

Maiden provincial poll for Sri Lanka's war-ravaged East

Amid sweeping security arrangements, Sri Lanka's war-hit eastern province comprising Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Amparai districts will elect a provincial council Saturday, barely a year after the military seized the former Tamil Tiger strongholds.

A total of 982,721 registered voters are eligible to exercise their franchise to pick 37 members from among 1,342 candidates from 18 political parties and 73 independent groups.

But the battle for the post of chief minister and forming the maiden council for the eastern province is a virtual two-horse race between the ruling United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) of President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the main opposition United National Party (UNP) headed by former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The province holds a unique feature in the Sri Lankan map. It houses all three major ethnic communities - Tamils 48 percent, Sinhalese 22.7 percent and Muslims 28.2 percent.

The people of the area voice mixed reactions on the election manifestos of the political parties -- and the outcome of the poll.

The UPFA has an electoral alliance with the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP), which broke away from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and is led by former LTTE eastern commander 'Colonel' Karuna.

The UPFA-TMVP grouping faces a tough challenge from the powerful alliance of the UNP and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which claims to represent the Muslim minority.

President Rajapaksa has said that his government has undertaken many development projects in the Sri Lankan east and the election of opposition parties to the council would 'place all of them at stake'.

'Now the people of the east should decide whether they should be governed by their own representatives or according to the dictates originating from (the LTTE-held) Kilinochchi. On Saturday, the people will decide if they want to go back to the clutches of (LTTE chief Velupillai) Prabhakaran,' Rajapaksa said.

The UNP-SLMC alliance, which wants the heavily armed TMVP disarmed, has accused the Rajapaksa government 'of rescuing the east from one armed group (LTTE) and trying to hand over its administration to another armed group (Karuna group)'.

However, Pillaiyan, the chief ministerial candidate of the TMVP, told BBC that his party was carrying weapons only to defend its members from the LTTE.

'Our weapons are on sleeping mode and we will have to carry them until the LTTE is militarily weakened,' he said.

Key Muslim parties of both the government and the opposition camps are campaigning to elect a Muslim chief minister.

The historically Tamil-dominated northeastern province, described as the 'traditional homeland of the Tamils', remained merged following the 1987 India-Sri Lanka accord that sought to end Tamil separatism.

But they were separated following a ruling by the country's Supreme Court last year.

Since the provincial election in 1988 where A. Vardharaja Perumal of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) became the chief minister of the northeastern provincial council and its dissolution in 1990, significant changes have taken place in the eastern theatre, both politically and militarily.

Although the LTTE has not said anything officially, its proxy, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which has refrained from taking part in the poll, has urged the people 'to defeat the government and its allies'.

'At this election, we have to defeat the government's policies. So, we are asking the people not to support the candidates put forward by the ruling UPFA and the parties supporting it,' TNA general secretary Mavai Senathirajah said.

Said D. Sidharthan of the ex-militant People's Liberation Organisation of the Tamil Eelam (PLOTE): 'Weather we participate or not, the election will be held. While reiterating our demand for the merger of the north and east, we decided to contest in this election to ensure the election of a Tamil chief minister.'

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