Councils and the Pradeshiya Sabha Act was introduced, the local democratic space and the rules of the game (both formal and informal) have largely been established and practiced in other parts of the country (Leitan, 1999, 2001, 2010: Uyangoda Ed. 2015, Bigdon 2003). By 1999, the Local Government Commission of Inquiry⁵ ominously pointed to numerous weaknesses and specifically described the Pradeshiya Sabha system, as “most unsuccessful” (1999:41). The Commission recommended among the ten policy proposals the need for greater autonomy, the introduction of mechanisms for citizen participation and increased public accountability and responsiveness. The report did not catalyse any significant reform, and neither did the LTTE’s demands for a separate state, or calls for federalism (Edrisinha and Welikala, 2006). However, as the threat of the LTTE receded, the state introduced a progressive, and arguably anomalous, *National Policy of Local Government (2009)*⁶. Until the introduction of this 2009 policy, the legislative framework did not exist for encouraging and promote community involvement in planning. A central tenet of the policy is the idea of good governance and participatory citizenship (Pratchett, 2001) in which citizens are the main actors within a bottom up democratic model. This is in stark contrast to the *de facto* post-independence experience characterized by an institutionalized political system with an elitist, top-down political system cantered on maintaining a Sinhalese-Buddhist nation state.

The Sri Lankan state has shown a strong and consistent preference for a centralized and unitary state with strong integrationist tendencies as expanded in the post-independence constitutions: The Republican Constitution of 1972 and 1978. The main motivation for decentralization has largely been driven by a socio-economic imperative for the purpose of development, economic growth and improved service delivery especially with regards to sanitation and infrastructure. The local state *polity* has also been characterized by the strong presence and influence of a range of political and non-elected offices including that of the Member of Parliament, Government Ministers, with prominent roles for retaining powerful positions established under the British colonialists namely, the Government Agent (now the District Secretary but still referred to as the Government Agent or ‘GA’) and the Governor. The centrality of these functions as brokers of power have been documented and reinforced in both law and various policies of the government.

There were notable signs of potential reform. In 2006, the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) was established to form the basis for constitutional reform. The Report on Public Representations on Constitutional Reform⁷ (2016) was produced as well as the

⁵See Sessional Paper No. 1-1999. Report of The Commission of Inquiry on Local Government Reforms, 1999. Department of Government Printing, Sri Lanka

⁶The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka Extraordinary, No. 1632/26, Friday December 18, 2009. Part I: (Section 1) General, Government Notifications. National Policy on Local Government.

⁷Public Representations on Constitutional Reform, Public Representations Committee on Constitutional

Subcommittee on Centre Periphery Relations report. However, in the period of transition after the war, the government introduced a number of contradictory policy positions that re-established the persistent tension in the day to day practice of democracy. On the one hand it introduced the National Policy on Local Government and on the other, the government moved to formalize a series of institutions, including the *Mahinda Chintana* policy (2010)⁸ and the 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010, which reinforced the centralized nature of the state, espoused its unitary character and advanced a strong neo-liberal view of development premised on rapid economic growth. The strong, centralized, top-down government was firmly re-established as the dominant de facto preference for the state to engage its citizens. This system, as will be explored in this paper, is driven largely by a political context which is characterized by patronage and control, which is at the centre of the relationship between the state and its citizens. In this context, the role of local government seems to more concerned with service delivery and supporting government programs and less with it being a means of “liberty, participation and democracy,” Sharpe (1970:10).

O'Donnell has cautioned that, “formal rules about how political institutions are supposed to work are often poor guides to what actually happens” (1996:39). Political patronage, defined here loosely as a social relationship that is based on the provision of a range of assistance including jobs, money, assistance, to another person (client) who is generally less powerful than the patron with the expectation of some form of reciprocity (Weingrod, 1968). A number of researchers have examined the role of patronage in the political order and functioning of institutions and processes. Klem (2012) and McCourt (2007), documented its role in the civil service and within politics. Moonesinghe (2007) made the connection in relation to both public administration and service delivery, as well as its ethnic connotations. As a result, electoral politics is dominated by a simple straightforward desire to grab power, so that there can be access to resources and influence that state power provides,” Sunil Bastian quoted in Frerks and Klem (2011: 174). Recent empirical research has shown significant challenges in the practice of local government including their weak financial autonomy, duplication, poor capacity and politicization (Bigdon, 2003).

The theoretical thrust of the *National Policy on Local Government* links it to a subset of governance theory that combines both representative and deliberative practice (Fischer, 2012). The factors that may inhibit this form of citizen engagement and democracy needs to be understood (Gaventa and Barrett, 2010), as well as the design of institutions (Fung and Wright, 2003) that shape engagement. The legislation seeks to bring Sri Lanka in line with international development practice which has seen a paradigm shift since the 1960s towards more bottom up approaches to socio-economic development which stress community participation in local planning and decision making. Held argues that the presence of control over local space cannot, “advance the principles of participatory democracy” Held, (1996:269). In fact, borrowing Sherry Arnstein's (1969) concept of a ladder of citizen participation, which identifies eight steps that reflect the degree of participation, ranging from

Reform, May 2016

⁸Political manifesto of UPFA Presidential candidate Mahinda Rajapakse during the 2010 election campaign, *Mahinda Chintana (Mahinda's Vision) titled, A Brighter Future - Mahinda Chintana: Vision for the Future.*

manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegation to citizen control; these practices largely fall in the tokenistic rungs, since the citizen is for the most part, not in a strong partnership or in control.

3. Community Governance

Local level organizations and social systems are important in decentralization processes even if they are often omitted from formal decentralization administrative structures. The understanding and practiced form of ‘participation’ in Sri Lanka has its basis in the historical and social-cultural practice. This section focuses primarily on informal, community-level structures which are meant to facilitate citizen participation. There are several types of organizations found at the local level; those that are government sponsored, and rely on the government for resources. Those that have evolved on their own in response to a particular issue and another common form, which are structures that are introduced by external agencies, such as international organizations, typically for a specific purpose. This section seeks to provide a brief outline of the experience with popular participation.

In the period immediately following independence, with a view to developing rural areas and supporting local economic development, the Sri Lankan government began to introduce community based organizations. In the Northern Province, community experience with local government and decision making is largely circumscribed after the 1980s due to the onslaught of the war and internal displacement. Therefore, the period before the war is instrumental in shaping civic participation even though some organizations continued to function during the war.

One of the most enduring community organizations is the Rural Development Societies (RDS), introduced in 1948, which remains in place to the present⁹. The Cooperative Movement, has its genesis in the Co-operatives Societies Ordinances No. 7 of 1911, and in 1958 the Multi-Purpose Cooperative Movement was formed with the primary aim of development. In the same year, Cultivation Committees were also established under the Paddy Lands Act of 1958.

Weerawardena argues, “the tendency of the politicians to treat village level institutions as a part of their power base has led to these organizations being manipulated to suit different ends” (1987:7). As it relates to the cooperative movement, one of the most damning reports, was the 1970 Royal Commission Report on the Cooperative Movement which found that, “the co-operative has now become the handmaid of the state and the cooperative societies are virtually agencies directed to carry out government policy,¹⁰ (1970:41).” The 1970s saw one of the strongest efforts by political actors to shape and influence local decision making and actions through the promotion of participatory democracy at multiple levels. These informal ‘participatory organizations’ that were instigated and shaped from the centre. The United Front (UF) sought to establish a number of participatory structures at many levels including;

⁹The RDS was introduced in 1948 and the Women Rural Development Societies in 1952.

¹⁰Royal Commission, Government of Ceylon, Report of the Royal Commission; Cooperative Movement in Ceylon. Sessional Paper No. 11, 1970. Colombo. Government of Ceylon Press.

people's committees, divisional development councils, elected employees' councils and advisory committees in government offices. The People's Committees were enacted by legislation in 1971 with a view to establishing 9,000 such structures. The establishment of the bodies was closely guided and shaped by political actors, namely the Member of Parliament (MP) and the Minister of Local Government, Public Administration and Home Affairs.

What is also important to note, is that membership in these various voluntary organizations, especially those that had strong links to political and other actors that could provide resources in a community, meant that the heads of these organizations also rose to the ranks of the village elite. Until 1979, the Village Council served as an apex body for the myriad of voluntary associations at the sub-local level.

Table 1. Change in the Spatial Representation of Popularly Elected Bodies

LEVEL	SELECTIVE YEARS/ELECTED BODIES				
	1920	1952	1973	1980±	1987- present
Province	-	-			Provincial Council
District	-	-	District Political Authority	Development Councils	
Division	-				Pradeshiya Sabha
Village	Village Council	Village Council	Village Council*		-

*Discontinued in 1979. This table does not reflect other local authorities (Urban and Municipal Councils)

± In 1981 the District Development Councils absorbed the powers of 83 Town Councils and 549 Village Councils. The remaining elected bodies were Municipal Councils (12) and Urban Councils (39)¹¹.

By the 1980s, there was as a consequence, a veritable lack of any local level structure to support local decision making and participation. The response to which was the introduction of the *Gramodaya Mandalas* in 1981. The *Gramodaya Mandalas* are an interesting hybrid, because they lacked the features of an elected structure but were semi-formal institutions in the sense that they were given statutory status by an amendment to the District Development Council law (section 17) in 1981 and they are reflected in the 13th Amendment (1987) as well as the Pradeshiya Sabha Act (1987). The *Gramodaya Mandala* represents a preference of the state to constitute a body with no political proclivities, it specifically states that its membership should be drawn from the heads of community level structures that were “not of a political nature, as may be specified by the Minister by Order published in the Gazette which in his opinion, should be represented in the *Gramodaya Manadala*” (17A, (2) a)¹². Its membership would be drawn from public officers and public corporations and would be

¹¹See Overview of the Local Government System: Towards Participatory Democracy in Sri Lankan Society. Marga Institute. (2011:9)

¹²See Development Councils (Amendment) Act (No. 45 of 1981) - Sect 2: Insertion of new section 17A in Act No .35 of 1980

nominated by the Minister (17A, 2b).

Wanasinghe's 1976 study and Abeyrama and Saeed's 1984 study, both highlight waning interest in collective action by villagers and low levels of participation. A 2017 study¹³ of the RDS and WRDS organizations, documented their politicized nature and found that their activities were subject to approval and controls by the Divisional Secretary (2017:1). The study also found that there a small group of persons who formed the members and were generally active in community based organizations and tended to be from a dominant caste or class. The RDS are reflective of the socio-political power dynamics within the community. A significant finding is the link to state officials who were described as "crucial" for their functioning (2017:4). This suggests a strong degree of *continuity* in how the state engages with such structures, and also the prominence of such structures in the reconstituted areas of the Northern Province. A salient feature of these structures was that they were all instigated by the government and were usually affiliated with a particular political party or President. For example, "People's Committees" to the UNP, *Gramodaya Mandala* and *Pradeshiya Mandala* (Premadasa) and more recently the *Jana Sabha* or "People's Councils" (Mahinda Chintana). What all of these structures have in common is the strong focus on rural areas and the need to organize and mobilize rural citizens and groups. The *Jana Sabha* concept, introduced in the 2005 political manifesto 'Mahinda Chintana' (in English, Mahinda's Vision, referring to the incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse) was meant to be established, "parallel to the 'Gama Neguma' programme to develop the villages that are the bedrock of provincial governance" (2010:52).

Citizens, are identified as key agents in the new socio-political dispensation as outlined in the political manifesto, *Mahinda Chintana -A Brighter Future*, in order to "break the fundamentalist concepts of a traditional homeland and a separate state" (2010:52) and one that would "devolve power to all citizens" (2010:52). The government of the day, like several before it, sought to establish alternative nodes of citizen "participation" with circumscribed powers, with which it could have a direct link.

4. Post-War Local Governance

After the war ended in 2009, the government adopted a symmetrical approach to community based organizations, ensuring the same structures were established (or re-established) in the North as in other parts of the country and following the same rules, systems and procedures. This essentially meant reviving and re-registering dormant community level groups, the majority of whom fall under either a deconcentrated (Divisional Secretary) or a devolved (Provincial Council, *Pradeshiya Sabha*) structure.

The Northern Province shares the experience with rural development and local governance as other parts of the country, specifically with the presence of similar participatory structures that functioned prior to the war. The first step within communities was to revive the local level participatory structures that existed previously. In the post war period there were no

¹³Rural Development Societies and Women's Rural Development Societies in Participatory Governance, Law and Society Trust publication. June 2017, Colombo.

identified Pradeshiya Sabhas with more than one type of structure, Community Centres or Community Development Committee that fall under them. Though called a Community Centre, in some places and a Community Development Councils in others, it is a voluntary organization with an establishment governance structure, in the sense that it has a President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. The office term is two years and the board is elected from among their members. The majority of the Community Centres were revitalized after 2009, and specifically around the time of the entry of the elected executives into public office. Since the RDS and WRDS fell under the DS office and these bodies did remain operational, albeit to a lesser extent, these structures continued to exist and to embed themselves within the community.

By far the most common organization present in the north by 2015 are the RDS/WRDS and the Community Centres. The RDS/WRDS is registered with the Provincial Council but for all intents and purposes falls under the office of the Divisional Secretary where the Regional Development Officer to whom the W/RDS reports is situated. The W/RDS have a long history in Sri Lanka and their rural development purpose is shared with the Community Centre. It is outside of the scope of this study to determine the nature or efficiency of the two bodies but the by-laws of both structures easily suggest the possibility for duplication and horizontal competition.

There were a number of groups, many of them now being reformed that were referred to including RDS and WRDS (which was the most common), Farmer's Organizations, Thrift and Credit Corporate Society (TCCS) Fisheries Organizations. Many of the government departments have a particular organization that they work with and that reports to them. There were also some reports that organizations have sprouted up to respond to the needs, what one interviewee called "instant groups". Some persons are members of more than one group.

The Grama Niladhari (Village Officer) who reports to the Divisional Secretary (see Figure 1), plays a key role in connecting the Divisional Secretary's office to the public. Through the Grama Niladhari's office, citizens are able to access key services and are identified to benefit from programs that provide relief and development at the village level. It is therefore not surprising that the Grama Niladhari's office obtained the highest vote of confidence of all the local government actors identified by the Asian Foundation's 2010 survey¹⁴. However, both the Divisional Secretary and the Local Authorities scored similarly as institutions in which citizens have a 'moderate level of confidence'. These key non-elected offices are significantly better resourced and more well established at the local level than the elected offices. The fact that this survey included non-minority areas suggests that even when the local authorities are in place, key administrative roles such as the Grama Niladhari and Government Agent are considerably better resourced and more efficient in the delivery of services.

¹⁴2010 Survey of the Sri Lankan People: Findings from a Public Perceptions Survey. Asia Foundation. See <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/2010-survey-of-the-sri-lankan-people-findings-from-a-public-perceptions-survey/> (Accessed on May 11, 2018)

A separate study by the Centre of Policy Alternatives (CPA)¹⁵ found that the greatest degree of citizen trust lies in the civil service for the majority of Tamils (62.5%) a position that is comparable with their Sinhalese counterparts (60.9%). This is corroborated by the 2006 findings of the 2006 Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA)¹⁶ study which showed that citizens generally perceived public servants, and specifically the Grama Sevaka/Grama Nilidhari (GS/GN), as being powerful persons.

4.1 Voting and Local Elections

Elections are a central feature of a representative democracy (Dahl, 1971), and another means via which citizens can express their preferences. Several scholars, have highlighted the role of elections in local democracy. Heywood argues, “Elections may not in themselves be a sufficient condition for political representation” but they are “a necessary condition” (1997:211). Cheema and Rondinelli (2007); Crook and Manor (1998) have all argued about the participation in elections is a precondition for consolidating democracy.

A key measure of the political system is the enfranchisement of citizens and the ability of citizens, especially in a time of peace, to vote for their own representatives. In the period of transition, the Government of Sri Lanka showed a general willingness and commitment to restore local democracy and local elections were held within three years of the war ending. Gobyn argued that issues of local governance are usually left fairly unaddressed in the first couple of years of the reconstruction process, (2006: 6). However, the post-war country context was uneven in the sense that decentralized systems were already operational in the majority of the country.

Among Tamil citizens who were interviewed for the 2011 CPA study, a high percentage, in fact the highest overall said that they did not know, or are not sure if they can have a real influence on politics. Only 20.5% felt that they could have an influence, the lowest when compared to the other ethnic groups. This is significant, since it shows the importance of cultivating new leadership among Tamil citizens as well as the despondency with which they may view their political representatives and their abilities.

Pitkin’s notion of descriptive representation is meant to be empowering for minorities since it allows them to choose a representative with whom they share characteristics. The majority of Tamils are considered to vote for political parties that represent their own ethnic groups. This in turn produces “political divisions with a deep ethnic basis” a fact that “politicians are always prepared to exploit” Samarasinghe (2009:451). During the local government elections in the Northern Province in 2011, several Tamil political parties emerged to compete in the elections, including the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (TNA) an ethnic Tamil party strongly associated with the LTTE, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), Eelam’s People’s

¹⁵ Top Line Survey Results: Democracy in post-war Sri Lanka 2014. See <http://www.cpalanka.org/top-line-survey-results-democracy-in-post-war-sri-lanka-2014/>. (Accessed on May 11, 2018)

¹⁶ Moving Out of Poverty in Conflict-Affected Areas in Sri Lanka, August 2006. Colombo: Centre for Poverty Analysis.

Democratic Party (EPDP), strongly linked to the majority government's United People's Freedom Alliance, Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), the Tamil Makkai Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress.

During the 2011 election, the voter turnout was 52.7% of the 623,271 citizens were eligible to vote. The TNA/TULF coalition won 190,625 votes, followed by the ruling party's United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) with 91,599. No other party gained any significant number of votes, therefore the two emerging parties represent the majoritarian government and the largest Tamil minority party, the TNA. Post-conflict literature suggests that a key priority for the government will be to "win hearts and minds" and this agenda may affect the ability of the TNA who will also, in the new democratic dispensation, be trying to establish their own legitimacy by establishing a track record of responding to constituent needs to avoid being sanctioned (Mansbridge, 2009). The TNA also gained control of the provincial council in the 2013 elections winning 30 out of 38 seats. The TNA had a strong showing in Jaffna district (winning the majority of councils – 13 out of 17), in Mullaitivu it won both districts in which elections were held and four out of five councils in Vavuniya district. The TULF was the major victor in Killinochchi district, winning two out of three councils. The TNA therefore emerged as the choice of the majority of Tamil citizens to represent them at both the Provincial and local levels.

Women are generally underrepresented in political decision making. "The percentage of Sri Lankan women's representation in parliament has been below 6% since 1977, and in Provincial Councils, less than 5% since its inception in 1987. The percentage of women's representation in local governments was 1.9% in 1997, 1.8% in 2004, and 1.9% in 2011," (2018:306). As it relates to general local government trends in the 2011 local government elections, Liyanage, writes that: "of the 4552 local council representatives elected in 2011, 4465 (98%) were men. Only 87 women managed to win elections; it is the lowest percentage among South Asian countries" (2018:308). The challenge of youth and female participation, a substantial minority, is instructive of a wider question of how dynamic and inclusive are local authorities.

Overall, in keeping with national statistics, the CPA study found that women were underrepresented in the elected bodies of the local authorities. Despite the endorsement and voiced support for increasing women's participation, women representatives occupy relatively limited positions within democratic structures. Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, the study found that there was an overwhelming support for the proposal to allocate a fixed quota system for women, guaranteeing their participation at the district level during elections.

4.2 Profile of Elected Representatives

Several members of the executive referred to the difficult circumstances that accompanied their entry into public office, suggesting coercion on the part of their parties and intimidation or a threat of violence by the State. In some Pradeshiya Sabhas they were very specific in identifying how this was done, including the use of military surveillance, threats, abduction,

torture, being questioned and being interrogated¹⁷. In the majority of areas representatives were not forthcoming because potential candidates were afraid and several Pradeshiya Sabhas reported that they had great difficulty in mobilizing enough representatives. One reason for their selection, and one noticeable trait of the leadership especially the Chairman, is that they had a well established reputation and standing within their community for their leadership, whether in local community development activities, within their temple societies or in some position of social good.

The majority of representatives belonged to a single party in most Pradeshiya Sabhas, and even though there were other parties represented (usually one other) they were significantly less, occupying 2-3 seats. Political decentralization within a unitary state system is characterized by the transfer of functions or authority from the central government to elected, local government representatives. This therefore requires that the devolved structures must be governed by locally elected representatives (Conyers: 1983). From a minority perspective, descriptive representation is considered as a response to promoting more inclusive and arguably, empowering representation. Descriptive representation essentially posits similarities between the represented and the representor (Mansbridge, 1999). Mansbridge argues that the identity of the representative is a key variable, and that they should have similar, visible characteristics as the constituent that she or he represents (Mansbridge, 1999).

Table 2. Select Information on the Research Area

DS Division	Area (Sq. Km)	Population	GN Divisions	Villages
Thunukkai	347.3	10,808	20	36
Manthai East	515	8,158	15	68
Poonakari	448.75	22,543	19	93
Karachchi	410.96	70,450	42	133

Source: District Secretariat, Mullaitivu 2011 and District Statistical Hand Book, District Secretariat, Killinochchi

The data contained in this section is based on a survey of elected representatives (Chairmen and counsellors) in the four Pradeshiya Sabhas under study. The data was gathered through a short survey that was conducted by phone or in person. In total, within the four Pradeshiya Sabhas, there are thirty-nine (39) executive members, including the Chairman the Vice Chairman and the elected counsellors. The breakdown is as follows: in Killinochchi; Poonakari (10) and Karachchi (12), in Mullaitivu; Thunnukai (8) and Manthai East (9). In total responses were obtained from 32 out of the 39 persons on a range of identifiers including age, sex, ethnicity, religion, occupation, political party and voluntary organization membership. In the case of Poonakari where there was some level of discord among members, additional information was also obtained about caste. These responses form that basis of what is presented in this sub-section as well as responses given during the Focus Group Discussion and Key Informant Interviews.

The men and women who stood for election have several noticeable characteristics that speak

¹⁷These claims cannot be substantiated, however ICG reports have pointed out the use of violence.

to their homogeneity and which characterizes the type of representation as, by default, descriptive. They were predominantly Tamil (with the exception of one respondent who identified as Muslim) and of Hindu faith. In the case of Poonakari, because of the challenges that the executive faced, questions were also asked about caste, however, there was no consistent correlation that could be found, as caste membership was mixed and there were counsellors from the same caste that belonged to differing parties. The majority of representatives did not have any long standing affiliation with the party that they represented with most members joining between 2009 and 2011. In two Pradeshiya Sabhas, the chairmen had been long standing members of the party (TNA), in one instance for 35 years holding a senior role in the party in his district, and in another for more than 20 years.

The elected representatives of the four Pradeshiya Sabhas all reported that they had no previous experience of local government, with the exception of one chairman who had participated in the 1967 local government as a village council staff. This lack of experience contrasts with the administrative members of the Pradeshiya Sabha who typically have previous training and experience and in particular the secretary of the Pradeshiya Sabha who served as acting chairman in lieu of an elected body. By law (Pradeshiya Sabha Act No. 15 of 1987), the Chairman of the Pradeshiya Sabha is the chief executive officer of the Pradeshiya Sabha (8.1) and is able to delegate to the Vice-Chairman or Secretary or another officer (8.2, 8.3). The preparation for public office came exclusively through voluntary and party political experience.

However, the majority of elected representatives had a common trait in that they had some (and usually strong) previous experience in a community governance organization, the majority of this membership is overwhelmingly from within the Rural Development Societies (RDS) and to a much lesser extent Community Centres. The next most common form of membership is in the Farmers' Organization, or Agrarian Society as it was referred to and which falls under the government ministry responsible for agriculture. In the case of the sole female representative in Mathai East, she was a member of the Women Rural Development Society since 1986. Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) identified a number of features that membership in voluntary organizations can produce, including, learning skills that support their political participation, being exposed to messages and discussions that stimulate their participation and the development of relevant skills that support political participation including communication and organizational skills. Despite vast periods in camps for Internally Displaced People (IDPs) it suggests strong social capital based on kinship, membership in socio-cultural organizations helped to maintain connections and links. The correlation and role of these organizations are significant since many of the key bodies in particular the RDS has been in place since 1948, which allows for socialization and engagement with the administrative and political system.

Most of the elected representatives were chosen for public office by their parties seemed to do so based on their standing within the community and the trust placed in them by the public was the main reason for their selection. In the majority of instances, the chairmen are characterized by being part of the elder leadership in the community having occupied senior positions within the schools, public service or private sector. The majority of them had a public profile or role which placed them in high standing within the community.

In terms of socio economic status (SES) of the representatives, the majority of them were identified themselves as farmers but it was not possible to determine the size of their farms. Apart from farming, the other occupations were diverse including a business man (rice mill owner), a postman, two contractors, and in the case of the sole female representative a pre-school teacher. The Chairmen came from various professions, two were retired Principals (one a Vice Principal), another a General Manager in a Cooperative Society and another a retired *Grama Nilidhari*, the one role in the community in which villagers tend to rely for a range of services and in which they have some confidence. The majority of the members reported having secondary school, or GCE Ordinary Level qualifications with the highest listed being GCE Advanced Level qualifications and in the case of one Chairman having a Bachelor of Arts in Economics. The members are all Tamil and have shared religious and cultural characteristics including religion, they are almost exclusively of the Hindu faith and some have known each other for a long time.

In Thunnukai, the average age of the elected representatives is 48.8 years, within a range from 28 to 74 years old. All of the representatives of the Thunnukai Pradeshiya Sabha are male, there are no female representatives¹⁸ despite the fact that the majority of the population in the area is female. In Manthai East, the average age of the representatives is 38 within a range from 28-72 years old. Eighty-seven (87%) of the elected representatives are male. In Poonakari, the average age was 59 and in Karachchi it was 47 years of age.

The Chairmen in this transitional structure, are a unique group reflecting an old guard, mainly septuagenarians lacking in political ambition (typically, they did not plan to stand for elections again) but with a strong commitment to advancing the interests and development of their war-ravaged communities rather than as local politicians. This older cohort of leaders will likely form part of a transitional leadership that will likely be replaced by a more politically savvy politician over time. A few of the younger members did indicate their interest in standing for office in future. Counsellors in the executive also stated that their primary motivation for entering public office was to develop their areas and this was clearly a unifying cause that was shared among both older and younger members.

5. Conclusion

The research found that the participatory and good governance approaches to local development though necessary, are mired by contradictions and tensions caused by existing institutions, historic factors, and stymied by the debilitating exercise of power politics. Nowhere is this more evident than in the introduction of the *Policy on Local Government* during the same period of transition. The policy is an atypical espousal by the state, and advances deliberative democratic notions of resource distribution, decentralized decision making, collaborative partnerships and increased accountability (Chambers: 2003, Dryzek: 2007, Gaventa, 2002). This policy provides a firm basis with which to examine theoretical

¹⁸Female participation in local government nationally stands at less than 2%. In government in Sri Lanka is known to be very low. Nizam Ahmed (Ed.) in *Women in Governing Institutions in South Asia: Parliament, Civil Service and Local Government*. (Upcoming 2018)

construct of ‘participatory democracy’ which sees a broad number of actors including citizens, civil society and other marginalized groups involved in a number of areas including planning, decision making and fostering private-public partnerships.

The research found that participatory democracy is thwarted by the current institutional structure with its tendency towards centralization, coupled with the entrenched practice of patronage and patriarchy (Oakley, 2011). Participatory democracy aside, bolder reform that advances deliberative democracy, such as a second chamber in Parliament and presence of deliberative spaces, may be more effective in ensuring greater dialogue and discussion among all ethnic groups. The timing of the National Policy on Local Government is significant in that it was introduced at a period when key international donors and multilateral banks were investing heavily in governance and participatory approaches at the community level. These notions or participation are significant in the transition period because of the presence of strong donor influence in the values to be enshrined in decision making which reflect good governance principles of transparency and accountability.

This paper examined minority citizen participation in three distinct areas; democratic revitalization (participation in elections), participation in local representation and decision making structures (*Pradeshiya Sabha*) and in civic bodies (community based organizations). This broad based approach to participation allows for a stronger understanding of these areas separately, but also how they connect and interact with each other. Citizen preferences are clearly articulated to a range of complex channels including elected and non-elected bodies. The notion of “people’s governance” (2009:3A) and developing a “democratic and participatory local governance culture” (2009:3A) as outlined in the National Policy on Local Government undermines the significant political utility of a much more limited form of ‘participation’ that has historically been articulated and implemented based around the de facto exercise of power and the use of patronage. The participation of minorities is critically shaped by rules and regulations adopted at the national level and sub-national level.

The post-independence period saw strong norms being developed around citizen participation, and these were generally through a local level institution affiliated with the state through a ministry of government or the Provincial Councils. However, the RDS and WRDS, along with the Community Centres to a lesser extent, clearly emerge as the more common form of collective organization at the local level. However, under these structures collective action was largely informed by the mandate and purpose of the organization, as well as the flow of resources on which their activities are dependent. The majority of community level structures through which citizens participate have a clear link to the state, and fall under their sphere of influence and to some extent, their sphere of control especially because of the high dependence for resources. This therefore limits the types of areas, or more importantly, the issues on which these structures can represent minority women and men.

The research did not find any strong presence of more organic, or locally developed civil society organizations and given that the same people tend to participate in voluntary association and political spaces, it is likely that the presence of government sponsored structures in a range of areas from sports to livelihoods, may affect the formation of these groups. The presence of single issue voluntary organizations also has an implication for what these organizations can represent citizens on, and issues that may be considered politically

sensitive, or those that are not traditionally addressed by these structures, might mean that citizens are forced to find alternative spaces, or actors, to advance these atypical interests, or that they will not be voiced at all. The greater prevalence of government sponsored structures shows the resilience and power of these structures over time.

The extent to which descriptive representation is important for minority citizens cannot be determined here, but there is clearly strong representation that for the most part reflects the local context. The sole exception being the low levels of female and youth representation. The situation of these minorities, within a minority, are important and speaks to a larger need for autochthonous leadership and a move towards more inclusive planning and inclusive institutions. Despite this, Tamil representatives clearly saw themselves as “acting for” or on behalf of the Tamil people. The vehicles of minority participation are for the most part shared with their majority counterparts, however in the aftermath of the war, there was a missed opportunity to examine more dynamic forms of decision making within a democracy, and to engage minorities and citizens in more *deliberative* democratic practices rather than the generic participatory approaches embodied in the 2009 national *Policy on Local Government* especially when this is examined in light of the actual practice of local participation.

Deliberative democratic practices could allow minority citizens, and minority groups generally, to have more substantial influence on decision making based on a process where key laws and policies that affect minority citizens at the local level could be subject to a process of deliberation. The Sri Lanka experience suggest that on key issues that affect minority citizens, such as those around socio-cultural and ethnic markers, that more substantial opportunities to deliberate and influence such decisions could go a far way to offsetting feelings of marginalization and powerlessness.

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