

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN A MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXT: A STUDY OF AMPARA DISTRICT OF SRI LANKA

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The literature on political participation is voluminous especially examining the pros and cons of political participation. However, there are a few studies on political participation in Sri Lanka they have not paid much attention to political participation in a multi-cultural context. The major objective of the present study is to fill the above gap in the Sri Lankan scholarship on politics. The study was carried out in the Ampara District. The rationale behind selecting the area was that it has been a multi-cultural space from the demarcation of the administrative district in 1961. The relevant information and data had been extracted from literary sources as well as from the field. The qualitative data gathering techniques such as key informant interviews, focus groups discussions, in-depth interviews and observations were used. The data were descriptively analyzed. One of the key limitations of the study is the non-comparativeness. The study found that the ‘patron-client relationship’ of the political culture works as a mobilizing initiator for electoral turnout among the three major ethnic groups in the district. However, Muslims of the coastal area of the district had established their own political party marking a major departure point of the community’s pattern of the political participation. This development has to do with the ethnic conflict between the two ethnic groups of the country, i.e. Sinhalese and Tamils. There is a different pattern of political participation between Traditional inhabitant Sinhalese and settlers in colonization schemes of the government. The Traditional villagers are less interested in politics in and around elections, while Sinhalese in the colonies have been very active in electoral politics. This is a shared feature of both Muslims and Sinhalese living in the colonies. The reasons behind this commonality have to do with the high dependence on political patronage due to particular historicity of the two groups. Tamils living in the area tend to amend the political orders of the Tamil political elite based in Colombo and Jaffna. They tend to isolate themselves from other political parties. It is concluded that until Sri Lanka finds a lasting political solution to the larger ethnic issue, segregation and fragmentation in multi-cultural context remains the pattern of electoral politics and building an overall Sri Lankan identity is next to impossible.

Keywords: Political participation, Multi-cultural context, Elections, Patron client relationship, Political elite, Colonization schemes