

# Northern Provincial Election 2013: Mainstream print media front-page coverage

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22 and 23 September 2013

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மற்றும் கொள்கைகளுக்கான நிலையம்

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## Executive Summary

The Northern Provincial Council (NPC) election in Sri Lanka was held on the 21 September 2013 for the first time in twenty-five years. The TNA won a total of 30 seats including 2 bonus seats in the 38 member council. The voter turnout was as high as 67.5%, which was quite unexpected due to what was believed to be a widespread disillusionment with the election process and serious intimidation of voters leading up to and on election day.

The frontpages of mainstream print media were monitored on 22 and 23 September to study the coverage given to this election and the results. Unsurprisingly, even amongst non-State / privately owned media, the Sinhala newspapers carried relatively fewer articles, lead news stories and editorials in comparison to Tamil and English newspapers, which featured a lot more coverage around the election and its significance for the Tamil people in the North.

Of particular significance in State-owned newspapers is the lack of coverage even in the Tamil Newspapers to the election result and its significance. Thinakaran, the only State owned Tamil newspaper, did not publish any lead news around the results on the 22 September, the day after the election. The State-owned English newspaper, Daily News and Sinhala Newspaper, Dinamina published lead news on the 22 September. Even the few articles published in Thinakaran on 22 and 23 September were clearly biased towards and promoting the government's perspectives and opinions.

## Non-State owned Tamil Newspapers

After the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) election came to a close on the evening of September 21, four main Tamil newspapers namely, Thinakkural, Virakesari, Sudar Oli and Uthayan included lead news stories related to the elections on 22 and 23 September.

As highlighted in the table below, the Uthayan newspaper published the most number of news items during these two days. A total of fourteen (14) news items were published out of which, on 22 September, the front page consisted of ten (10) news items. This is the only newspaper which had a multitude of NPC election related news featured on its front page. The table below shows data collected in relation to these newspapers during 22 and 23 September 2013.

Newspaper	Lead News		Editorial		Photo		Other news
	22 Sept	23 Sept	22 Sept	23 Sept	22 Sept	23 Sept	22-23 Sept
Thinakkural	1	1	1	1	1	-	5
Virakesari	1	1	1	1	2	-	5
Sudar Oli	1	1	1	-	-	1	5
Uthayan	1	1	-	1	-	-	12
Total	4	4	4	2	3	1	27

The nature of the lead news on 22 to 23 September most frequently read 'Historic Victory' and 'Grand Victory'. Headlines such as "The historic victory of TNA in the North" (Virakesari, 23 September), "Grand Victory" (Sudar Oli, 22 September) and "Historic Victory" (Sudar Oli, 23 September) was featured as the lead stories. However notable is the fact that the Uthayan newspaper, based in Jaffna did not reflect this theme in their newspaper, and featured headlines of a slightly different nature; "Blossoming of the Tamil Government" (22 September).

Additionally, Uthayan published a news article on 22 September where they mentioned a fake copy of the Uthayan newspaper that had been distributed on the morning of the election, 21 September. This fake edition (the front page of which is reproduced on Page 3) claimed that Tamil National Alliance (TNA) candidate Ananthy Sasitharan had joined the Government. It also mentioned that the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), a political party, was no longer contesting in the election.

Although all four newspapers placed a considerable amount of importance and coverage on the success of the TNA, they also repeatedly flagged the interference caused by the military during the election period. For example, on the 22 September, Uthayan published an article about the victory of TNA as its lead story; however the remaining nine articles were about military interference and election violence.



## Notable headlines and articles about military interference

### **Majority of the people voted amidst increased violence: Record of 100 incidents of violence directly involved with military” (Thinnakkural, 22<sup>nd</sup> September)**

This article published in Thinakkural was sourced from the election violence monitoring body PAFFREL. Military interference recorded by PAFFREL during the election in Jaffna includes threatening and obstructing people from voting, attacking voters causing them to disperse, attacking civilians and members of Local Government, insisting that people vote for the Government party and election campaigning.

### **“In search of Mavai in his relative’s house” (Thinnakkural, 22 September)**

In this incident, military intelligence had gone in search of TNA MP Mavai. He is quoted in the Thinakkural as saying that when he had gone to vote at the Mavittapuram Kollankalatti Hindu Tamil Mixed School, he noticed “a suspicious looking person standing outside the polling station”. He inquired after the individual and then handed him over to the police. A person accompanying Mavai to the polling station videotaped the incident. When he walked out of the polling station, he noticed another three individuals in civilian clothing loitering outside similar to the first man. According to the newspaper’s, it was only after leaving the polling station, that the military had gone to his relatives’ house in search of him. He mentioned that they had also inquired about the person who had taken the video. A video of this incident can be accessed [here](#).

A photograph of the incident was published as a separate news story on the front page of the same newspaper with the caption “When Mavai had gone to vote at the Valikamam North polling station, people had surrounded and captured one male in civilian attire who looked suspicious. He was then investigated by Mavai Senathirajah and handed over to the police.”



வலிகாமம் வாக்குப் பகுதியில் தமிழ்த் தேசியக் கூட்டமைப்பின் எம்.பி.மாகவ சேனாதிராஜா வாக்காளிகளின் சென்ற போது சந்தேகத்திற்கு இடமாக திகைஞ்சூர் ஒருவர் பொது மக்களால் மடக்கிப் பிடிக்கப்பட்டு மாகவ சேனாதிராஜாவால் விசாரிக்கப்பட்டு பொலீஸாரிடம் ஒப்படைக்கப்பட்டார்.

### **“Firing of candidate Sayanathan’s vehicle” (Uthayan, 22 September)**

The Deputy Chairman of the Chavakachcheri Pradeshiya Sabha when delivering lunch to the polling agents at the Chavakachcheri Varani Mahavidyalayam, was being followed by what appeared to be military intelligence. This incident was videotaped by Sayanathan, an election candidate of the TNA party. The military, who had noticed Sayanathan videotaping, immediately entered an army camp nearby. Sayanathan’s vehicle was later shot at by from within the army camp.

### **“Despite the threat caused by military, there was 69% turnout for the election” (Sudar Oli, 22 September)**

This article was published in Sudar Oli on 22 September, which highlighted the turnout of voters despite election violence and disturbances caused by the military.

## Editorials

Out of the four Tamil newspapers, only Thinakkural and Virakesari featured the NPC election in their editorials during the days following the election. Sudar Oli covered the election on 22 September and Uthayan covered the election on September 23.

The Editorials stated that the people of the North, through their votes, made the Government of Sri Lanka realize that they are looking forward to a solution to their problems. An example of this is the title of the Editorial in Virakesari on 23 September 2013: “The verdict given by the people of the North”. The Editorial states that the Sri Lankan Government branded the TNA’s election statement as a demand for a separate state and blamed the party for attempting to divide the country. However, the Editorial says that during the election, the people of the North gave their full support to the TNA’s policy, which indicates that they are more interested in obtaining their rights as opposed to obtaining development and other benefits from the Government.

The Thinakkural Editorial on 22 September is titled “A new beginning”. This Editorial articulates that the struggle to obtain rights for the Tamil people has been going on for the past sixty years. The first thirty years of this struggle was through Ahimsa (non-violence) and the last thirty years was through armed struggle, which also came to an end after the destruction of Mullivaikkal. The Editorial also states the following:

“Mr. C. V. Vigneswaran has stated that the third step of this struggle will be a diplomatic war with the support of the International Community, which would be achieved by obtaining and strengthening the full power granted to the Provincial Council. This would also be a struggle to obtain the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment Plus that has been mentioned on numerous occasions by President Mahinda Rajapakse. This struggle is therefore not that of separating or dividing the state, which, the Government is also fully aware of. As far as the minority is concerned, the struggle will not come to an end, and NPC election is just a new beginning.”

## Non-State owned Sinhala newspapers

According to the table below, 3 Sinhala Newspapers, Lankadeepa, Lakbima and Divaina had published a total of 7 news items in the two days after the election. There was no lead news stories published on 22 September on any of the papers. However, Lankadeepa and Lakbima published 1 lead news item each on 23 September.

Newspaper	Lead News		Editorial		Photo		Other news
	22 Sept	23 Sept	22 Sept	23 Sept	22 Sept	23 Sept	22-23 Sept
Lankadeepa	-	1	-	-	1	-	1
Lakbima	-	1	-	1	-	-	2
Divaina	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Total	-	4	-	1	2	-	4

It's abundantly clear that the Sinhala newspapers did not place much prominence to the NPC elections in comparison to Tamil print media. On 22 September, there were no headlines or themes similar to Tamil Newspapers. Simple headlines, with no relevance to any particular party, such as "The Chief Minister will be announced after the arrival of the President" (Lakbima, 22 September) and "Cases against those who did not abide by the law" (Divaina, 22 September) were published.

On September 23 however, the newspapers gave high priority to the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and the elections that were conducted in the Central and North-Western Province's. In all three newspapers, the lead stories had large images of the President with his hands raised.

Lankadeepa had an image of the President with raised hands, the image of the Dayasiri Jayasekera who had obtained the most number of votes in the North-Western Province, and the image of Anuradha Lanka Jayaratne who had obtained the most number of votes in the Central Province, in front of a large crowd of people.

There was no image of anyone from the Northern Province in a similar setting.

Only Lankadeepa and Lakbima ran lead news stories about the NPC election. However, the principle story was still that of UPFA success. For example, Lankadeepa's lead was "UPFA has drunk from the pot of victory". In this item, they also included a small heading titled "The North goes to the TNA".

Lakbima's lead was "Grand Victory for Mahinda" and under the image of the President, a title relating to the TNA as "The North goes to the TNA". The title of these two articles about the TNA is notable as they both are identical, conveying the same message.

In Lakbima, there was a news item released under the title of "Heavy competition among parties to obtain power in the North" on 22 September. It was also stated that the United National Party (UNP) and the Muslim Congress had a secret liaison with the TNA in order to build a Northern Provincial Council. However the source of this information was not revealed in the article.

Lakbima, again on 23 September, released a news item under the header "Northern politics through Nil Rella". In this article, Minister Basil Rajapakse claims that the Government, through Nil Rella, will implement the development work in the North. He also claims that Vadakkin Vasantham was created to revive the North in terms of development and does not partake in publicizing the Government.

## Editorials

Of the three newspapers, only Lakbima mentioned the NPC elections in its Editorial. The Editorial declared,

"The Government, which lost terribly in the NPC election, is not something that can be overlooked. It should be noted that the people had voted for TNA not because of the political party or because of racism. The Tamil people in the North have not received a just solution for simple problems they face every day. It doesn't appear that the Government is concerned about solving the ethnic issue in the North. It is apparent that the Government is procrastinating and buying time by ignoring these issues in the hope that the problems will go away on their own. The Parliament Select Committee, due through their actions, has given the impression of being deceitful to the Tamil people in the North."



Divaina, on 22 September published a photograph of people carrying the boxes from the Divisional Secretariat's office to the polling booths with the protection of the Police during the election in the North.

## State owned newspapers

Thinakaran, Daily News, Dinamina and Silumina are the four State owned and controlled newspapers that were studied. The Daily News and Dinamina published 1 lead article on 22 September. Thinakaran, a Tamil Newspaper published one lead news on 23 September. In addition to which, they also published a total of 5 regular news items during these two days.

Newspaper	Lead News		Editorial		Photo		Other news 22-23 Sept
	22 Sept	23 Sept	22 Sept	23 Sept	22 Sept	23 Sept	
Thinakaran	-	1	-	1	-	-	5
Daily News	1	-	-	1	-	-	2
Dinamina	1	-	-	1	-	-	1
Silumina	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Total	2	1	1	2	-	-	8

Thinakaran published a news article on 22 September entitled "We are for each other: Sangari Ayya and Siddha". The article claims that four members who joined the Government deserted the PLOTE leader Siddharthan. Therefore, Siddharthan follows Sangari Ayya where he goes. As Sangari Ayya is also alone, they are each other's greatest companions.

The authors note that this article bears no relevance to the election results of the NPC.

The second article that was on the front page on 22 September was titled "Sir, please don't stop what we are getting too" where a discussion between an elderly man and a young boy is described in detail. The boy explains to the elderly man about the development carried out by the Government, and how they should accept it without complaining.

This again does not directly reference the NPC elections and instead promotes the development work done by the Government in the North.

The Daily News had on 22 September a lead news article titled "Aye for govt's vision; ITAK wins North" under which one subheading titled "UPFA does it again" was published related to the NPC elections. This paper sourced from three ministers, namely, Hon. Susil Premajayantha, Hon. Maithripala Sirisena and Hon. Basil Rajapaksa, published three news items relating to the NPC on the front page on 23 September.

In the article, "North appreciates democracy", where Gen. Secretary of the UPFA, Hon. Minister Susil Premajayantha was cited, He compared Sri Lanka and other countries such as Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq and Egypt in their post-war period, and claimed that Sri Lanka was the only country that was successful in conducting an election in a former conflict zone while the other countries were not able to implement democracy at the same speed. He highlighted the recent election in Afghanistan which was conducted in 2010 where only 36% of the voters cast their votes, whereas in Mullaitivu – 70% of the people turned up to vote. This is a significant amount as this area was the most war affected and consisted of people who endured suppression by terrorism during the past 30 years.

On 22 September, Silumina had not published any news items related to the NPC elections on their front page.

On 23 September, Dinamina published two sub-headings under the lead title which read ‘UPFA has a grand victory in the Central and North Western Provinces’ on their front page.

The two sub headings were: 1. “North is for TNA” and 2. “Elections in the North; a victory for the People”.

## Editorials

Silumina, on 22 September, declared in its Editorial that the NPC elections were conducted not at the request of the United Nations (UN), Tamil Diaspora, Indian Government or UNHRC. Even TNA, it seemed, was not concerned about the need for an election in the North, even though it was necessary in order to establish peace and democracy. However, it is mentioned that the Tamil people in the North were of a different mentality and wanted an election. This need was recognised by the President and therefore the NPC elections were held.

On 23 September, Dinamina mentions the NPC elections in their Editorial. The editorial depicts the TNA in a negative light. It asks “if the people of the North do not want development and basic needs such as good roads, concrete land, a railway system and electricity? Do they also not require peace and reconciliation? TNA does not seem to have made any impact in the North. Their only goal is self-determination.” The Editorial claims to be posing this question based on an election pamphlet distributed by TNA that read: “did we sacrifice our lives just for carpet roads?” and “Did we become suicide bombers so we could have cricket grounds?”

The Editorial that was published in the Daily News on 23 September was entitled “A vote for the status quo”. The election that was conducted in all three provinces of Sri Lanka was claimed to be a success and it has been mentioned that the “most emphatic winner however is democracy and the power of the people’s will” – an attribute that has been much traduced by UN personnel such as Human Rights Commissioner, Navaneethem Pillay.

The charge that the Sri Lankan state had lapsed into dictatorship is said to have been eliminated decisively after the victory of ITAK in the North.

It is also mentioned mockingly, that, “in a province that it was said was ruled under the iron fist of the armed forces, a situation it was wagered, would guarantee that there would not be a free and fair election”, it must be “some dictatorship” that enabled the opposition party [ITAK] to secure 79% of the vote. The victory of TNA itself is undervalued and stated as having won simply due to “status quo” and “racial lines”, as opposed to the President who does not have to seek any legitimacy since the majority of the country is with him.

## Non-State owned English newspapers

The non-state English Newspapers that were monitored were Daily Mirror and Ceylon Today. Daily Mirror is not available on Sundays (22 September) but on Monday 23 September they published a lead news story and Editorial on NPC elections. Ceylon today published lead news stories on both days. The editorial was written on the NPC elections on 22 September. Additionally a photo with a caption was published on 22 September as well.

Newspaper	Lead News		Editorial		Photos		Other news
	22 Sept	23 Sept	22-23 Sept	23 Sept	22 Sept	23 Sept	22-23 Sept
Daily Mirror	-	1	-	1	-	-	1
Ceylon Today	1	1	1	-	1	-	3
Total	1	2	1	1	1	-	4

The Daily Mirror published two lead news stories side by side of which the first one is about the NPC elections, titled “TNA conquers Northern Provincial Council”, where the TNA MP Mr. Sumanthiran is used as the source in the article. The second piece is titled “UPFA bags NWP, CP Councils” which refers to the elections in North-Western and Central Province.

In the lead news stories (image below), TNA MP Sumanthiran has been quoted to have said that “the Government declared elections in the North following international pressure”, which was welcomed by the United States sponsored resolution adopted by the UNHRC. It is also mentioned that India had requested the government to hold these elections as an initial step in implementing the Thirteenth Amendment in full. Also it is stated that the TNA defeated the government in Kayts electorate which had remained as the base of the ruling party’s ally EPDP.

Ceylon Today on 22 September highlighted the victory of both UPFA and TNA in their lead news articles. This article had used sources from many political parties and Ministers, using their information to report on the results, election violence and the prevailing situation. For example, the statements from UNP General Secretary Tissa Attanayake, MEP Leader Minister Dinesh Gunawardena and JVP parliamentary group leader Anura Kumara Disanayake were mentioned in relation to election violence and the ground situation.

Using TNA MP Sumanthiran and TNA Leader Sampanthan as sources, reports of election violence in the North was reported. Hon Sampanthan’s statement about the Northern polls being flawed particularly due to alleged intimidation by members of the armed forces and the EPDP was mentioned as well.

There were two more news items that were published in the front page of Ceylon Today on 22 September. The first one was titled “Fake Uthayan says Ananthi joined ruling party” where they mentioned the incident of an edition of fake Uthayan newspapers that was circulated among the public in Jaffna on election morning about Ananthi Sasitharan, a TNA candidate, joining the ruling party. This news was also reported in the Tamil Uthayan paper on 22 September.

The second news item was titled “Wigneswaran’s sister asked not to vote for TNA” where it states that a group of men, had visited the residence of TNA chief ministerial candidate, C.V. Wigneswaran and unaware of his sister’s family connections, had cautioned her against voting for the TNA and Wigneswaran. It was later mentioned that Wigneswaran had sent a letter to the Commissioner of Elections, Mahinda Deshapriya, and stating “his own sister had been advised not to vote for the TNA”.

On 23 September the lead news story was published with the images of all leading contestants of the election, with three subheadings, where the third one was highlighted in red and titled “Wigneswaran, Dayasiri create history”.

Additionally in the front page there is another article entitled “Govt. needs to rethink wishes of Northerners”. In this article, SLFP General Secretary, Maithripala Sirisena says “election results of the NPC clearly show the governments will to set up democracy in all parts of the country”. It states that the results of the NPC election also gives a message to the international community that democracy does prevail in the North, where free and fair elections were conducted.

## Editorials

Daily Mirror on 23 September entitled their Editorial “Ayubowan Wigneswaran”. As far as democracy goes, it has been mentioned that Sri Lanka might not be the best, but in comparison with Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden who “internationalized their local/regional conflicts and eventually paid with their lives” – this NPC election has been a “success and is in the best interest of the people” both in the North and the South. As the “new provincial government of the Northern Province keeps its borders intact and prevents outsiders from ‘internationalizing’ the politics of the region.”

It is also mentioned here that the global and regional powers as well as the Diaspora community consider the victory of the TNA as something they can exploit. However it is also stated that the present environment, where the election could take place, did not result due to the “west-engineered peace talks or political manipulations” – but came about only as a result of the end of the war where the LTTE was wiped out. It has been stated that even if Velupillai Prabhakaran had his way, someone with the caliber of Justice Wigneswaran becoming the Chief Minister in the North would not have happened, even in anyone’s “wildest dreams”.

However, it has also been highlighted that after the elections, the pre-existing ‘stringent ideology’ from both sides (TNA and UPFA) will be difficult to overcome until both parties meet halfway, by nurturing and fostering a rapport with each other.

The Ceylon Today, on 22 September in its Editorial titled “The will of the Northern Voter”, highlights the NPC election and the results. It has been mentioned that even though there was a “sudden spike in violence and intimidation directed both towards the opposition candidates and the voters”, there was still a voter turnout of 68%, which is claimed to be a proof for the faith people from the North have in the democratic process. However, it is also mentioned that TNA (the voice of the Tamils in the North) was campaigning with the election manifesto with no reference to a “unitary state” of Sri Lanka, but “made the election more rousing by issuing a controversial manifesto” about their ‘Thimpu’ principles and emphasizing on self-determination for the Tamil people, particularly for those from the North.

It is also mentioned that the TNA’s dogged devotion to the so-called “Thimpu” Principles was not unobserved by the “political pundits, North or South”.

Additionally, it has been speculated “how well it would work with the government on issues such as land and police power, if TNA secures sufficient members in the Council to form a Provincial administration.”

This Editorial also notes that “for the first time in the country’s Provincial Council history, a retired Supreme Court Judge may sit as the Chief Minister of a Province.” It is also highlighted that the TNA chief minister is qualified “to be voted even to the highest post in Sri Lanka in terms of academic qualifications”. Therefore, in this regard, it has been stated that the voter in the North, had sent an

unmistakable message to the rest of the country” as opposed to the people who do not vote on the strengths of qualifications, therefore filling the Parliament with “half-qualified, half-educated buffoons who are deciding on the destinies of ‘the land, race and faith’.