

# 6

## Tamil Nationalist Anti-politics in the Wake of Defeat

The old guard of Tamil nationalist politicians moved back to centre stage after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) defeat. The gentlemen lawyers and parliamentarians of the main Tamil party, Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK), had made way for armed youth militants in the 1970s, when Tamil nationalism became Tamil national *liberation*. Pleas for federal power-sharing then escalated into uncompromising separatism, and constitutional bargaining yielded to guerrilla violence. In 2009, the pendulum swung back. The now-ageing ITAK leaders moved to the front seat again. But what could they bargain for without leverage? How could they claim heirship of the national cause when the new political reality forced them to shed the aspiration of an independent Eelam? ITAK was thus confronted with one of the central conundrums of this book: the schizophrenic plight of separatist political parties, which are forced to pursue their aspirations through the very democratic landscape that they reject on principle. To understand ITAK's postwar positioning, we also need to reengage with the provincial council system discussed in Chapter 5. The Tamil nationalist movement saw the provincial councils as treason to the Tamil cause. But after the defeat of the LTTE, they were the only remaining forum for a semblance of self-government in the north and east of Sri Lanka. If ITAK refused to govern the Northern and Eastern Province, rival Tamil parties would do it in their place.

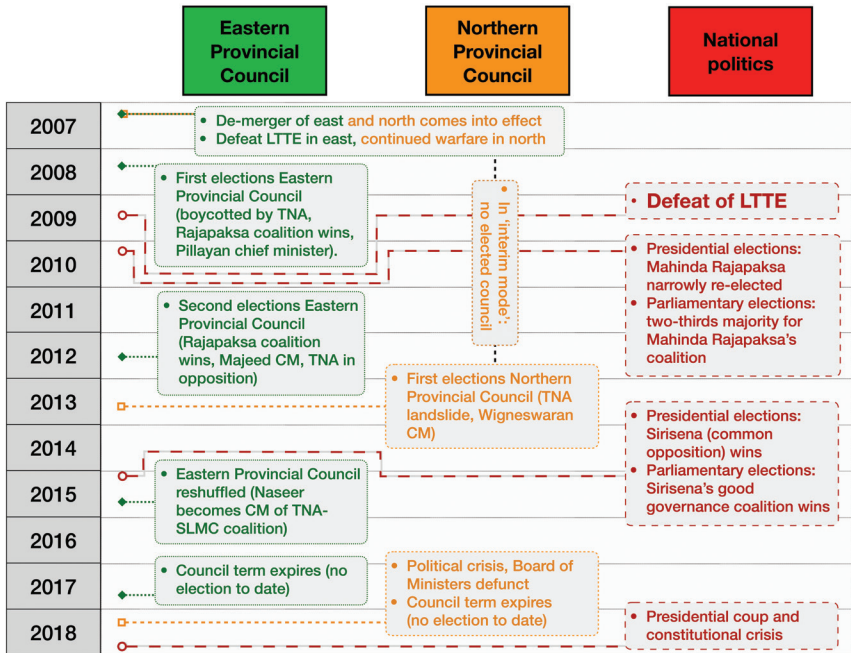
A performative conception of politics sheds light on the way ITAK handled the schizophrenic condition of simultaneously opposing and participating in the prevalent political framework. By lifting our preoccupation with formal institutions and associated moral yardsticks of democratic behaviour, this conceptualisation directs our focus to the repertoires with which political aspirations are enacted, within or beyond official mandates and procedures.

More specifically, I will draw on the performative repertoire that Hansen (1999) has called 'anti-politics' in his work on Hindu nationalism. Anti-politics may be defined as a principled dissociation from the prevalent political arena. Evidently, the very attempt of extracting oneself from politics is itself a political act. Anti-politics should therefore *not* be understood as an apolitical phenomenon but rather as a performative attempt to construct a realm that is separate from (and typically elevated above) the established political arena. This anti-political realm is often legitimised in cultural or religious terms, and this then opens up space to construct 'the people' or 'the nation' as a cultural or religious, and therefore anti-political, category in the name of which transgressive practices are legitimised (Hansen 1999; see also Spencer 2008). South Asia has amassed an elaborate repertoire of anti-political performativity, with a plethora of pomp and ritual, ethnic or religious idioms, spectacle and enactments of potency, as well as a range of popular resistance tactics that include *satyagraha* (non-violent protests such as sit-in occupations), electoral boycotts, *hartals* (public shutdowns) and hunger strikes (Banerjee 2011; Harriss, Stokke and Törnquist 2004; Spencer 2007; Suykens and Islam 2013).

This chapter will distinguish three anti-political repertoires of the Tamil nationalist movement: oath-of-allegiance politics, politics of abstinence and the performance of institutional deficiency. I will argue that the 2009 defeat of the LTTE placed these anti-political repertoires under new strain. During the war, the Tamil nationalist movement could defer its paradoxical stance (in rejecting the framework of the Sri Lankan state but nonetheless participating in its institutions) by positioning itself as a moderate extension of the LTTE state experiment and a democratic placeholder for a new sovereign framework to come. With the defeat of the LTTE, such positioning no longer made sense: extension of what, placeholder until when? Moreover, the end of the war confronted the Tamil nationalist leadership with two practical challenges it was no longer familiar with: grappling with open disagreement in a multi-party Tamil arena and actually governing elected institutions, namely the provincial councils.

In shifting between local, provincial and national level politics, this chapter diverges from the tendency to discuss postwar Tamil politics on the basis of key national turning points (Höglund and Orjuela 2012; International Crisis Group 2017; Seoighe 2017; Stokke and Uyangoda 2011; Venugopal 2018; Wickramasinghe 2009). To help readers less familiar with Sri Lanka keep track of the different levels and their timelines, Table 6.1 provides a rudimentary chronology. As a brief crib sheet, the four key Tamil political figures that feature in this chapter among several other names are R. Sampanthan (leader of ITAK and the Tamil National Alliance [TNA]; member of parliament from Trincomalee), Mavai Senathirajah (ITAK/TNA deputy leader; member of parliament from Jaffna), C. V. Vigneswaran (chief minister of the first Northern

**Table 6.1** Key political events at provincial and national levels, 2007–2018



Source: Prepared by author.

Provincial Council; former Supreme Court judge from Colombo) and S. V. K. Sivagnanam (chairman of the first Northern Provincial Council, ITAK/TNA provincial councillor from Jaffna).

## Historical antecedents of Tamil nationalist politics and anti-politics

As the political mainstay of Tamil nationalist politics, Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK) waxed and waned throughout Sri Lanka's turbulent conflict history. Literally translated, Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi means Sri Lankan Tamil State Party, but in English it is known as the Federal Party. In 1949, the party broke away from G. G. Ponnambalam's All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) and became the primary platform of Tamil democratic agitation in the 1950s and 1960s. It was ITAK leader S. J. V. Chelvanayakam who negotiated pacts with the government in the 1950s and 1960s (Sivarajah 2007; A. J. Wilson 1994b, 2000). The party rejected the government's 'unilateral' drafting of the 1972 constitution and declared Chelvanayakam's 1975 by-election a

constitutional referendum. ITAK carries the symbol of a house, an icon that resonates with protection and homeland. It also alludes to the party of 'father' Chelvanayakam offering an overall shelter for a wider gamut of Tamil groupings and formations. ITAK was the dominant player in the Tamil United Front (TUF), which later converted itself into the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and took an explicitly separatist position with the 1976 Vaddukoddai resolution. This resolution marked a critical juncture in the history of the Tamil nationalist movement, by demanding the 'restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of Tamil Eelam based on the right of self-determination', and calling 'upon the Tamil Nation in general and the Tamil youth in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully into the sacred fight for freedom and to flinch not till the goal of a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam is reached' (Edrisinha et al. 2008: 258).<sup>1</sup> The Vaddukoddai resolution also represented a moment of ambiguity. Despite the fierce calls to arms, the resolution signatories kept their seats in the Sri Lankan parliament (the TULF participated in the 1977 elections on the explicit premise of treating the polls as Tamil referendum on the separatist stance). Moreover, there was a discrepancy between the firm resolve of the resolution and the underlying difference and disagreements between the TULF's three constituents. Apart from ITAK, there was ACTC (both an ally and an electoral rival) and the Ceylon Workers' Congress (a party representing the *malaiyaha* Tamil constituency in the central highlands). The latter signatory unsettled the resolution's central point by adding a clause that registered the party's 'reservations in relation to its commitment to the setting up of a separate state of Tamil Eelam' (Edrisinha et al. 2008: 258).

With the rise of youth militias in the 1970s and the escalation of violence in the 1980s, ITAK/TULF lost its position as the orchestrator of the Tamil struggle to the LTTE. Several members, including its leader Amirthalingam, were assassinated by the movement. Under these circumstances, no new cohorts of political leadership emerged. The party assumed renewed significance in the run-up to the 2002 ceasefire, when the TNA was created (Whitaker 2007: 190–192) as a new joint platform of Tamil parties.<sup>2</sup> Officially, the TNA had no links with the LTTE. It was an elected party, composed of veteran politicians of the old days, largely drawn from the anglicised 'high' caste elite. The LTTE eschewed official support to the TNA, because it rejected the legitimacy of parliament. It had its own Political Wing and sought to establish its own sovereign state. But in practice, the TNA was a tactical LTTE mouthpiece in the heart of Colombo politics. If the movement considered itself the 'sole representative' of the Tamil people, the TNA became the 'sole representative of the sole representative'.<sup>3</sup> The TNA derived significance from this position.

Destined to eternally occupy a handful of opposition seats, the party was marginal to the horse-trading of party politics. But it gained prominence as a unified platform of the Tamil community, as an advance post of the LTTE's sovereign ambition and as the embodiment of a moderated and democratic Tamil nationalist force. Both domestically and internationally, TNA leader R. Sampanthan was perceived not just as the front man of a small political faction but as a spokesperson for the Tamil nation, a statesman-like figure. Both the institutional backbone and the leadership of the TNA had an ITAK signature. In everyday parlance, ITAK, TULF and TNA were in fact largely interchangeable<sup>4</sup>: different institutional outfits comprising the same people, networks and political repertoires.

After the war, ITAK (and the TNA) remerged as the primary Tamil formation, but it was confronted with a new set of challenges. The demise of its sovereign referent, the LTTE, newly exposed the party to the problems of democratically challenging the foundations of the democratic system. ITAK levelled fundamental critique against Sri Lanka's democratic system in rejecting the notion of a singular Sri Lankan nation, the validity of the constitution and the unitary nature of the state. But to act on that critique, it had to operate within the political architecture of one Sri Lankan nation, a unilaterally imposed constitution and a unitary state – the very system that had been upheld with the ruthless military violence in 2009, the same violence that had ultimately nullified Tamil Eelam. As a result, Tamil nationalists suffered from political schizophrenia: they could not simultaneously be good nationalists (by their own definition) and good democrats (by the prevalent legal and political norms). In what follows, I will argue that ITAK has navigated these challenges and paradoxes with three complimentary kinds of performance that combine elements of politics and anti-politics: oath-of-allegiance politics, the performance of political abstinence and the performance of institutional deficiency.

## Oath-of-allegiance politics

The S. J. V. Chelvanayakam memorial in Jaffna commemorates the founder of ITAK and 'father of the Tamil nation', known by the short name *thanthai* Chelva (father Chelva). The grounds occupy a significant place in the symbol-infused urban landscape of the northern capital. At the edge of the old town, it lies adjacent to the Jaffna library, once a venerated repository of ancient Tamil sources, which was set ablaze in 1981 amidst escalating ethnic enmity and newly built after the war as a testament to the irreplaceable collection it once housed. The football stadium across the road carries the name of Alfred Duraiappah, the former mayor of Jaffna, now famous for being the first person to be killed

by LTTE leader Prabhakaran. It is also the site of a mass grave. Beyond it lie the ramparts of the renowned Jaffna Fort, built as the heart of the local colonial administration and more recently home to government offices and the IPKF. Amidst those beacons of troubled Tamil history, the *thanthai* Chelva memorial comprises a slightly larger-than-life size golden statue of Chelvanayakam and a large tombstone with a tall white column towering over it. The ensemble is surrounded by a small but well-kept garden and a parapet wall.

My friend and mentor Shahul Hasbullah and I attended the annual Chelvanayakam memorial ceremony in April 2018. We were protected from the sun by a simple structure of wooden poles and tin sheets – perhaps fittingly, the party of the house (ITAK's electoral symbol) offered shelter that resembled refugee camp architecture. The audience trickled in to greet, chat and shake hands before finding a plastic chair. Many of the leading figures of the Tamil political community were present, including parliamentarians and provincial councillors, though the crowd was said to be smaller than usual. Several dignitaries were absent because they were attending the funeral of the wife of S. V. K. Sivagnanam – the chairman of the Northern Provincial Council was a respected face in ITAK circles. As would have been the case at that sad event, many of the attendants of the memorial lecture were dressed in solemn white. Almost all attendees were men well into retirement age. Most would have had their formative years in the 1950s and 1960s – a chapter of Tamil nationalism that was premised on parliamentary opposition and the Gandhian non-violent resistance of *satyagraha*. The memorial ground, similarly, was not only a homage to Chelvanayakam's persona, but it also harboured a nostalgia to his political era: a time before armed youth militias wrested command over the nationalist struggle, before the impressive but ruthless feats of the LTTE, and before the devastating end in Mullivaikal. A time when Tamil political leadership rested with a community of respected well-educated 'high' caste lawyers, legislators, and administrators in Jaffna and Colombo: civilised, learned and measured men, with impeccable manners and English rhetorical skills, a stratum once personified by Chelvanayakam, now a demographic cohort that earned ITAK the nickname 'pensioners' party'.

The master of ceremony was a priest from the Church of South India. Like many Tamil leaders of his time, Chelvanayakam was a Christian, though he claimed to be a 'Christian by religion and a Hindu by culture' (A. J. Wilson 1994b: 4). Following the main speech, the attendants flocked to the golden sculpture at the front of the grounds. An improvised platform with some scaffolded steps had been erected to enable the guests of honour to garland the statue. The priest, with his starkly purple cassock, ordained the sculpture with a first string of flowers (Photograph 6.1). A long sequence of dignitaries followed this act, including Mr. Chandrahasan, Chelvanayakam's now ageing son who had come from Chennai. The fusion of religious and political registers



was remarkable – though not surprising for readers of Geertz (1980); Hansen (2004); Paley (2008); Siegel (1998); or Spencer (2007). Pomp and ritual curated by a priest mixed effortlessly with the political history of Tamil nationalism. The rickety stairs were a source of concern given the advanced age of gentlemen climbing it, but on a ceremonial day like this, it was not difficult to read symbolic meaning into their arduous yet steadfast journey to the top. These highly photogenic moments – and I was far from the only one taking pictures – were followed by the garlanding of the tombstone itself, an act in which the entire audience participated (Photograph 6.2). More greeting, chatting and handshaking followed, before the men dispersed with their motorbikes and cars, slightly more impressive vehicles for the dignitaries than the commoners.

**Photograph 6.1** Celebrating Chelvanayakam



*Source:* Photograph by author.

*Note:* Priest garlanding the statue of ‘father’ Chelva at the annual commemoration event at the S. J. V. Chelvanayakam memorial ground in Jaffna, April 2018.

**Photograph 6.2** Paying respect to Chelvanayakam



*Source:* Photograph by author.

*Note:* Commemorators decorating S. J. V. Chelvanayakam's tombstone at the memorial ground in Jaffna, April 2018. This photo is the original image that was used for the cover of this book.

This memorial event is a fitting representation of ITAK, not just because of the party's strong preoccupation with the past, its ageing political cadre and the adulation of past heroes and their offspring but also because the ritual illustrates what the party represents for the Tamil electorate. Voting for ITAK (or the TULF or the TNA) is to a large degree about nationalist articles of faith – an affirmation of the Tamil struggle, of the enduring plight of the Tamil people and of standing united in opposition to the Colombo government. Voting for 'the house' is only marginally political in the sense of steering the course of policy, endorsing the selection of party leaders or taking an ideological stance; it is primarily political in the sense of attesting to be part of a Tamil nation with unfulfilled aspirations. This ritual attestation of Tamil nationalism is congruent with Hansen's (1999) conceptualisation of the rise of Hindu nationalism in 1990s India and the use of anti-political repertoires to dissect nationalist ideology from small-fry politics, to project a mirage of Hindu puritanism that supersedes the politicking of democracy.<sup>5</sup>

Support to ITAK as a nationalist article of faith became all the more significant in the immediate postwar years, when ITAK/TNA presented itself as the only remaining bulwark against the government – within the country, that is, because the Tamil diaspora movement, with which the party had a complicated relationship, assumed a significant role in the oath-of-allegiance



politics of Tamil nationalism. In December 2009, the immediate aftermath of the war, diaspora organisations initiated a referendum in several countries with a large Sri Lankan Tamil community in Europe, Canada and Australia. With a significant turnout (though no exact number can be given without an official voter registration system) and over 99 per cent majorities in each country, the Tamil diaspora endorsed the statement:

I aspire for the formation of the independent and sovereign state of Tamil Eelam in the north and east territory of the island of Sri Lanka on the basis that the Tamils in the island of Sri Lanka make a distinct nation, have a traditional homeland and have the right to self-determination.<sup>6</sup>

If a codified oath of allegiance for Tamil nationalism ever existed, this is probably how it would read. While the referendum spawned some paradoxical questions,<sup>7</sup> it powerfully staged the large transnational support base of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism. This added weight to ITAK's efforts, but it also complicated the challenge of keeping the ranks closed. Within Sri Lanka, ITAK firmly positioned itself as the heir of the LTTE's liberation struggle. The party was not able to stop the government's Sinhala nationalist and militarised interventions, but a vote for ITAK was one of the few remaining channels to voice dissent, if anything, to an international audience.

During the 2010 parliamentary elections, I was in Trincomalee, the home district of ITAK/TNA leader Sampanthan. His rallies were nothing like the government ones, which had a massive stage with large banners, a spectacular security arrangement, passionate shouting and an impressive congregation of acolytes. Government performances radiated political potency. Sampanthan's rallies were nothing of this kind. He would speak alone and on a tiny podium. People sat on the grass in an almost reverent quietness, while the 77-year-old ITAK leader placed the elections in their larger historical context with a soft-spoken but sonorous voice. If the government rally had felt like a rowdy, hot-tempered sport's match, the ITAK event seemed more like a tranquil meditative performance.

The government alliance boasted about its development plans and ability to deliver jobs and material progress. Roads were asphalted last-minute, new housing projects and industries foreshadowed, and small gifts distributed to secure votes (Photograph 6.3) (see Klem [2015] for a more detailed discussion). ITAK needed no such show of force to get the Tamil vote.<sup>8</sup> In the words of Nadarajah, the party organiser for Trincomalee District whom we encountered in the Chapter 4:

We don't have to buy their votes. We have the weapon of being Tamil. That is a wrong thing, I know, but we are doing like that. We will say things like: so many people died, what did they die for? And so on. Without any expectation [of receiving material rewards] the people will come together.

**Photograph 6.3** Election fever

*Source:* Photograph by author.

*Note:* Election posters for the 2010 parliamentary elections, displaying President Mahinda Rajapaksa with Susantha Punchinilame (*right*), the district strongman for the Rajapaksas in Trincomalee.

When I asked one of my other regular interlocutors, a Christian Tamil man from neighbouring Muttur, about the prevalent electoral sentiment among the Tamil community, he said, ‘The LTTE was destroyed, but many people can’t accept that. That’s why most people will vote for ITAK.... Just to show their allegiance’.

## Performing political abstinence

Political abstinence, the second repertoire I will discuss, was mainly present through electoral boycotts. The scholarly literature acknowledges this phenomenon as an occasional political tactic in South Asia.<sup>9</sup> I will approach electoral boycotts primarily as an anti-political performance: a call on the electorate (sometimes backed up by coercive force) to demonstratively sacrifice their voting rights and thus participate in a principled display of protest. In Sri Lanka, such boycotts date back to the emergence of proto-democratic institutions in the late British period: the Jaffna Youth Congress famously insisted on boycotting the island’s first general elections for the State Council in 1931 (Russel 1978). In ITAK’s history, such political abstinence played a significant, if inconsistent, role.<sup>10</sup> The party boycotted the presidential polls

twice, in 1982 and 2005.<sup>11</sup> It never boycotted any parliamentary elections, though it did forfeit its seats twice: in protest against the 1972 constitution and when the government forced an anti-separatist oath on them in 1983. One of the most salient electoral boycotts was driven by a principled opposition to the forum on ballot (as well as by LTTE pressure): ITAK/TULF's opposition to the newly created provincial council, the NEPC, in 1988.

Boycotts can be powerful, but they are also perilous. After all, they carry the risk of demoting one's own relevance rather than that of the spurned institution, in which case political *abstinence* degenerates into political *absence* (as the first-ever Tamil boycott in 1931 had dramatically shown; Russel 1978). This risk became a major concern for the ITAK/TNA with the Eastern Provincial Council elections of 2008. These were arguably Sri Lanka's first postwar elections, even if there was still heavy fighting in the north, because the polls were prompted by the military's success in driving the LTTE out of the east in 2007. The 2008 elections were part of a government attempt to convert its military success into consolidated political control. ITAK/TNA continued to oppose the provincial council system (a stance underpinned by LTTE objection) and refused to participate in the polls. It was particularly resentful about the demerger of the northeast into an Eastern Province and a Northern Province (which dissected the claimed Tamil homeland into two administrative units and cut out the political heart of the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord)<sup>12</sup> and the use of elections as a stabilisation tactic while fierce fighting continued in the north. The party had no way to enforce such a boycott among its constituency as the LTTE had done in the past, but the low turnout suggests that the party's moral authority did indeed convince a part of the Tamil electorate to refrain from exercising its franchise.<sup>13</sup>

This abstentionism was consistent with ITAK's boycott of the NEPC elections in 1988, but the context was different. The 2008 of the Eastern Provincial Council elections were a prelude to the Tamil political arena opening up to a plural kind of politics with competing claimants to Tamil leadership and open disagreement and political mobilisation on intra-Tamil issues. The ascendancy of rival Tamil parties made the ITAK/TNA boycott of the 2008 elections in the Eastern Province a risky endeavour. President Rajapaksa was actively propping up the political platform of Karuna, the renegade eastern commander of the LTTE. The Karuna split of 2004 had exposed the latent but long-standing regional divide between the Tamil north and the east (Thangarajah 2012; A. J. Wilson 1994a). Karuna's newly created party, the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP, or Tamil People Liberation Tigers) offered obvious political utility to exploit that divide. Like all previous militant groups which had been driven into the hands of the government after falling

out with the LTTE, the TMVP remained a fringe movement and it was subject to further splits. But the mobilisation of eastern Tamils, rather than the Tamil nation at large, with a narrative of redressing the dominance and arrogance of Jaffna Tamils and their stiff caste hierarchies, was a threat to the oath-of-allegiance politics of ITAK.

Only in the unique constellation of the first Eastern Provincial Council elections – the multi-ethnic east, President Rajapaksa desperate for a win, the void of the LTTE eviction, and ITAK/TNA stepping away from the vote – could a marginal movement like the TMVP claim electoral turf. And it was for that reason that the first chief minister of the Eastern Province, Sivanesanthurai Chandrakanthan (commonly known by his fighter's name Pillayan), was a highly unlikely political figure. As a former LTTE child soldier from a modest social background and a school drop-out with no work experience (Sanchez Meertens 2013), Pillayan represented the opposite of ITAK's leaders. After breaking with TMVP leader Karuna, he headed the splinter of a splinter of the LTTE and had no party structure to fall back on, but he was to lead the newly created provincial administration with a coalition consisting of the Sinhala and Muslim constituents of Rajapaksa's electoral machine, both of which despised him.<sup>14</sup> Pillayan filled the vacuum created by ITAK/TNA's boycott, and for a brief period, he became a significant player as he set postwar precedents. He was governing a province in collaboration with Muslim and Sinhala parties, with the protection and backing of the formidable patronage networks of the Rajapaksa government. Offices started running, development projects were kickstarted, and Chief Minister Pillayan drove around with an impressive motorcade to attend public forums, cut ribbons and visit the halls of power in Colombo (see also Goodhand, Klem and Walton 2017).

Meanwhile, ITAK/TNA was absent from the scene. It steered clear of the Eastern Provincial Council and instead pleaded to an international audience with a discourse of Tamil rights and aspirations. On that front, however, it was not the most powerful voice either because diaspora networks assumed a prominent place. LTTE-associated outfits cried out about military violations during the final months of the war, particularly in Geneva, the seat of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The council continued to be a highly visible arena to perform competing political scripts after the war. While Western delegations and activists named and shamed the Sri Lankan government to push it towards accepting investigations and redressive measures, the Sri Lankan government used the same arena to perform its sovereign power and allude to Sinhala cultural idioms of preventing and deflecting shame.<sup>15</sup> Tamil diaspora, in turn, sought to connect war crime allegations to the broader discourse of Tamil human rights and the right to self-determination. This required significant adjustments to

their routine script. The martial symbols and references of the Tamil struggle were inadequate for the legal idiom used in Geneva. Individual victim reports became the central performative tactic. Tamil aspirations, adulated leaders and the cult around martyrs dissipated from the plot, but this tactical severance from the LTTE created new tensions (Thurairajah 2020). The aforementioned diaspora referendums further boosted the transnational dimension of Tamil allegiance politics.

ITAK and the TNA had been conceived as the central platform in Tamil politics, but they were at risk of being outflanked from two sides: Pillayan was performing an executive kind of Tamil politics by catering to people's material needs, and diaspora players were performing oath-of-allegiance politics through their firm statements on the international stage. And this political rivalry was only the start. With the end of the war and the dissolution of the LTTE's coercive grip on society, the Tamil political arena opened up once more and a diversity of outfits proliferated. Militia movements like TELO, EPRLF, PLOTE (People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam) and EROS (Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students) re-emerged from hiding and hibernation to fashion themselves as democratic political platforms. ITAK's long-standing rival-cum-partner ACTC, now headed by GG Ponnambalam's grandson Gajen Ponnambalam, also joined the fray. Though there were differences, all of these parties professed some version of Tamil nationalist allegiance and drew on the same performative and discursive repertoires of Tamil politics.

This made it increasingly difficult for ITAK to paper over the divisions within Tamil society. The unifying narrative of Tamil nationalism edged on a preservationist stance on cultural traditions, but this outlook faced growing opposition. The postwar context offered fertile ground for mobilisation on intra-Tamil issues (as discussed in Chapter 4): turf battles between castes and *kudis*; youngsters and women seeking to release themselves from conservative trappings; Christians' anxiety about Hindu domination and Hindus' anxiety about Christian proselytisation; and the rural poor desiring economic development instead of nationalist rhetoric. With their emancipatory social outlook, some of the leftist Tamil movements found a receptive audience. The resurfacing of diverse versions of Tamil nationalism confronted ITAK with a dilemma: it was no longer able to perform the role of the statesmen-like advance guard of the LTTE's sovereign project, representing the Tamil people towards external foes and benefactors. Instead, it was faced with an internal Tamil political arena that encompassed this broad array of issues and parties. Given its association with the upper stratum of Tamil society and its leadership of well-educated 'high' caste men, ITAK was poorly positioned to launch an agenda of social transformation.



## Running for the provincial council to perform its deficiency

Faced with these political hazards, ITAK did participate in the next eastern elections in 2012. Similarly, it decided *not* to boycott the first Northern Provincial Council elections. It was 2013. The war was well over and the Rajapaksa government was firmly in power. For the first time in ITAK's long and turbulent history, there was an opportunity to democratically govern the north. All the party's hesitations and frustrations with the provincial council system remained in place, and some civil society groups advocated another boycott of the polls to avoid a 'political Mullivaikal' (cited in Sathanathan 2013). But if ITAK (and its broader TNA alliance) recused itself from this arena, it would vacate a visible political stage for other Tamil groups – groups with a bigger clout and more authority than Pillayan had had in the east – and the party would risk losing relevance.

The northern election was a result of mounting international pressure against the Rajapaksa government (Photograph 6.4). Polls had been held twice in the east, but in the north they had been postponed indefinitely. The government's Machiavellian tactics in the multi-ethnic east would not work with the vast

**Photograph 6.4** Northern Provincial Council complex



*Source:* Photograph by author.

*Note:* In 2013, the first-ever Northern Provincial Council was elected. It was accommodated in this complex in Kaithadi, outside Jaffna (photo taken in 2018). The entrance to the right comprised a large hall where people commonly queued up to present their problems to Chief Minister Vigneswaran, his cabinet and his officers.

Tamil majority in the Northern Province (see the ethnic geography depicted on Map 2.1), so the Rajapaksa government played for time. However, it was confronted with increasingly serious statements and resolutions in the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. Aiming to alleviate pressure with gestures of goodwill without compromising on its key concerns, the Rajapaksa government conceded to schedule elections in the north.

The northern council elections brought fresh excitement to Jaffna: posters coloured the streets, party offices sprouted up, tuk-tuks with loudspeakers and rally speeches echoed through the neighbourhoods. The polls formed a major political juncture for the north and they were unfamiliar on three counts: all the key Tamil issues were openly on the agenda, people had a suite of parties to choose from and it was clear that Tamil parties would win and govern. A week before election day Hasbullah and I visited an ITAK campaign office to interview Mavai Senathirajah. As a long-time member of parliament and general secretary of the TNA, he yielded only to Sampanthan in the Tamil party hierarchy. ITAK had decided to run with the broader TNA umbrella (along with EPRLF, PLOTE, TELO and remnants of the TULF) to keep the ranks closed. But within the TNA campaign ITAK was clearly in the lead, and the speech Senathirajah gave us (and it was indeed more of a speech than an interview) was an ITAK speech. With his white robes, grey thinning hair and black moustache (a trademark of male Tamil potency), simple wire-framed specs (that is, not a 'modern' Colombo man), and his rhetorical ability to thread a whole range of historical events and legal notions into one flawless grammatical English sentence, he was easy to recognise as part of the old Tamil political cohort.

Senathirajah rehearsed the history of the Tamil struggle for us: the advocacy and civil disobedience, the pacts, the Indo-Lankan Accord, the limitations of the thirteenth amendment. But ITAK's stance had shifted now, he emphasised:

We did not go back to the Vaddukodai resolution [the separatist turn of 1976]. We accept a united Sri Lanka, but with devolution, so long as we clearly define what is central – defence, customs, monetary policy – and what is devolved – police, fiscal policy, land – and with no concurrent list.

The TNA election manifesto indeed walked a fine line. It rehearsed the foundational principles of the Tamil struggle: the Tamils as 'distinct People' and the northeast as the 'historical habitation' of the 'Tamil-Speaking People', a category subtly including the Muslims along with the Tamils. It underlined the 'right to self-determination' but avoided reference to homeland or a separate state and instead advocated a 'Federal structure' on the basis of 'shared sovereignty' with a merged north and east.<sup>16</sup> This was a narrative of Tamil

nationalism with the separatist components redacted, a nationalism without liberation – or at least, without the explicit mention of thereof.

I asked Senathirajah about the Muslim community. After all, as the forthcoming government of the north, it was upon the Tamil leadership to act responsibly to its own minorities. He responded as if this was a routine matter: ‘We are ready to accommodate the Muslim aspirations. The manifesto also says that.’ Done and dusted. At that point, my companion Hasbullah, himself a northern Muslim and a victim of the LTTE Eviction of 1990, intervened. ‘Is your party prepared to publicly acknowledge the fact that what happened to the Muslims was ethnic cleansing and that the Tamil leadership was responsible for that?’ he asked with some vigour. The veteran ITAK leader was clearly not so used to being spoken to in such a confrontational way by a younger visitor, and he tried to shrug the question with some comments about how the party was ready to represent all Tamil-speaking people and how they were taking positive steps. Rhetorical fireworks ensued. Hasbullah, whom I knew to be an utterly mild-mannered man, fiercely rebuked this woolliness with a sternly raised finger and a seething voice. Senathirajah retorted that Muslim leaders were involved in political games and needed to be more accommodating. ‘Then what about the Tamil leaders and the Jaffna bishop?’ Hasbullah shot back, hinting at the overtly Tamil nationalist affiliation of the church leader. Having become a bystander to the debate, I waited for the tempers to calm down and politely wrapped up the interview. As so often, the most insightful words were spoken in the margin of this heated exchange. After we got back into our vehicle, the man who was facilitating our stay, himself a politically engaged Jaffna Tamil, said he was flabbergasted at Senathirajah’s despotic rhetoric: ‘It was like hearing the voice of [President] Rajapaksa!’

These concerns over the plight of minorities under a Tamil nationalist administration were not completely unfounded. In contrast to most other parts of Jaffna, the Muslim neighbourhood on the town’s western fringe was still in ruins. Many of the Muslim victims of the 1990 Eviction had not returned, and those who had come back felt that the Tamil leadership gave them stepmotherly treatment, just as the LTTE had done. The position of the Muslims, a small proportion of Jaffna’s electorate, was one of the several issues that had long been relegated to the background in Tamil nationalist politics. The end of the war brought the question with its rupturing potential back out in the open.

It was difficult enough for ITAK and the TNA to keep the Tamil ranks closed. They needed a leader who wasn’t implicated by the violent and divisive past of Tamil nationalism, a unifying figure who could rise above the parties

and proudly stand on par with the anglicised Colombo elite but also embody an innate Tamilness. In that perspective, the party's choice for C. V. Vigneswaran was a master stroke, or so it seemed at the time. A former judge of the Supreme Court, he was senior and articulate. He had unquestionable integrity and would command respect internationally. He was very much a Colombo Tamil, part of the ethnically intermarried elite of central Colombo with a life that was insulated from the war-torn north and east, but he was also an overtly devout Hindu and a quintessentially Tamil persona in terms of his demeanour, dress and diction – not one of the cosmopolitan urbanites despised by many northern Tamils. He had great rhetorical and poetic skills and had not been part of any previous fissures, mudslinging or worse because he was not a politician, let alone a militant. That lack of experience was also a potential problem, but for the time being it seemed an advantage. Vigneswaran in other words, resembled something of a stranger-king (Sahlins 2008; see also Gilmartin 2015) to the postwar Tamil political arena: a leader originating from beyond the bounds of society who nonetheless embodies that society; someone with reverential qualities of being a non-partisan exemplar who is simultaneously elevated above and embedded in a political community.

With the broad TNA alliance, a manifesto that was nationalist but not separatist, and a chief minister candidate with an almost regal aura who could rise above the parties, ITAK had smartly navigated some of the challenges and contradictions of postwar Tamil politics. Given all the historical baggage and the preoccupation with Tamil identity politics, the party did not say much about what it would actually do once in office: no grand development plans were launched in the campaign, no visions of material advancement projected. More than anything else, the impending task of governing the Northern Province was presented as a phase in a larger historical struggle, a phase that had been preceded by periods of both non-violent advocacy and armed liberation struggle and a phase that would not be the end game but a transient stage towards a more meaningful fulfilment of Tamil aspirations. And in view of that trajectory, the primary audience of the ITAK's performance arguably lay abroad. A TNA organiser from Vavuniya phrased it as follows:

The elections are an important moment for the Tamil people, but they also realise that these elections will not solve the problem. We started as a political struggle, then it became an armed struggle. That is not possible now. So we continue the political struggle.... The government has the responsibility to respect the political choice of the people. If that fails, the international community has to take action. Both armed struggle and political struggle have then failed.

ITAK veteran Mavai Senathirajah alluded to such recourse in similar terms: ‘The elections are very internationalised. We see that opportunity. There is no way to solve this internally.’ Running for provincial office and governing the northern council was thus primarily a way to give expression to Tamil sentiments and display a constructive attitude to demonstrate that the present constitutional framework of stifled provincial councils was no adequate solution to ‘the Tamil problem’. ITAK, in other words, had shifted from the performative anti-politics of a boycott to the performative politics of enacting provincial rule. But it did so *not* with the intention to legitimise the provincial councils (as the EPRLF the Indian federal government had tried so ardently in the 1980s) but to perform their insufficiency: to lay bare the inadequacy of the council.<sup>17</sup> Foreign powers, who were seen as capable of trumping the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan government, were the main target audience of this performance. Rather than an inward-oriented performance of provincial governance, ITAK’s strategy was concerned with performing a residual aspiration of external sovereignty – a desperate clutch for the last straws of international recognition for the Tamil plight.

## Tamil nationalists in office

The TNA won the northern elections with a landslide 78 per cent of the vote and thirty of the thirty-eight seats. ITAK came first among the TNA constituents with a safe fifteen seats. A quarter century after the Indo-Lankan Accord, the Tamil nationalist leadership thus set out to take hold of both the legislative and executive branch of government within Sri Lanka’s arrangement of devolved governance. Vigneswaran was inaugurated as chief minister and set the tone in a public address at the first council meeting on 26 October 2013. The thirteenth amendment (the constitutional basis of the provincial council system), he argued, was ‘like a vessel with a hole and seems good for nothing’.<sup>19</sup> He hoped to work with the centre to resolve the underlying issues, but the top priority was to de-militarise the north and release the occupied lands to the rightful owners. His speech gave voice to widely held feelings among the Tamil community, but it was entirely dedicated to issues that the council had negligible power over. The fields that Vigneswaran was empowered to act on – fully devolved subjects like health and education as well as poverty alleviation and agriculture – were hardly mentioned at all.

In subsequent months, the council caused controversy with staunchly Tamil nationalist resolutions on similar non-provincial issues. In January 2014, the TNA-dominated council passed a resolution calling for an international inquiry into ‘ethnic cleansing’ by government forces in the last stages of the



war. After several rounds of debate, the term 'genocide' had been deleted from the resolution.<sup>20</sup> A year later, in February 2015, the council stepped up its efforts and passed a resolution that discussed in detail why government conduct during the war *did* qualify as 'genocide' and called for an 'international mechanism' to redress impunity and an 'international intervention ... to ensure a sustainable future for self-determination, peace, and justice, in Sri Lanka and for the Tamil people'.<sup>21</sup>

Almost immediately after assuming office<sup>18</sup>, however, questions arose about Vigneswaran's leadership. His conservative Hindu stance on cultural and religious issues instilled a fear that India's militant Hindu nationalism might lay down roots in Jaffna. In addition, there were doubts about Vigneswaran's administrative capacities.<sup>22</sup> His defiance towards the national government raised concern about his ability to broker the support that the north needed. Employment, infrastructure, service provision and economic opportunities were in a dilapidated state.

When I met Vigneswaran in 2019, a year after his term had ended, he agreed that his term in office had been a disappointment: 'I am not used to these things, because I have been in the judiciary. [Before becoming chief minister] I never knew anything about politics.' We were sitting in his residence in Nallur, northern Jaffna. He wore his signature dress, a collarless white robe, and his forehead was adorned with white stripes of sacred ash and a *pottu*. Much in line with his reputation, he was charmingly unpretentious and almost naively candid – if he had spin doctors, he clearly was not taking their cues. He knew that many people were disappointed with his accomplishments, he said, but they did not appreciate the limitations placed on the provincial council. He underlined the central government's long track record of constraining and starving the provincial councils. In their first operational budget, the northern council requested 12 billion rupees but received only 1.6 billion, 'not because the government does not have the money. That's not what happened. All that money was given to central ministers to do work in our province.' And even with the funds they had, the province's work was frustrated from Colombo.

The fall of the Rajapaksa government in 2015 offered Vigneswaran's northern council a much more conducive political environment.<sup>23</sup> The rainbow coalition of the Sirisena government came to power with ITAK backing and on an explicit agenda of addressing the ethno-political conflict. This transformation of the political landscape placed ITAK in a highly unusual position. It had been governing the north as a government adversary – it now became a government ally of sorts. In parliament, ITAK simultaneously positioned itself as a government partner *and* claimed the role of opposition leader.<sup>24</sup> Even if ITAK steered clear of an executive role in Colombo, its hands

were closer to the levers of power than they had ever been. And this, combined with their ambitious campaign promises, stoked expectations. As illustrated in the final section, however, the Northern Provincial Council struggled to abandon its combative stance.

In the Eastern Provincial Council, meanwhile, the 2015 change of government prompted a major shift. In the immediate aftermath of Sirisena's presidential inauguration, the eastern board of ministers was reshuffled (see also Klem 2024).<sup>25</sup> The government adopted a supportive attitude to the province and vowed to resolve gridlocked issues, such as the resettlement of Sampur (discussed in Chapter 4). This success cast positive light on ITAK, which had regularly protested, either in situ or in speeches aimed at audiences abroad. The release of Sampur's land was ITAK's victory too. But once return had taken place, the party could no longer hold up Sampur as a scandal. It needed funding now to show that it could actually do something for the returning community. With great effort – and some luck – the responsible ITAK minister managed to mobilise resources,<sup>26</sup> but the loyalties of patronage require constant replenishing. If politicians disappear for too long or arrive empty-handed too frequently, they become the subject of criticism or mockery over their incompetence (cf. Ruud 2009).

This was precisely what happened to ITAK leaders in post-return Sampur. I was told by Nadarajah, a local ITAK organiser whom we encountered in Chapter 4 (where he commented money spent on the temple was 'all wasted') and earlier in this chapter (where he referred to the electoral 'weapon of being Tamil'). Nadarajah campaigned vigorously for ITAK leader Sampanthan, but in private he was critical of the party and its leadership. After 2015, the ITAK leadership was playing a macro-level game, forging a grand bargain with the government and mobilising international pressure in that pursuit. 'Sampanthan only comes to [his home district] Trincomalee for the elections and for the temple festival. People call him the "temple MP" [member of parliament]'. Given the fierce social conflicts over temple honours and *kudi* hierarchies within Sampur's Tamil community, such donations were not effective in nurturing a broad vote base. The 2015 change of government had a decompressing effect on ITAK, he observed. 'As Tamils, we were held together by the torture of the [Rajapaksa] government. That has stopped now, and Tamil politics will unfold.'<sup>27</sup>

## Showdown of the Northern Provincial Council

ITAK/TNA leader Sampanthan had foreshadowed a grand constitutional bargain, when he called on Tamil voters to back President Sirisena's coalition in 2015, but negotiations on constitutional reform kept dragging on. Because of

their partnership with the government, ITAK's statements became more moderate, much to the dislike of the party base. Meanwhile, the fruits of being in office – as the ruling party of the northern council (2013–2018) and a junior partner in the east (2015–2017) – had been meagre. Both in terms of nationalist aspiration and in terms delivering patronage, the party had disappointed. On the flank of nationalist politics, the Tamil opposition accused ITAK/TNA of squandering the LTTE legacy. Gajen Ponnambalan's ACTC was raking them over the coals for not speaking out to the central government. On the flank of development politics, there was disillusionment about the party's failure to use the northern council apparatus to improve everyday living conditions. The tactic of performing the deficiency of the provincial council system, as an intermediary step for mobilising international pressure, had not shown any returns either – if anything, foreign interest in Sri Lanka appeared to be waning.

Internally, the ITAK/TNA coalition governing the north had fractured. In fact, there had been a complete rupture between Chief Minister Vigneswaran and the rest of his party, and as a result, the council's board of ministers was no longer functional. The only meaningful political office that was still occupied when I visited the council in October 2018 was that of the chairman of the Northern Provincial Council (a role akin to the speaker in parliament).

I had awaited chairman Sivagnanam's return from the public accounts meeting, a large gathering that spans five long days to meticulously review all council expenditure. It was well after office hours when the chairman finally returned to his desk. Despite the preceding meeting, which must have been tedious and tiring, he appeared in no rush, and we talked until late in the evening. This was an ideal time to take stock of the Northern Provincial Council, as it would be dissolved upon completing its first five-year term in the following week. Sivagnanam's lone voice in the silent darkness of an otherwise abandoned provincial council complex matched his despondent account.

After some initial discussion, I wanted to ask about his opinion on the chief minister's credentials and started by saying that many praised Vigneswaran's honesty. Sivagnanam had been leaning back in his office chair, but he suddenly set up straight to interrupt me: 'Correct! He is honest. Financially, he is scrupulously honest. But that is not politics. Being honest is not enough in politics. You must also be a man of action.' Vigneswaran's key responsibility as the Tamil leader of the north was to 'keep his team intact. We have 30 seats of the 38. It should be easy to keep the team together. But he could not.' All of the above-discussed tensions within Tamil nationalist politics had become exposed in mid-2017, when a major schism had occurred, first in the council and then across the whole of ITAK and the TNA. This fissure had everything to do with the dynamics discussed in this chapter: the challenges of combining the repertoires of nationalist politics and patronage politics. Executive office

requires political leaders to kickstart the state machinery and get the funds flowing by mobilising networks higher up in the patronage pyramid. This can be done in perfectly legal or not-so-legal ways, but it inevitably generates political adversaries and it makes leaders vulnerable to being tarnished as corrupt (Piliavsky 2014b; Price and Srinivas 2014).

In addition to the 'incorruptible' Chief Minister Vigneswaran, the Tamil executive of the north consisted of four TNA ministers: Ayngaranesan (EPRLF, agriculture), Deniswaran (TELO, fisheries), Kurukularajah (ITAK, education) and Sathiyalingham (ITAK, health). In 2016, Ayngaranesan was accused of administrative irregularities, possibly corruption, and the chief minister insisted on an independent inquiry. The tug of war over that inquiry revealed more irregularities, drawing fire to the other ministers, two of whom were ITAK men. Vigneswaran installed a board of inquiry for all four ministers, but the key witnesses for Ayngaranesan (EPRLF) and Deniswaran (TELO) did not turn up, so they were not found guilty, while Kurukularajah and Sathiyalingham (both ITAK) were. When Vigneswaran threatened to sack all four ministers in one grand clean-up, the party (both ITAK and the broader TNA alliance) pushed back and prepared a no-confidence motion against him.

Tamil politics was thus at risk of a complete, self-implicated breakdown at a key political juncture. At the national level, the Sirisena government had just entered office, and negotiations over a constitutional settlement had started, so there was an urgent need to at least try and stand united. At the level of the Northern Province, this should have been political harvesting time: the years of establishing the institution, having consultations for grand plans and mobilising funding had passed; now was the time to deliver and reap the fruits of all these efforts. ITAK/TNA leader Sampanthan and northern Chief Minister Vigneswaran managed to avert a complete escalation and agreed to a compromise in June 2017. The no-confidence motion was withdrawn and the board of ministers of the Northern Province was replaced. The newly inaugurated ministers were Kandiah Sarveswaran (PLOTE, agriculture), Ananthy Sasitharan (ITAK, women's affairs), Kandiah Sivanesan (EPRLF, education) and Gnanaseelan Gunaseelan (TELO, health). ITAK's new minister Ananthy was noteworthy appointment. She stood out as a rare female leader in an overwhelmingly male-dominated party landscape. Moreover, she was a formidable activist, who was widely known to the public for demanding accountability for her husband, LTTE leader Elilan, one of the many Tamil names on the list of people missing since the war. Her campaign as a widow calling for justice was powerful, and she secured an impressive 87,000 preferential votes, second only to Vigneswaran (Women's Action Network 2013), but commanding a ministry required a different kind of authority.

Soon after her appointment, she started to receive flak for her inability to deliver results. This reflected badly on her party: ITAK's role in the northern council had now been whittled down to one inconspicuous portfolio (women's affairs) held by a minister that lacked political experience.

With the Sampanathan–Vigneswaran deal, the crisis within ITAK and the northern council seemed to have been resolved, but there was a snag. Ironically, given the chief minister's profile as a Supreme Court lawyer, it was a legal one. Vigneswaran had removed Minister Deniswaran from office and told him the official notification would be sent by the governor, but that notice never came. The sacked minister appealed his dismissal, and after various legal procedures, he found the law on his side. In the absence of a formal dismissal letter, Vigneswaran was forced to reinstate Deniswaran in July 2018, but he refused to fire one of the four newly appointed ministers, which would have caused a new political crisis. The northern council was thus left with six ministers (the chief minister, the new four and a reappointed Deniswaran), but the constitution only provides for five. Unlike at the national level where bloated cabinets are the norm, one cannot add a portfolio to a provincial board of ministers. This left the northern council with the political version of the game of musical chairs. The only way forward, to stick with the metaphor, was to keep the music going to avoid having to sit down. The issue remained unresolved, and the next meeting of the board of ministers was deferred indefinitely, until their term ran out a few months later. The first elected Tamil government of the north had set out to demonstrate the deficiencies of the provincial council but ended its term with a defunct executive because of political infighting. As a result of the rivalry between Tamil factions and allegations of corruption, there were six people for five seats and therefore, it had become impossible – practically, politically and constitutionally – for the provincial executive to sit.

## Conclusion

The tensions of separatist politics within a democratic arena came out in stark relief in postwar Sri Lanka. The difficulty of democratically contesting the foundational underpinnings of democracy confronted the Tamil nationalist movement with a fundamental problem. As the main Tamil nationalist party, ITAK/TNA could no longer position itself as parliamentary extension of the LTTE, a placeholder of a Tamil state to come. It was destined to participate in – and indeed govern – the democratic institutions that it had pitted itself against on principle grounds. After the annihilation of the LTTE in Mullivaikal, Tamil politics experienced a sense of decompression: all political registers were no longer forcibly aligned into a singular LTTE discourse. ITAK purported to



represent the Tamil nation, but opening up the Tamil political arena forced the party to show its colours on issues that divided the Tamil collective.

This chapter placed postwar Tamil politics in the light of political performativity (Geertz 1980; Hansen 2004; Harriss, Stokke and Törnquist 2004; Paley 2008; Siegel 1998; Spencer 2007; Wedeen 2003), with particular attention to the repertoires of anti-politics (Hansen 1999; Spencer 2008). To navigate its postwar predicament, ITAK shifted between three different kinds of anti-political performance, though this evidently involved a very political kind of anti-politics. Each of these, this chapter has shown, came under heightened strain and then faltered, due to the forces of postwar transition.

ITAK's oath-of-allegiance politics, firstly, comprises a repertoire of rituals, historic narratives and nationalist articles of faith. It becomes visible at commemorative events, such as the one at the *thanthai* Chelva memorial, but it is also evident in electoral campaigns wielding, in the words of Nadarajah, 'the weapon of being Tamil' and the diaspora referendums on Tamil nationalist aspirations. It is anti-political in the sense that it is premised on the sphere of a people, their culture, language and history – a set of existential categories that is elevated above the mundane arena of party politics. It is a performance that depicts ITAK as a formation of statesman-like politicians. It steers clear of a left-right ideological divide, plans for running a government and intra-Tamil contentions over caste, clan and gender (which are shrugged under a carpet of broadly conservative cultural positions). Instead, it mobilises voters to testify that they belong to a Tamil nation with a long history of struggle over a well-known set of grievances and aspirations that remain unresolved. This approach continued to be highly effective when the wounds of war were still fresh, as is evident from ITAK/TNA's landslide victory in the 2010 parliamentary elections. But as the years passed, the repertoire of oath-of-allegiance politics started to unravel. ITAK could no longer position itself as the parliamentary avant-garde of the LTTE insurgency. Tamil electoral politics had become more competitive, and a variety of groups was elbowing to claim the political inheritance of liberation struggle.

ITAK's second set of anti-political performances comprises a repertoire of abstinence. Such performances were centrally important in the early decades of the nationalist movement. ITAK was known for its adaptation of Gandhian protest methods, such as *satyagraha* sit-ins – an approach the government struggled to respond to at the time (see the memoirs of Jaffna's government agent of the 1960s, Jayaweera 2014: 105–128). The electoral boycott had become a common political instrument. ITAK was adamant about opposing the provincial council system as a hostile Indian implant that disabled a genuine solution to the Tamil problem. As substantiated in the previous chapter, these reservations were not completely

unfounded – arguably, the provincial councils *were* politically impotent. ITAK therefore boycotted the 2008 Eastern Provincial Council elections, as it had done during the first original NEPC elections of 1988. Political abstinence carries the risk of turning into political absence, however. The 2008 boycott gave buoyancy to a rival form of Tamil executive politics: the outfit of Pillayan, propped up by the Rajapaksa government. After the LTTE defeat, boycotting the provincial council was no longer a tenable position for ITAK. It would be outflanked by more potent Tamil parties, and it risked being relegated to the annals of history. Despite its principled objections, ITAK therefore participated in the subsequent elections in the east (2012) and north (2013).

ITAK's participation in these elections then promulgated its third kind of anti-political performance: governing as a demonstration of institutional deficiency. Having assumed responsibility to govern the north with a landslide 78 per cent victory and a thirty (out of thirty-eight) seat majority for the TNA, ITAK needed to engage in real bargaining over coalitions, portfolios and all the manoeuvring, scheming and cunning that comes with executive politics. And it needed to take responsibility towards minorities within the northeast: most obviously the northern Muslim community but also marginalised communities of particular religions, castes, classes and regions within Tamil society. ITAK took on this challenge by assuming office on the explicit position that the provincial councils were a halfway house in the longer historical trajectory of pursuing Tamil aspirations. This yielded a peculiar form of political performance aimed at revealing the shortcomings of the system they governed, while simultaneously preserving the party's reputation as a capable and credible aspirant to state power. This produced myriad tensions, and the outcomes reflected badly on ITAK.

The entrenched political aspirations of Tamil nationalist parties do not easily combine with the pragmatic manoeuvring of patronage politics. In the east, party leader Sampanthan was lambasted for being a 'temple MP' who neglected his constituency, and ITAK struggled to carve out a role for itself in the reconstruction of Sampur. In the north, accomplishments were even more sobering. Even with a vast majority in the provincial council and in a firm position of power as kingmaker to Sirisena's national government, ITAK/TNA struggled to channel funding to the region they governed. To make matters worse, Vigneswaran's administration had fallen prey to allegations of corruption and political mudslinging, which eventually resulted in the self-implicated breakdown of the first ever elected Tamil government of the north. Rather than performing the deficiency of the provincial council system, ITAK/TNA had exhibited its own shortcomings. To stick with Vigneswaran's inaugural metaphor: the provincial ship of state went down, not because it was leaky but because it was wrecked by a poorly executed mutiny against a swaying captain.

## Notes

- 1 This text is widely available in English translation. See, for example, [https://www.sangam.org/FB\\_HIST\\_DOCS/vaddukod.htm](https://www.sangam.org/FB_HIST_DOCS/vaddukod.htm) (accessed 15 November 2023).
- 2 The TNA was created on 22 October 2001, by four parties: the TULF, the ACTC (previously part of the TULF), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF).
- 3 This phrase has been attributed to Ketesh Loganathan.
- 4 The position of the TULF in this process adds yet another layer of complexity. TULF leader V. Anandasangaree, a staunch LTTE opponent, resisted the creation of the TNA (after he was himself kept out by the LTTE). While almost the entire party joined the TNA, he persisted in his opposition, forcing the other TULF members to revive ITAK (the main TULF constituent) as their political vehicle. As a result, the TNA ran under the icon of ITAK's house, rather than the TULF's sun.
- 5 In contrast to India's Bharatiya Janata Party, Tamil nationalists resorted to anti-politics from the arguably rather more suppressed position of an ethnic minority.
- 6 This text is widely available on the internet. See, for example, Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/tamil-canadians-vote-for-independent-state-in-sri-lanka-1.810846> (accessed 15 November 2023).
- 7 These referendums were puzzling on several fronts. What to make of a plebiscite on an article of faith? With what legitimacy could those who had left Sri Lanka decide over the plight of those who had not? And how to deal with the profound contradictions of a transnational community vying for a nationalist cause, a sovereign claim by people who had become foreign citizens and the validation of an ethno-territorial (and potentially xenophobic) discourse by a de-territorialised electorate domiciled in dispersed multi-cultural societies? The referendums remained inconsequential (when considered in the formal legal and political terms through which referendum outcomes are normally effected). But as a political performance, they were a significant articulation of citational practice – what had started with ITAK leader opting out of Sri Lanka's sovereign constitutional arrangement in the 1970s (and had been reiterated at key junctures like the 1985 Thimpu talks, Perumal's 1990 unilateral declaration of independence and the 2003 ISGA proposal) now continued on a transnational level.
- 8 Sampanthan swept the Tamil vote in Trincomalee in 2010 and easily secured his parliamentary seat, as did the vast majority of his party men across the north and east, with the exception of the Jaffna islands (a known stronghold of the Eelam People's Democratic Party) and some electorates along the east coast where Karuna's electoral outfit and the Muslim vote challenged ITAK in some seats.
- 9 See, for example, Banerjee on 'vote bahiskar' (Banerjee 2014: 155–158).

- 10 On several key junctures, ITAK decided not to abstain from political participation. Most saliently, ITAK briefly joined Senanayake's 'national government' in 1965 and M. Thiruchelvam, a leading ITAK member, became the cabinet minister for local government. A more recent example was the first postwar presidential election in 2010, when voters could choose between Mahinda Rajapaksa (who had presided over LTTE defeat and the brutal military campaign leading up to it) and Sarath Fonseka (the most senior army general in charge of that very campaign) – if there ever was a race without a remotely reasonable choice for Tamils, this was it. But ITAK did not boycott these elections and advised its supporters to vote for who it thought would be the lesser evil: Fonseka.
- 11 In both cases, the boycotts tipped the election to favour a belligerent Sinhala nationalist candidate. In 1982 (the first presidential race), the boycott enabled Jayawardena to gain an absolute majority; in 2005, the boycott (which was clearly driven by LTTE instructions) helped paved the way for Mahinda Rajapaksa's victory.
- 12 In 2006, the Supreme Court had declared the merging of the North-Eastern Province unconstitutional. The resulting demerger came into effect in January 2007 and cleared the way for elections in the east, while the war continued in the north.
- 13 The turnout was 66 per cent in a province where Tamils comprise 40 per cent of the electorate. According to Department of Census and Statistics (2012) data, the Eastern Province was home to 39.79 per cent Tamils, 36.72 per cent Muslims and 23.14 per cent Sinhalese. In the 1971 census, this was 43.89 per cent (Tamils), 34.86 per cent (Muslims) and 20.69 per cent (Sinhalese). While the overall turnout was similar in the next elections of the Eastern Provincial Council (66 per cent), the turnout in the Tamil dominated districts Batticaloa and Trincomalee was several per cent point lower in 2008 (61 and 62 per cent respectively) than in 2012 (64 and 67 per cent).
- 14 The mainstream Sinhala-dominated SLFP and two Muslim parties organised around strongmen: the All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC, led by Rishad Badiutheen) and National Congress (NC, led by A. L. M. Athaulla). Both constituents had expected the president to give their candidate the chief minister post, rather than inexperienced Pillayan, who was considered by many as a former terrorist.
- 15 My thinking on this issue has been informed by Chulani Kodikara who kindly shared with me her work-in-progress article (under review with the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*) on the dynamics of cultural pride and shame in relation to the UNHRC.
- 16 <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/full-text-tnas-northern-provincial-council-election-manifesto-2013/> (accessed 22 May 2021).
- 17 A similar, though arguably more dramatic, performative effort of incriminating one's own institution may be found at the end of Hansen's *Wages of Violence*

(2001: 227), where he describes Shiv Sena leader Ramesh Vaiti, who – as the elected mayor of Thane – participates in a Shiv Sena riot that ransacks his own office.

- 18 The caption of this section (Tamil nationalists in office) resonates with Nicole Watt's book *Activists in Office* (2010) on the manoeuvring of Kurdish nationalists in Turkey who are elected at a provincial level.
- 19 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/south-asia/sri-lanka-northern-council-holds-historic-first-session/article5273775.ece> (accessed 22 May 2021).
- 20 <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/27637> (accessed 22 May 2021).
- 21 <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/npc-passes-resolution-asking-un-investigate-genocide-tamils-sri-lanka-state?articleid=13726> (accessed 22 May 2021).
- 22 Some of the problems of Vigneswaran's provincial administration were self-inflicted. In the first weeks of his tenure, a dispute with his chief secretary (the most senior civil servant of the council), Mrs Vijiyalakshmi, escalated to damaging proportions. Since such senior staff are part of the national civil service, not the provincial one, there were fears that the loyalties of Vijiyalakshmi (who is Sinhalese) would lie with President Rajapaksa. To pre-emptively rein Vijiyalakshmi in, instructions were issued to prevent her from leaving the province or communicating with the central government without Vigneswaran's permission. This attempt to display overlordship backfired. 'She took me to the Supreme Court, and I was about to lose the case', Vigneswaran admitted. He had to withdraw his decision to avoid an affront at the bar. This defeat reflected badly on him. Much of his authority derived from having been a Supreme Court judge himself. As a result, one of my informants commented: 'the secretaries [senior bureaucrats] felt the chief minister could not be relied on. If he can't even confront his own chief secretary.... So they wanted to play safe from then on.'
- 23 In the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections, scheduled by Rajapaksa himself to get a fresh mandate at a time of his choosing, a remarkable rainbow coalition of hitherto archenemies emerged behind one of his renegade ministers, Maithripala Sirisena, who became the joint opposition candidate. Vital support to Sirisena's victory came from ITAK/TNA. The party successfully called on its voters to support Sirisena, foreshadowing that the Tamil problem would be resolved, no less, under the next administration. Upon their victory, the Sirisena government established a whole suite of *yahapalana* (good governance) measures and initiated negotiations with the Tamil leadership on constitutional reform and ethnic power-sharing. However, soon after, these initiatives balked and the coalition started showing the first signs of disintegration.
- 24 The 'leader of the opposition' is an official title in Sri Lanka, which comes with certain privileges and resources. In political terms, it was obvious that Mahinda Rajapaksa (the defeated former president) led the opposition: he commanded



many more members of parliament and, unlike Sampanthan's TNA, he avidly opposed the Sirisena government. However, given that Rajapaksa was technically a member of the SLFP, the same party as his rival presidential candidate Sirisena, the post of opposition leader went to the TNA.

- 25 No new elections were held, but the main Muslim party – the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) – changed alliance and joined hands with the Tamil ITAK/TNA. Two ITAK ministers were newly inaugurated: opposition leader S. Thandayuthapani (from Trincomalee) became the education minister; K. Thurairajasingham (from Batticaloa) was put in charge of agriculture. The fifth minister (Ariyawathi Galappaththi, SLFP) was appointed minister for road development. In addition, and arguably more significantly, the governor of the Eastern Province, retired Admiral Mohan Wijewickrama, was replaced by a veteran civil servant, Austin Fernando.
- 26 India, one of the few donors still active in Sri Lanka, supported a housing reconstruction project in Sampur, but ITAK was not involved in the delivery of such assistance. The provincial minister of education (Thandayuthapani, who also had personal links to Sampur) was also responsible for resettlement, but this portfolio came with a mere 17 million rupees (roughly 95,000 US dollars), as he told me. Almost all resettlement work was administered by the central line ministry. Coincidentally, one of the big World Bank projects from the 2000s (the North-East Local Service Improvement Project, NELSIP) had a final line of funding left. It was not designed for what Thandayuthapani wanted to do, but with a slight creative adjustment, unspent funds could be deployed for reconstruction in Sampur. What comprised leftovers for the World Bank represented a patronage goldmine for ITAK minister Thandayuthapani. 297 million rupees (about 1.6 million US dollars) could be disbursed under his tutelage for roads, schools and health centres.
- 27 When I met Nadarajah in 2018, he had left ITAK and returned to his first love in Tamil politics, EROS, which was gradually coming back to life as a political party. His political enthusiasm was back. When I met him again in 2019, EROS had also disappointed him. He had started a restaurant and was no longer active in politics.