

Campaign Trail Blues: Eran Wickramaratne's 2015 General Election Campaign

Mark Schubert

Editors' Note:

The Field Diary section aims to document and disseminate some of the rich field experiences that SSA's researchers share with us during the course of their fieldwork. As the reader will see, the style of these notes is rarely explicitly analytical. Instead, drawing inspiration from ethnography, it aims to document and reflect on the researcher's field experiences for a more extended analysis later. This extract is from the diary of Mark Schubert, a researcher at SSA, who participated in the General Election campaign of Mr. Eran Wickramaratne. Mr. Wickramaratne who was previously the Chairman of the National Development Bank (NDB), had entered Parliament in 2010 as a member of the United National Party's (UNP) National List. In 2015 he contested from the Moratuwa electorate and secured a seat in Parliament with more than 82,000 votes. Apart from Mr. Wickramaratne's, all names in this article have been changed.

05th August 2015

I first got in touch with Amanda, who subsequently put me on to Romesh. Romesh had studied at a private boy's school in Colombo and then gone on to study and work in a Western country for a few years. When I met him, Romesh was working for a major private company. He also worked on a voluntary basis for Eran Wickramaratne, a politician contesting from the Colombo district on the UNP ticket. He was also doing a post-graduate degree at a local university. He told me that he took leave from his office as and when there was work related to the election campaign.

He picked me up at 9.00 am from Nugegoda. In the car he mentioned that because of his school background he was exposed to only a particular class of people, and that now he has had to work with people from different social classes. He understood that he couldn't speak to people from a *watta*¹ the same way he would speak to me. He struggled with the challenge of navigating the many requests for jobs after Mr. Wickramaratne entered Parliament. In the evening just before heading out, Suresh from Ratnapura asked him whether anything could be done to secure a job for himself after the elections. Romesh asked him to send him a list of people, along with their CVs and what sort of job they would like to have, saying that he would forward it to the politician.

The volunteers were supposed to turn up at 9.30 a.m., as there was supposed to be a meeting starting at that time. There was already one middle-aged man who was sitting in the office when we arrived. He was wearing track bottoms, a t-shirt and sports shoes. There was a man wearing a green t-shirt sitting at a table. He seemed to be in charge of the place. Romesh spoke to him about how many leaflets etc. he would need for the day. Apparently there were two cut-outs missing. The individual who appeared to be in charge complained that while people would go and put up cut-outs, they never bothered to bring them back, and that that was why two cut-outs were missing.

No one really turned up till after 10.00 a.m. Slowly some young people started arriving. As soon as they arrived they

were asked to write their names and give it to a young lady who was there. She was dressed in a particular way that suggested to me that she was of the middle class (when she left, she left in a Montero). However, it was clear that English was not her first language. Romesh spoke to her in Sinhala. There were clearly two groups of people. One was Sinhala speaking and the other group was Tamil speaking. Both groups were chatting and talking in two different places. The Tamil group was talking near the gate while the Sinhala group had gathered near the vehicles parked a little further down the road. The Sinhala group had a few groups within it and they were loosely spread out along the road. The organizers were waiting for more people to come. Some came from the Jayawardenepura University. There were others there from Thimbirigasyaya and Mutuwal. At around 10.30 a.m. one guy came dressed in shorts and rubber slippers. He had a bandage on his ankle. He was sent off later because he wasn't appropriately dressed. Everyone else there was wearing jeans and shoes. A little later another group of people who were wearing chains, had sunken cheeks, darkened lips and tattoos and seemed to me to have some kind of a connection to the '*paathala*'² arrived at the office. The lady who was in charge of registrations wasn't pleased and complained to Sanjay, who seemed to be the man overseeing the canvassing activities for the day, that there were too many people, and that it would be difficult to control them. However, in the end everyone was taken along for canvassing.

While these other groups were trickling in, I was sitting on the floor of an old rickety van. There was one long seat in the middle. The seats that could have been put in front and behind it had been removed. A small cross was hanging from the rear view mirror. Some boys were sitting on the seats while a couple were sitting on the floor. Two were sitting at the back on top of some boxes and a spare tire. The group seemed to know each other very well and got on very well with each other. They were all from the same area in Thimbirigasyaya. Most of them had attended Isipathana College. One boy who was from Royal College, had joined the campaign after he got school holidays. There was one really thin boy, and they jokingly told me that he attended every single rugby match, and that he was made to stand in one of the four corners of the grounds as one of the sticks to mark the touch line. They had various nick names for each other. They repeatedly called one boy 'Elibank', because he had been involved in some misunderstanding regarding Elibank Road. They had been roped in to this through Praveen, a big made man, who owned the rickety van. He seemed to get on with this group of boys very well and I overheard him reprimanding one of the boys for being lazy.

After a while the young lady left in her Montero. A little later we were all asked to get out of the van, and the whole group that had come for canvassing was asked to come together for a meeting. We were all given t-shirts with the politician's name, number as well as a cap. We were asked to wear them. Sanjay spoke to us. He said that there had been a small issue regarding the number of people who turned up,

but that he had spoken to the young lady who had just left and had convinced her to let those who had already come to work for the day. He said that the following day a group of people would be told that their help was no longer needed. He went on to say that Mr. Wickramaratne had a particular image in society, and he was also appealing to a particular class of society. Therefore, he told us that we should approach those people in a particular way. "They are posh, and we are just street boys. But there are some things within our control that will make us more acceptable. So one of those things we can do is to remove all the chains and rings you are wearing. We had to send the boy who came in shorts away because we can't approach these people in that way." He also warned the group against getting in to any verbal exchanges or fights. He said that to walk away from a fight (*wendala hari enna, kamak neha*³) was not a sign of weakness. We were also told that if we were to smoke cigarettes to do so after we removed the caps and t-shirts we had been provided with. He said to contact him the moment there was any issue.

A few moments later a lorry came to the office. We were asked to load the leaflets, pocket calendars, key tags and wrist bands. We did so and all thirty or forty of us jumped in to the back of the lorry. We were told that we had to cover the Nawala- Rajagiriya stretch. One group would start from near the Weli Park and the other team would start from Ethul Kotte and work their way to the Rajagiriya junction, and then head down towards Nawala covering all by lanes in the process.

As the lorry was heading out, we passed a middle aged lady standing outside her house who shouted *Jaya Wewa* at us. Many of us laughed and shouted the same back at her. As we were travelling through Kirulapona, Nugegoda, Nawala, Pitakote, and Ethul Kotte, the different groups occupied different spaces again. The group I went with began throwing key tags and wrist bands at pedestrians. It seemed that they were very selective in whom they threw these items at (perhaps unconsciously). It was generally people who did not appear as middle-class and were, most of the time, male. Towards the end they realized that children liked the wrist bands and started throwing these items at young children. One boy who was with us said, 'These are not ours so what do we care? Anyway it is to be given away.' One group from Mutuwal and some university students got down in front of the Weli Park. We continued in the lorry to Ethul Kotte. I remember another lorry driving in the opposite direction actually trying to stop the vehicle to get a wrist band. At one point one group started singing songs. There was generally a merry air about the whole ride.

While we were travelling I asked the thin boy whether they had had any issues when doing this kind of work. He said that when they were in Bloemendaal people from the village had told them not to come anywhere near the area because all politicians were the same. They had gotten very aggressive, so they had had to leave. He said that it was understandable because they live with the *kunu kanda*⁴ that no one was doing anything about, and that it was absolutely smelly and

there were a lot of flies. He said the smell really hits you as you go to the area. He said that twice or thrice some drunk people had come up and tried to stir up fights but that they had carefully negotiated those situations. He said the previous day had been really fun in Wellawatte, with the beach and all. He had had to spend half his time running behind leaflets that were being blown away in the wind. He had also been drafted in to work on the campaign through Praveen.

Once we got to Ethul Kotte, the group got out of the lorry. The extra wrist bands, key tags, leaflets and pocket calendars were given to Romesh who had led the way in his car. We divided ourselves in to two teams, each going on to either side of the road. Crossing the road was an indifferent stroll amidst traffic. I was with the group on the side of the road heading towards Battaramulla. As we walked along we lazily distributed leaflets to people walking towards us. One pretty, young girl was walking towards our group of men clad in green t-shirts and green caps. She quickly made a detour into a Keells we were passing (maybe she genuinely had to go to Keells, but it really appeared as though she was trying to avoid us). We walked past the HSBC distributing leaflets and calendars. Some of us had leaflets, some had key tags, some had wrist bands. I had leaflets and pocket calendars. Apparently they were supposed to be folded and distributed, but I was certainly not going to waste my time folding these leaflets. I had a bit too much in my hand, and it was difficult to carry but I didn't want to burden any of the others with it, so I continued with what I had. As we were walking one of the older guys whom they called 'Elibank' scolded us for not distributing our items to the on-coming three wheelers, after which we began to do so. We came to the road that was next to the petrol shed, and headed down that road. Regardless of all advice to remove all chains, we were still particularly targeting lorry drivers and three wheel drivers. After some time we went into a hotel by the side of the road and sat down for a tea and a roll. We split the bill among ourselves. This was about half an hour after we started. We finished eating and crossed the road. Some sat down on a couple of cement block stones that were lying there while I sat on a ledge next to another boy. Some in the group proceeded to smoke a cigarette (Eran t-shirts and all).

As they were smoking I asked the boy next to me whether he smoked, to which he replied he only smoked ganja. We got to talking and he told me he was from Thimbirigasyaya, and was currently studying at the South Eastern University. He was staying at the hostel there. I asked him about ganja and he said the boys from Thanamalwila would bring ganja. Apparently one day he had smoked ganja and cigarettes till he had vomited. After that day he had resolved to stop smoking cigarettes. When I said I don't smoke or drink they all said it was a good thing because it was a waste of money and it doesn't do any good. Just before leaving that spot I asked them how much they are paid. They said 1,500 a day. I said it was really tiring work, to which they said that that particular day was a good day. They said it was really difficult when they had to go to areas with lots of apartment

complexes as they would have to use the stairs to go to each apartment.

We headed off from there and I began talking to another boy. I asked if he also studied at Isipathana, he half smiled and said with a bit of pride that he studied at Royal. He had joined the campaign after school holidays had started. He was well-built. He had played rugby in school but had to stop because he had dislocated his shoulders, and they kept jumping from the sockets. He also had to stop playing Basketball because of his shoulder issue. He had joined the canvassing through his friends, who knew Praveen.

While walking some van drivers would horn to get our attention and get their hands on the wrist bands and key tags. Three wheel drivers would stop in the middle of the road to get the same and they were given both items along with the less desired pocket calendar and the much less desired leaflet. Some commented saying '*Api kohomath denne eyata thamai*'⁵. Some said '*Api me peththen nemei malli*'⁶ to which the prompt reply came '*ekata kamak neha aiye*'⁷. One person laughed and said that he was from Galle and anyway wouldn't vote for the UNP. Some people came behind us to get extra wrist bands and key tags. I realized then that perhaps it was so unproblematic and easy for us to do this because Colombo was a UNP stronghold and no one would really take offence to groups canvassing for the party. Of course we were careful to avoid houses and shops which had a picture of Mahinda Rajapakse.

We reached the Rajagiriya junction. I had to call Romesh to see what was to happen thereafter. He asked us to get on to the Nawala Road and head towards Nawala. We had to cross the road again. Again it was a nonchalant stroll across the road. We hurried up a bit when we saw a Policeman standing directly in front of us. We walked by him very quickly like we hadn't seen him, all the while quietly grinning at each other. One boy commented that we could get away like that because we were wearing UNP t-shirts.

We went along the road distributing leaflets and key tags. Our stock of wrist bands had deteriorated to one packet. They needed to be rationed now. We passed the mosque above the Harcourts building. We went down one of the by-roads and saw a garage with a cut-out of Mahinda. We got a little worried and crossed to the other side of the road. As we were passing they called us and asked for wrist bands and key tags. We obliged and made sure to give them leaflets too. They were not in any way aggressive. We walked along the road. One old lady told me not to waste the leaflet on her because she was anyway going to throw it. We met another old lady who asked who we were working for. We mentioned the politician's name, and went on to ask her to vote for him. We walked down a little more and found a little ledge (it was part of a flower bed). We sat down there out of exhaustion. One boy sat at the entrance to a house which had a bit of space. A man driving by stopped his car and asked who we were working for. When we said Mr. Wickramaratne's name he said, 'Ah he is a very good man. I will vote for him. He is

a good man. How much is he paying you?' One boy replied saying 2,000/=. Then he checked with me if I was out of school and I laughed and said that I was out of university also. He drove off. The boy who had said that they were paid 2,000/= said it was important to say an amount higher than what they are actually paid. Another boy scolded him saying that it was a bit risky, because people who drive around in cars could very well know the politician and that they could get caught.

We walked back to the main road and continued to lazily distribute fliers. We walked a little way down the road missing a couple of by-roads in the process (apparently we were supposed to go to the very end of each and every by-road). We stopped at a row of shops. People were still keen on getting wrist bands and key tags. One person from a hardware shop came and asked for another band. I said I didn't have any more. We went and sat down on the step of another shop and waited there for the other group to join us. A man came up to us and started talking. He said he was a UNP *kanuweth kanuwak*,⁸ and that the hardware shop owner was a Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) supporter. For the first time I heard Mahinda Rajapakse being referred to as a *ponnaya*.⁹ I am sure that some of the people there found it difficult to swallow, but they didn't really say anything. The other group finally joined us and we sat there and waited, because lunch was on the way.

Praveen called and we started walking towards Nawala. We met him near a temple. He was in his van. There was a temple just there. Someone went and asked the chief monk if we could eat there. One boy jokingly said that the monk only allows *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS) supporters to eat in his temple. We - campaigners for a Christian politician - got permission and went in to the temple. Some of them shouted at each other to take their caps off. One boy commented 'even though I am a Christian, I removed my cap. You should do the same.' Everyone was given a lunch packet. I opened mine to find Yellow Rice, chicken, potato curry and Ambarella. I overheard one of the boys complaining about worms in the food.

We finished eating and the boys were collecting money for cigarettes. They were short of five rupees. I said I don't sponsor cigarettes. They proceeded to check if Praveen's van had any coins. One boy found 5 rupees in his pocket and the boys went to get the cigarettes. I sat at the back of the van to rest a bit. One boy sat in the seat till Praveen called us. He said there were better places to sit. He showed me some boys stretched out on the ground beside the Buddha statue. It looked really inviting.

I went and lay down there and began a conversation with the boy sleeping next to me. Suresh was from Ratnapura. He was in his second year at the South Eastern University. He had come to Colombo for a university-related training, and had seen some people canvassing and asked how he could join the group. He had been put in touch with Praveen. His father was dead and he was living with his mother,

and her family. He had a cousin brother still in school. Suresh said he was working for the politician in the hope that he would be able to get a job. He said if he gets a good enough job he would give up his degree and go to work. He still hadn't met the *Amathithuma*¹⁰ but was hopeful he would at some point. There was to be a meeting between Mr. Wickramaratne and his volunteers on the 15th, the day after campaigning was to stop. He was doubtful about his chances of getting called for that meeting because he had to stop working for Eran from the next day. He had to go home because he hadn't been home for some time. He said that he would come back before elections in the hope that he might be called for the meeting and could meet Mr. Wickramaratne. He said that he had worked like this previous elections although not for this particular politician, and was hopeful something would happen. He took my number as well. I think he was under the impression that I had some bargaining power and that I would be able to help him in his endeavor. I tried to make it clear that it wasn't the case. He was still hopeful I think. Then both of us had a small nap right there next to the Buddha statue in the politician's t-shirts while using the politician's caps to cover our faces.

We were woken up at 2.45 p.m. and headed towards Nawala. I went to one side with one group. I wanted to go back and cover the roads we had missed. A couple of boys who had no intention whatsoever of covering those roads told me to go ahead and that they would cover the other roads and come. I partnered up with a young boy and we headed off. He said that his father works as a supervisor at Abans. His mother was a government servant. His brother was studying at the Sri Jayawardenapura University. We got off to a slow start with each other. We spent the better part of 2 hours with each other. He was 18 years old. He had *samajayath ekka inna*-fied¹¹ from the time he was 15. Perhaps that was why he stopped pursuing his education even after passing his O/Ls. He spoke about how he had beaten people and been beaten by people (in fact so much so that he had been bed-ridden for five and a half months with a sore back after getting hammered with a wicket). He said he doesn't smoke ganja anymore, but only smokes KG. He would love *peni* but it was too expensive these days at 1,000/= per *peniya*. He said that he was a *kariya*¹² with those who were *kariyas* to him, but he was even willing to bring up the food he ate for people who treated him well. After his beating he had given up assaulting people with his hands and legs and had started using brains (upon being pressed he hinted at placing drugs on them and informing the police). He had two knives hidden beneath his bed although he claimed to not having taken them out in a long time. He was confident though that he was moving away from the *samaajaya*.¹³ His friends who had started smoking cigarettes with him had now moved on to heroin but he had always been careful to avoid it. He didn't move with the 'samaajaya' as much now. He had met with a serious accident and got away with a few scrapes and had learnt his lesson about drinking and driving. Speaking about his future, he said he didn't know what he wanted to do. His dad had said he would get him a job at the Munic-

ipal Council but he wasn't interested in it because 30,000/= per month wasn't enough. He was confident he will get his parents' house, so he believed that all he had to do was some small job that will bring some money in.

I asked him if he would vote for Mr. Wickramaratne at the election. He said he wouldn't. He said he was for the *sandaane*.¹⁴ His whole family was strong SLFP supporters. He would be kicked out of the house if his parents so much as knew he was canvassing for Eran. He said that most of the group working for the politician was probably much the same as him and were quite unlikely to vote for the politician. At the end of the day, he said, he was doing it for the money. Apparently while Mr. Wickramaratne pays 1,500/= a day, other politicians only pay 1,100/= a day.

We walked down a few by-roads. We passed a drinking party. We passed a mother feeding her child in the garden. It was a large house and she looked like she was an English speaking person. I spoke to her in English to maintain my class status. We passed an old uncle who told us he was voting Ranil, Eran and Harsha, and that the country needs people like them in Parliament. We stopped and had plain tea in a little hotel by the side of the road. We passed one of Harsha's offices. They smiled with us. We walked on to the main road and by now we were quite close to the Nawala junction. We were sure that others had already covered this area. I was about to ask a lady at a shop when I heard people shouting *aiya aiya*.¹⁵ It was the other boys who had gotten in to a bus after finishing their work. They were heading to Nugegoda and had no way to find or inform us because they didn't have our contact numbers. I got in the bus. We didn't buy tickets. We were on our way to a pocket meeting in Nugegoda. We passed a van full of Rosy Senanayake's supporters as well.

At Nugegoda, Sanjay was waiting for us at the bus halt. He instructed us to go through the bus depot, and then for one group to go up to Highlevel Road and proceed to Jambusgasmulla road, and for another group to take a by road that would eventually connect on to Highlevel Road, although much closer to Jambusgasmulla road than the previous route. I spoke to Sanjay and he said he had worked with the JVP for 10 years and was now working for Mr. Wickramaratne. I wasn't able to find out why he had switched sides. He claimed that he knew all there was to know about canvassing as a result of those 10 years of experience.

I wanted to go for the pocket meeting but I was too tired, sweaty and smelly to stay around like that. I headed home,

had a bath and came back. The volunteers were still at the meeting. I took my place with them. I took the drink that was offered. I took the piece of cake that was offered and gave it to the boy next to me. He was very appreciative. They offered cake again and I did the same again. He was extra-very-appreciative of it and shared with his friends this time. The politician spoke and went. A young up and coming Provincial Council person addressed the gathering in English. The boys who had canvassed during the day had tuned off and were talking among themselves. They headed out saying they were leaving. I followed them a minute later. Sanjay was with them. He was scolding two boys for swearing while wearing the politician's t-shirt at the Nugegoda junction. Praveen joined a few minutes later. He paid them their dues.

Suresh from Ratnapura was hanging around the gate. I went and spoke to him. He was still concerned about securing a job and was waiting to talk to Romesh. Romesh came out and he spoke with him. He asked about the possibility of getting a job. Romesh very confidently asked him to hand in a list of the people who were looking for jobs, their interests and their CVs and to mail it to him. Suresh seemed a little assured.

I was about to leave when I saw a school friend coming for the meeting. I had already taken my politician's t-shirt off. I went to meet him and we went inside. Later on I met another friend. He said he couldn't recognize me in the politician's shirt. It showed me how the middle class perceived those who go canvassing. The t-shirt alone was enough to make me unrecognizable. I left for home thereafter.

Notes

- 1 Slum
- 2 Underworld
- 3 Worship them and get out of that place if you must, it's not a problem
- 4 Garbage mountain
- 5 We would anyway vote for him
- 6 We're not from this area
- 7 That is fine
- 8 Die hard supporter
- 9 Strong Sinhala swear word used derogatorily to refer to an effeminate man
- 10 Minister
- 11 Direct translation is 'living with the society'; this could be a code for hanging around with the rough and tough
- 12 Strong swear word used to denote something akin to 'bastard'
- 13 Direct translation is society; this word is used to describe the 'world' one comes from, and hence should be understood in relation to the context which in this case seemed to refer to the rough and tough
- 14 Coalition; in this instance referring to the alliance led by Mahinda Rajapaksa
- 15 Address form for an older male person