

Identity Politics in the Eastern Province: A Reappraisal of Federalism in the Perspective of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam

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ABSTRACT

The federal demand of the Federal Party led by Father S.J.V. Chelvanayakam reached its peak at the *Vaddukoddai* Conference as a demand for self-rule. However, it was abandoned during the Thimpu talks and was later reduced to the recognition of the Northern and Eastern Provinces as the traditional homeland of the Tamils. Under the Indo-Lanka Accord, these two provinces were merged into a single North-Eastern Provincial Council. Subsequently, as per the Supreme Court ruling, they were separated into two distinct provincial councils. Along with this, the powers relating to land and police that were constitutionally granted to the provincial councils have remained unimplemented, resulting in a prolonged deadlock and leading to a mass protest demanding the devolution of those powers. Consequently, the situation has once again arisen where assistance from the Government of India is being sought for this purpose. In such a context, the question or debate as to whether the two provincial councils should be merged and strengthened appears to contradict the political reality. However, it would be more appropriate to argue or discuss that, in addition to the powers already granted through the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, further powers and resources- including those relating to land and police- should be devolved to the provincial councils. To obtain these powers from the central government, cooperation and coordination among the provincial councils are essential. According to Stuart N. Kaufman's theory of identity politics, the path to ethnic conflict begins with the discourse of one ethnic group opposing another. Such discourses contribute to the formation of hostile and discriminatory identity-based assumptions. When members of an ethnic group feel that their identity or social status is under threat, they are more likely to join people's movements that engage in reactionary politics. In this context, the minority communities living in the Northern and Eastern Provinces have weaponised their respective identities to protect their existence. Tamil nationalism has gradually transformed itself into identity-based nationalism. Father Chelvanayakam's discourse of "Tamil-speaking people" has split into two distinct identity politics—of Tamils and Muslims. Even the identity of "Tamil people" itself has become divided between the North and the East. The Tamil people of the Eastern Province, like the Muslims, are establishing and strengthening their own political institutions. The moderate organisations that once nurtured Tamil nationalism by uniting the Tamil people of the North and East are losing their influence in the East. This represents the lived reality and political landscape of the Tamil-speaking people today. Here, Father Chelvanayakam's dream of a unified "Tamil-speaking people" lies shattered and fragmented.

Key Words: Election, Federal Party, Multi-ethnic, Provincial Council, Symbolic

INTRODUCTION

The question of identity politics has remained a defining feature of Sri Lanka's post-independence political landscape, particularly in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Eastern Province. This region, home to significant Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhalese communities, has long been a site of competing territorial claims, ethnic anxieties, and political contestations. Within this context, the ideas of S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, the foremost advocate of Tamil federalism and minority rights, acquire renewed relevance. Chelvanayakam's vision of federalism was not merely a constitutional framework but a philosophical response to the persistent tensions of ethnic coexistence. His advocacy sought to reconcile regional autonomy with national unity, envisioning a system that could safeguard minority identities while preserving the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan state. The Eastern Province, with its complex demographic and historical realities, offers a critical lens through which to reassess

this federalist ideal. Therefore, this study seeks to reappraise the federalist thought of S. J. V. Chelvanayakam in light of the identity-based politics that have evolved in the Eastern Province. It aims to explore how his principles of shared governance, power devolution, and inter-ethnic cooperation could inform contemporary political discourse and contribute to a sustainable framework for peace, justice, and coexistence in Sri Lanka's plural society. To achieve these objectives, secondary data and a qualitative analytical method have been employed. Secondary data and information were gathered from literary works, journal articles, and online sources. These sources document the history, dynamics, and challenges of the politics of Tamil and Muslim people in the post-independence period. This study draws upon data and information from these sources, presenting quotations, references, summaries, and interpretive analyses, accompanied by detailed descriptions of political events and contexts.

The Symbolic Politics Theory

Since the end of the Cold War, discussions among political theorists have increasingly focused on how ethnic conflicts tend to escalate into violent confrontations. Scholars studying civil wars that arise from ethnic differences have engaged in debates to explain the causes of such phenomena. Two distinct schools of thought have emerged in this discussion:

(i) Rational Choice Theorists, and (ii) Symbolic Politics Theorists. According to the Rational Choice Theory, ethnic conflicts in nation-states emerge when domestic political institutions fail to provide legal protection and security to minority groups - a situation referred to as a *security dilemma*. The Symbolic Politics Theory, derived from social psychology, argues that *intangible variables* such as myths, symbols, and primordial emotions facilitate the creation of hostile environments between competing ethnic groups (Ogu, 2013).

The Symbolic Politics Theory can be regarded as the most accurate framework for understanding ethnic conflict. It argues that elite politics and the socialisation of competing identities serve as key factors that trigger the eruption of intense violence. The theory further assumes that psychological motivations exert influence over rational decision-making. In this regard, both schools of thought consider three key aspects in the study of ethnic conflict:

- i. The Rational Choice Theory fails to identify how deep ethnic divisions lead to the formation of organised and competing political parties. It overlooks the psychological tendency of individuals to form groups based on class-based identities and shared emotions. This is a universal condition that fosters an ideology of struggle against perceived enemies.
- ii. The Symbolic Politics Theory explains the motivations of elite political actors. Elites tend to prioritise popular ideologies and policies. Thus, this theory explains the causes behind ethnic policies that promote genocide and destructive propaganda. These actions serve not only as mechanisms to address insecurity but also as channels for people to express their hatred.
- iii. The Symbolic Politics Theory encourages firm decision-making by targeting both the state and non-state actors in addressing the nature of ethnic conflicts. At the same time, the Rational Choice Theory misguides accountability when it comes to elite-driven politics.

Stuart N. Kaufman refers to ethnic conflict or ethnic war as a form of symbolic politics. He describes this as the Symbolic Politics Theory. According to him, ethnic wars originate from deeply rooted emotions or perceptions. He argues that most political behaviours are not driven by rational thought; rather, they are motivated by symbolic emotions, such as intuition, ideological beliefs, moral values, and prejudices. Political leaders manipulate these symbolic emotions among people, mobilising them for political purposes instead of rationally considering their welfare (Kaufman, 2019). Ethnic conflicts can take various forms, ranging from genocide, violence, and civil war to protest movements and peaceful confrontations in democratic societies. According to the Symbolic Politics Theory, the pathway to ethnic conflict begins when one ethnic group engages in discourse opposing another. Such discourses foster hostile and prejudiced symbolic stereotypes. When members of an ethnic group feel that their identity or social status is under threat, they are more likely to join rebellious political movements as a form of reactive politics. If ethnic groups perceive themselves to be physically threatened, they

are more inclined to support defensive political actions that can lead to violent ethnic conflict. These perceptions and emotions evolve into social movements or military mobilisations. Based on these perceived threats, political issues are framed, and aggressive leaders emerge. The people often accept such leaders as trustworthy figures capable of leading effective mass movements (Kaufman, 2019).

Nationalist sentiments pose a serious challenge to the rationalist arguments concerning political conflict. Stuart J. Kaufman developed the ethnic politics theory to explain why ethnic violence erupts in some contexts while peace is maintained in others. According to Kaufman, conflicts are triggered by popular symbolic perceptions (such as stereotypes and status-based distinctions) and feelings of threat. He tested and applied his theory to several internationally recognised cases of violent conflict to validate its explanatory power.

Kaufman applies his theory to several violent events, such as the Muslim insurgency in southern Philippines that began in the 1970s, the civil war in southern Sudan that started in the 1980s, and the Rwandan genocide of 1994. He also analyses situations in which leaders sought to control violence arising from nationalist sentiments. For example, in South Africa, Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk jointly brought an end to apartheid, although this process came at a heavy human and material cost, with more than 15,000 people losing their lives during the negotiation period. In contrast, Julius Nyerere successfully led Tanzania, a country built upon ethnic diversity, without allowing ethnic violence to occur.

Demand for the Federal system in Sri Lanka

The Kandyan National Assembly was established in 1925. In November 1927, it demanded that a federal system of government be established in Sri Lanka, through which regional autonomy should be granted to the Kandyan people (Jeyaraj, 2021). Therefore, it is worth noting that the demand for a federal system in Sri Lanka first originated from the Kandyan National Assembly. Following that, since 1949, the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (Federal Party) has been demanding the establishment of a federal system of government for over seventy-five years. To achieve this, the party's leaders, S. J. V. Chelvanayakam and S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, even signed an agreement. However, it was later abandoned. Since then, the federal demand put forward by the Federal Party has been rejected by every government that has come to power to date.

Eastern Province Politics

From the time the Ceylon Tamil Congress was founded, the Muslim people living in the Northern and Eastern Provinces had worked in co-operation with the Tamil Congress. During the period when Tamil leaders, under the leadership of S.J.V. Chelvanayagam (Known as *Thanthai* or Father), broke away from the Ceylon Tamil Congress to form the Federal Party (Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi), the Muslim people of the Northern and Eastern Provinces remained aligned with the Federal Party. When S.J.V. Chelvanayagam founded the Tamil Federal Party, he stated:

“...We realise that under a unitary system of government, the Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka are increasingly being pushed into a lower status. The only way for the Tamil-speaking people to live in this country as free and self-respecting communities is to establish a self-governing administration for them as a component of a united Sri Lanka under federalism...”(Chelvanayagam, 1949).

Since the 1950s, among the Muslim people of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, there was a belief that Tamil nationalism would protect them. Although S.J.V. Chelvanayagam used the concept of “Tamil-speaking people,” he did not negate the religious distinctiveness or identity of Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities. This was clarified by *Thanthai* Chelva at the Federal Party's mass rally in Trincomalee, as follows: “This is not only the struggle of the Tamils, but the struggle of all Tamil-speaking people. Power should be shared between the two communities, the Tamils and Muslims” (Sampanthan, 2012). Through this, S.J.V. Chelvanayagam guaranteed that the freedom and dignity of the Tamil-speaking people would be protected.

In 1956, the Federal Party put forward its federal demands and contested the parliamentary elections in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. In this election, out of the sixteen (16) constituencies contested in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, the Federal Party won in ten (10) constituencies. In the Northern Province, it won in six

(6) out of nine (9) constituencies, and in the Eastern Province, it won in four (4) out of seven (7) constituencies (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 1956). In the Eastern Province, the Muslim candidates who contested on behalf of the Federal Party in the Kalmunai and Pottuvil constituencies won in this election. In addition, the victories of the Tamil candidates in the Batticaloa and Trincomalee constituencies were strengthened by the votes of the Muslim communities living in those areas. In six constituencies, the voters either did not express their general support for the federal demand or can be said to have rejected it.

In the 1977 parliamentary general election, when the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) sought a mandate from the people of the Northern and Eastern Provinces to establish a separate state, the Muslim United Front (MUF), which had been formed in 1976, officially accepted TULF's demand for a separate state and agreed to contest the election together. M.H.M. Ashraff campaigned among the Tamil and Muslim communities in the East Province, saying that "If elder brother Amirthalingam does not come forward to secure Eelam, younger brother Ashraff will secure it" (Jeyaraj, 2021). This period is recorded as a time when both communities lived together unitedly under the concept of Tamil-speaking people.

The 1981 District Development Council election marked a permanent rupture in the relationship between Ashraff and TULF. In this election, the TULF held discussions with the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF) to secure the support of Muslim voters in the Eastern Province. In the Ampara District, where Muslims were 41.7% of the population in 1981 (Census of Population and Housing -1981), the MULF requested the TULF to nominate a Muslim as the chief candidate. However, the TULF rejected this request (Jeyaraj, 2021). Disappointed by this, the MULF joined hands with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to contest the election, but was defeated. The defeat of the MULF in the 1981 District Development Council election inspired Ashraff to form a separate political party for Muslims. The failure of Ashraff's strong belief in Tamil politics became the main reason that strengthened the idea of establishing an independent party. As a result, in 1986, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) was founded in the Eastern Province (Jeyaraj, 2021).

Ethno-religious identity in the Eastern Province

The Sri Lankan Muslims, also known as Moors, possess a distinct ethno-religious identity. Constituting about 9.6% of the country's population (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2012), nearly two-thirds of them live in the seven provinces predominantly inhabited by the Sinhalese, and the rest reside in the Tamil-majority Northern and Eastern provinces. Most of the Muslim people, including those living among the Sinhalese people, speak Tamil at home and are classified as Tamil-speaking people. Muslim students, including those attending Muslim schools, receive their secondary education in the Tamil language. Through this, the Muslim community has produced many Tamil scholars, writers, poets, journalists, and artists.

Although Muslims are dispersed throughout Sri Lanka, they are concentrated in the Eastern Province. A large number of Muslims from the Batticaloa-Ampara districts live intermixed with Tamil villages in the areas known as "*Ezhuwankarai*" (the shore where the sun rises). In contrast, the areas in the western part of the Batticaloa lagoon, called "*Paduvankarai*" (the shore where the sun sets), are predominantly inhabited by Tamil people. Muslims in the Eastern Province, which holds a significant Muslim vote, have contributed to the election of at least four to seven Members of Parliament. On certain occasions, Eastern Province Muslim voters have played a role in securing nearly 50% of the total Muslim representation in Parliament. Despite this favourable context, the overall leadership of the Muslim community had not been in the hands of the Muslim people in the Eastern Province for many years. Politically influential Muslim leaders from the Central, Western, and Southern provinces dominated the Muslim people of the Eastern Province. However, all of this changed following M.H.M. Ashraff's entry into politics.

In accordance with the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution, Tamil leaders, including Appapillai Amirthalingam, who had lost their parliamentary seats and had been residing in India, returned to Sri Lanka in August 1986. At that time, Amirthalingam held discussions with M.H.M. Ashraff regarding the aspirations of the Muslim community. During this discussion, the view was expressed that the Muslim community identifies itself not as Tamil-speaking people but as Muslim people. The self-identity of the Muslim people is based on ethno-religious principles, rather than ethno-linguistic (Jeyaraj, 2021). Ashraff later stated that Tamil leaders,

including Amirthalingam, failed to accept his view. In this context, the Muslim community totally rejected ethno-linguistic frameworks. This socio-cultural reality has, in recent times, acquired pronounced political dimensions.

It was alleged that the TULF, which had previously been the voice of Tamil-speaking people, had now become the voice of the Tamils. This was recorded as a major political setback in the context of the demand for a separate state or the merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces. As suspicion among Tamil militant groups toward the Muslim community began to increase, clashes between the two sides also intensified. At this juncture, in 1988, an agreement consisting of eighteen (18) points was signed between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the MULF. The first clause of this agreement reads as follows:

“It is understood that although the Muslim people living in Sri Lanka speak the Tamil language, they are a distinct ethnic group falling within the totality of Tamil nationality. The Muslim people recognise that the area composed of the Northern and Eastern provinces is as much their traditional homeland as it is of the rest of the Tamil-speaking people. The Muslim people believe that their interests could be safeguarded only in their homeland, and this could be achieved only through a greater unity between all Tamil-speaking people” ... (Bazeer, 2022).

However, during the 1990s, the trust that had existed between the two sides weakened. Beginning in July, both parties unleashed violence against each other. With considerable backing from the Sri Lankan military, the Muslim Home Guards launched attacks on Tamil villages, and in retaliation, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) carried out counterattacks. These mutual assaults claimed hundreds of lives on both sides. At the height of this conflict, in October, the Muslim people who had been living in the Northern Province for generations were expelled without notice. This was criticised as an act by which Tamil-speaking people themselves undermined the very principle of creating a separate state for safeguarding the rights of Tamil-speaking communities. Along with the expulsion of the Muslims from the Northern Province, Muslim students studying at the University of Jaffna and some university lecturers were also expelled. The Muslim students from the Eastern Province who were expelled from the University of Jaffna were subsequently enrolled at the Eastern University. Nevertheless, over the next five years, significant changes happened. Muslim students and university lecturers studying at the Eastern University were firm in their demand for the establishment of a new university of their own, citing security reasons. Ashraff provided both the political platform and support for this cause. With Ashraff's full backing for the demands of the students and lecturers, in 1995, the government established a new university named the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka in the Oluvil village of the Ampara District.

On 23 January 2003, the student community of the South Eastern University gathered a large crowd and issued a declaration that became widely known as the “Oluvil Declaration.” This was the first public declaration of its kind to be issued by the Muslims of the Eastern Province. This declaration attracted the attention of observers, writers, and those engaged with Sri Lankan affairs across the world. However, despite the rapid emergence of the “Oluvil Declaration,” it failed to generate a significant impact due to the lack of active political participation among the Muslim community. Alarmed by this situation, Muslim politicians acted swiftly to ensure that such a circumstance would not arise again in the future. The “Oluvil Declaration” emphasised the concept of a Muslim homeland and asserted their right to self-determination in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Among the demands put forward in this declaration were: (Bazeer, 2008)

- The Muslims of the North and East constitute a distinct community with their own religious and cultural identity,
- The North-Eastern Province also represents the traditional homeland of the Muslim people,
- The Muslims of this region possess the right to determine their own political aspirations and entitlements,
- The peace process should ensure a separate autonomous arrangement for Muslims by integrating the Muslim-majority areas within the North-Eastern Province.
- The rights of Muslims residing outside the North-Eastern Province must also be safeguarded.

The issue of the Tamil-speaking people put forward by Father Chelvanayagam gradually narrowed down to become an issue concerning only the Tamils. From the motivating force of ethnic and linguistic identity, a new driving force based on religious identity began to emerge and gradually spread within the community. This driving force naturally created a new environment and began to transform the Muslim community into a distinct identity-based social group. This transformation manifested itself in two forms - those of ethnic and religious identity. Based on this dynamic, the idea gained strength that equality and equitable solutions could be achieved only through the sharing of power. The *Vaddukoddai* Resolution, the *Thimpu* Talks Proposals, and the *Oluvil* Declaration each, from different perspectives, emphasise a system of autonomy centred on the future political and socio-economic aspirations of the Tamil and Muslim communities, who form the majority populations in the Northern and Eastern provinces. In essence, both communities strongly demand that powers of self-governance be guaranteed within a federal system of government.

Intra-group conflict within the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

The Intra-group conflict within the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) refers to the internal division that occurred in 2004. Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, known as *Karuna Amman*, who had been serving as the Eastern Province Commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), publicly announced at a press conference that he was breaking away from the LTTE and would henceforth operate independently in the Eastern Province. This division was rooted in several factors, including (Ratnayake, 2004):

- A separate administrative structure should be established for the Eastern Province.
- A distinct ceasefire agreement should be made with the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and the government.
- Among the 30 administrative divisions created by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), not a single fighter from the Eastern Province had been appointed as a leader.
- Eastern Province cadres were providing security to the high-ranking LTTE commanders who travelled around in luxury vehicles.
- People of the East had begun to doubt whether justice would be ensured for the Eastern Province in the interim administration that the LTTE planned to establish.

The main points emphasised by him regarding his decision became a major topic of discussion internationally. Scholars and journalists had significantly contributed to shaping the underlying reasons for Muralitharan's change of mind. However, they did not continue to work in alignment with his policies until the end. Eventually, he was left isolated. Nevertheless, Muralitharan's internal rebellion weakened the military structure of the LTTE. Also, it shattered the notion that the LTTE were the sole representative of the Tamil people. The defection significantly weakened the LTTE's military and political strength, especially in the Eastern Province, as Karuna took with him several thousand cadres and much of the LTTE's eastern infrastructure. This internal split marked a major turning point in the Sri Lankan civil conflict, ultimately contributing to the LTTE's decline in the years that followed.

Eastern Provincial Council Election

The first election for the Eastern Provincial Council was held on May 10, 2008. During this period, the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) party, which had allied with the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) that was in power at the central government, secured 308,886 votes (52.21%), winning 20 out of the total 37 seats. The leader of the TMVP, Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, was subsequently sworn in as the Chief Minister. The SLMC, which had allied with the United National Party (UNP), received 250,732 votes (42.38%), winning 15 seats. In this election, by forming alliances with the two major national parties, both the TMVP and the SLMC together secured 559,618 votes and divided 35 seats between them. A total of 591,676 votes were cast in this election (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2008). The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the largest party representing Sri Lankan Tamils in the Northern and Eastern provinces, boycotted this election.

The second election for the Eastern Provincial Council was held on September 8, 2012. During this period, the TMVP, which had allied with the UPFA, which was in power at the central government, received 200,044 votes (31.58%) and won 14 out of the 37 seats. The TNA, which had boycotted the 2008 provincial council election, contested this election and received 193,827 votes (30.59%), winning 11 seats. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) obtained 132,917 votes (20.98%), and the United National Party (UNP) secured 74,901 votes (11.82%), winning 7 and 4 seats, respectively. The National Freedom Front obtained 9,522 votes (1.50%) and won 1 seat. A total of 633,534 voters had cast their votes in this election. In this election, the TNA, which contested by promoting Tamil nationalism and the idea of a merged North-Eastern provincial system, secured only 193,827 votes and its percentage was 30.59% (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2012). It was therefore evident that around 70% of the voters in the Eastern Province had voted against the policies of the TNA.

The UPFA, on this occasion, assumed control of the Eastern Provincial Council in alliance with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). According to the agreement between the SLMC and the UPFA, a UPFA candidate would serve as Chief Minister for two and a half years, after which an SLMC candidate would assume the position for the remaining term. According to the agreement, M. N. Abdul Majeed, a UPFA provincial council member, was sworn in as Chief Minister before President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Among the four provincial ministers, Ibrahim Mohamed Mansoor and Ahamed Nazeer Zainulabdeen were appointed as ministers representing the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). The remaining two ministers were Meera Sahib Uthumalebbe from the National Congress led by A. L. M. Athaullah, which was allied with the UPFA, and Tissanayake from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), also a coalition partner of the UPFA.

It should be noted that, despite Tamil voters securing 22,338 votes in the provincial council election, no ministerial positions were allocated to representatives of the TMVP (Balachandran, 2012). As a result, the Eastern Provincial Council effectively became entirely controlled by Muslim members. Even though Tamils formed a significant portion of the electorate in the Eastern Province, they were unable to secure a single ministerial appointment. This once again demonstrated that the national government or central authorities exclusively determine who governs the Eastern Provincial Council. This situation signalled a continued government effort to establish that the Eastern Province is not subject to Tamil nationalist claims.

Changes in the Demographic Composition of the Eastern Province"

It is also important to understand the changes in the demographic composition of the Eastern Province. According to the official 2012 census, in the Eastern Province, Tamils constitute 39.79%, Sri Lankan Moors (Muslims) 36.72%, Sinhalese 23.15%, and others 0.34% of the total population. By religion, Muslims make up 37.12%, Hindus 34.78%, Buddhists 22.87%, and Christians 5.21% (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). Under these circumstances, it would be very difficult to gain support from the Eastern Province population for a North-East provincial merger. Census data shows that, in the Eastern Province comprising three districts, the Muslim population holds an electoral advantage comparable to that of the Tamils. In the Ampara district, Muslims form the majority and have emerged as a significant political force.

Looking Ahead

Efforts to merge the Northern and Eastern Provinces have already sparked debates and discussions within Sri Lanka's political landscape. In these discussions, participants must approach the matter with a democratic mindset, thinking intellectually and presenting their views thoughtfully. The Northern Province population has expressed, through elections, its preference to merge the Eastern Province with the North. Viewed within the framework of the provincial council system, it can be argued that the Northern Provincial Council, with the support of the Northern population, is prepared to work in coordination with the Eastern Provincial Council.

However, the provincial council and the people of the Eastern Province are not prepared for such a merger, as made clear by provincial council elections, general elections, and the split within the LTTE. If the provincial councils are to be merged against the general will of the people, it would require legal sanction obtained through political manoeuvring. Achieving these faces numerous obstacles. Moreover, the post-internal conflict control of the Eastern Provincial Council government presents an additional barrier, and historically, no government has seriously pursued the idea of merging the Northern and Eastern Provincial Councils.

The people of the Eastern Province who oppose merging with the Northern Province have been organised and active under the leadership of the T.M.V.P. and Muslim political parties. Since the time the North-East merger was first proposed, the Muslim population in the Eastern Province has consistently rejected the merger. Similarly, following the split of the LTTE, the Tamil population residing in the Eastern Province has also opposed the merger. In the last general election, T.M.V.P. leader S. Chandrakantan contested in the Batticaloa District while in prison and was elected to Parliament with 67,692 votes (22.71%), the highest number of votes received by any candidate in that district.

Historically, from the beginning of the merged provincial system to the armed struggle for a separate state, the Tamil population in the Eastern Province has experienced numerous grievances, leadership conflicts, rivalries, and animosities, all of which contributed to the situation. There is a widespread perception that no overarching leadership capable of guiding the Eastern Province Tamils impartially has yet emerged. In this context, the Eastern Province Tamil population considers the LTTE to have also failed.

The social and economic differences between the Jaffna Tamils and the Batticaloa Tamils were already well established both anthropologically and scientifically. Although united by language, the Eastern Province Tamils—particularly those in Batticaloa and Ampara districts—distinguish themselves from the Northern Tamils through differences in lifestyle, social structure, dietary habits, customs, and cultural practices. As a result, marital ties between the two communities are largely avoided.

However, anti-colonial movements had previously united the Tamil population, overcoming these social differences, through non-violent struggles against ethnic domination. During the armed struggle, even though the Jaffna and Batticaloa Tamils were united under the LTTE's centralised representative structure, this unity became impossible after the 2004 split within the LTTE. In this context, the Eastern Province Tamils fear that if the Eastern Province is merged with the Northern Province, they may be marginalised or lose their political leadership. They are concerned that they could become a small minority under the dominance of the Northern Tamils, losing their autonomy and being politically fragmented.

According to the 1981 census, the population composition of the Eastern Province consisted of 40% Tamils, 32% Muslims, and 26% Sinhalese. During the same period, the temporarily merged North-Eastern Province had a population comprising 65% Tamils, 18% Muslims, and 13% Sinhalese. In such a context, a merger of the Eastern Province with the Northern Province would make the Tamil population a politically dominant group. Consequently, the Muslim and Sinhalese populations of the Eastern Province would become minorities within the merged region. If ethnic cleansing activities similar to those carried out by Tamil militants in the past were to recur, the situation could become even more severe. Furthermore, the Muslims of the Eastern Province fear that such a merger would lead to the permanent loss of their political space and that they would be marginalised as a minority. These concerns have been evident since the periods of both non-violent and armed struggles, often reflected in the political leadership of the community. Thus, under the prevailing power relations, the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces is not only a major challenge but can also be considered impractical.

The federal demand led by Father S. J. V. Chelvanayakam's Federal Party reached its peak as a call for a separate state, but was later abandoned during the Thimpu Talks, evolving into the concept of the Northern and Eastern Provinces as the traditional homeland of the Tamils. Under the Indo-Lanka Accord, these provinces were temporarily merged into a single North-Eastern Provincial Council, but following a Supreme Court ruling, they were once again separated into two distinct provincial councils. Since then, there has been a prolonged deadlock over the implementation of the land and police powers that were constitutionally granted to the provincial councils. This unresolved issue has now turned into a major public demand, with calls for the Indian government's intervention and support resurfacing once again.

In this context, the discussion or debate on whether the two provincial councils should be merged and strengthened appears to be inconsistent with the present political realities. However, it would be more appropriate and meaningful to argue or deliberate on the need to grant the provincial councils additional powers and resources, including the land and police powers that are already provided under the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. For the provincial councils to successfully obtain these powers from the central government, cooperation and coordination must be maintained between the provincial councils themselves.

The mere conduct of elections cannot be taken as sufficient evidence that democracy truly prevails in a country. As the Greek political philosopher Aristotle observed, “Democracy is not the best form of government.” In practice, democracy often represents the domination of the majority over the minority. Those who are strong in thought and conviction but weak in numbers tend to be suppressed or marginalised within a democratic framework. In this light, the failure of Father S. J. V. Chelvanayakam’s efforts to establish autonomy for the Tamil-speaking people of the Northern and Eastern Provinces under a federal system can be interpreted as the inherent limitations of democracy itself.

The path to ethnic conflict often begins with the narratives and discourses of one ethnic group directed against another. Such discourses contribute to the creation of hostile and prejudiced identity-based assumptions. When members of an ethnic group perceive a threat to their group identity or social status, they are more likely to join populist movements that engage in reactive or oppositional politics.

In this context, the minority communities living in the Northern and Eastern Provinces have weaponised their identities as a means of protecting their existence. Tamil nationalism, in turn, has narrowed itself into an identity-based nationalism. Father S. J. V. Chelvanayakam’s ideal of a unified “Tamil-speaking people” has now split into two distinct identity politics- one representing the Tamils and the other the Muslims. Even within the Tamil community, the Tamil identity itself is fragmenting into “Northern Tamils” and “Eastern Tamils.” The Eastern Tamils, like the Muslims, have been establishing and strengthening their own political institutions. Meanwhile, the moderate organisations that once promoted a unified Tamil nationalism across the North and East are losing influence in the Eastern Province. This represents the current socio-political reality of the Tamil-speaking population-a landscape where Father Chelvanayakam’s dream of a united Tamil-speaking community now lies shattered and fragmented.

Therefore, it is essential to create a framework of social democracy in which all communities living in Sri Lanka can coexist in peace, dignity, and justice. Such a framework must emerge through new and alternative thinking among the younger generation—a vision that moves beyond the limitations of the past. Any delay in this process will only erode the opportunities that remain. All parties involved in or affected by ethnic conflict must understand this reality and work collectively to build an environment where people can live in harmony, with self-respect and mutual trust.

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