

19th to vote for a new provincial council for the north and east of the country. They rejected the boycott calls of the Tamil Tiger guerrillas, who during the five-year civil war have been thought to be the most powerful Tamil group. Ordinary Tamils have now elected councillors who renounce separatism. They have, it seems, had enough of war.

The election was the main plank of last year's agreement between India's prime minister, Mr Rajiv Gandhi, and Sri Lanka's President Junius Jayewardene. Some powers, including control of the police and the collection of local taxes, are to be granted to the joint council. This is a fair dose of autonomy, but not independence.

The Tigers kept forcing postponements, but the election had to be held before Sri Lanka's presidential election, due on December 19th. The two main presidential candidates, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike and the prime minister, Mr Ranasinghe Premadasa, both dislike the deal with India. But Mr Jayewardene is determined to get a settlement in place and Mr Gandhi wants something to show for his efforts, in order to impress the Tamil electorate of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which is due to go to the polls in January.

A cunning (if undemocratic) deal sewed up the Tiger heartland in the north. Advised by the Indians, the Tigers' two main rivals, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and the Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front (ENDLF), agreed to contest the election. They then agreed to share the 36 seats, and thus do without a vote.

In the east, the Tigers called a general strike. Locals were so frightened that 400 election officers had to be flown in from Colombo to man the polls. Still, the EPRLF, the ruling United National party and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress put up candidates, giving the Tamils, the Sinhalese and the Muslims—who each make up around a third of the population—their own people to vote for.

In the main Tamil district of Batticaloa, 79% of the voters, risking reprisals, braved the Tigers and went to the polls. It was the biggest turnout ever in the district. Thousands were still queueing when the polls closed. Many said they were voting not for any particular party but for the chance of peace. They had already been given a taste of security by Indian troops, who have pushed back the Tigers in the east. The Indians had threatened to leave if there was a low turnout.

The Muslims make up 8% of the country's population, have similar grievances to the Tamils, but previously lacked political organisation. This time they voted energetically: they have been galvanised by the

leadership of 40-year-old Mr Mohammed Ashraff. His Sri Lankan Muslim Congress urged participation in the provincial council. The Sinhalese hardly bothered to vote. In the Sinhalese-dominated town of Amparai the turnout was only 5%. They probably felt abandoned by the government in Colombo, and are understandably bitter. The government has been urging Sinhalese to move into the area to balance the Tamil population.

The EPRLF and the Muslims got 17 seats each in the east; the United National party got only one. Altogether, the EPRLF-ENDLF alliance got three-quarters of the seats in the joint council. The Tigers' refusal to take part looks like a mistake: for the first time everybody is questioning their claim to be the Tamils' only true representatives.

While the north and east are demanding an end to violence, the rest of the country is fast getting bloodier. In contrast to the Tamils' brave demonstration against Tiger threats, the country's Sinhalese majority looks cowed in the face of the group of Sinhalese extremists known by its initials JVP for Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (People's Liberation Front). The JVP called strikes and demonstrations which brought the country to a halt two weeks ago. Many Sinhalese workers are still striking. They are probably staying away less out of support for than out of fear of the JVP: it has a habit of killing opponents.

Some people fear that martial law will be declared. Others argue that a military government already exists. The president's commander-in-chief of the armed forces. A state of emergency has been in force since the last presidential election in 1982. Since November 2nd there has been curfew every night, all over the island. Troops may shoot curfew violators or demonstrators. A body staying away from work illegally can be sentenced to death.

Soldiers are being called in to check buses and petrol tankers and to man power and pumping stations. They may even sit in judgment on cases concerning breaches of the new emergency regulations. Now that newsreaders on radio and television are being threatened, soldiers are being trained to take over from them. The sight of a uniformed presenter on the nightly news may bring home to Sri Lankans how the civil war has brought them to army

THE ECONOMIST NOVEMBER 26 1988

Sri Lanka

The Tamils defy the Tigers

FROM OUR SRI LANKA CORRESPONDENT

THE island is turning inside out. Just when Sri Lanka's Tamil north-east may be reaching for peace, the Sinhalese south is hurrying towards martial law.

The Tamils amazed most other Sri Lankans by turning out in force on November



The voters' minder

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