

POLLING FOR PEACE POLICIES

The Sri Lankan Case Study¹

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Introduction

A fundamental principle of democratic governance is that policy making should be a function of the opinion of the demos (Wleizen and Soroka: 2006)² But practice is never perfect and the realities of democracies are far from what is theoretically sound and ideal. The influence of public opinion on government raises normative as well as empirical questions about democracy. Theories on representative democracy assume that people have only enough wisdom to elect the correct leader; policy decisions thereafter rest solely in the hands of the 'chosen one.' Some theoreticians take this argument a step further by pointing out that the public is largely ignorant of political issues and thereby unable to deliberate and form discerning opinions on the same. Vincent L Hutchings³ takes these differing streams and brings them together via the contention that while the public are not routinely vigilant, they become alert and informed when their interests come under threat.

So what then, is the place of a pollster? Is public opinion polling the watchword of democracy? Or, as Robert Weissberg⁴ argues, are poll results too limited and lacking in authority to be considered as guidelines for creating policy and legislation? Is it a stimulator or a constringer? Wleizen and Soroka, allow for public polling results to be the stimulus for policy formulation. Weissberg's argument, on the other hand, attacks polls as not having the second best choice; nor do they allow for a tradeoff and comments. Further that polls run the risk of testing issues amongst a public who suffer from a lack of required knowledge. However, if one were to analyze the issue through Hutchings' argument, one can strike a balance, where it is understood that even though polls may not direct what policy can be introduced, they can certainly provide strictures and limits for policy change and implementation.

The Sri Lankan case study provides ample fodder for such theories. Polling on public policy is comparatively new to Sri Lankan politics and has been much in demand largely due to the high degree of ethnic polarization, and the re-entry of the warring parties to a period of political negotiation.

What this paper hopes to explore is the role of public opinion in the peace process as both policy stimulus as well as policy constringer. The paper will look at polling initiatives on the peace process and their subsequent relevance on policy. Through the use of polling results from two continuous polls on the peace process, the Peace Confidence Index and the Knowledge Attitude and Practices Survey, the author hopes to understand the nexus between polling and policy. The paper will look at three aspects of the process, namely, the 'international community', 'political solution' and 'negotiations and will conclude by arguing that, while polling is not the sole influential factor in policy making, it cannot be denied that it is one amongst some important variables that shape public policies.

I. Sri Lanka's Ethnic conflict

Sri Lanka's total population is about 19 million and it is home to Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims who belongs to four main religious groups i.e. Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian. Like most of the neighboring South Asian countries Sri Lanka was also colonized. Since the late 1970s the power struggle of the minority community in the context of ethnic discrimination turned into violence. During the last three decades, Sri Lanka has suffered from bloody violence despite its uninterrupted record on democracy and its high standard of social indicators compared with its neighbours.

Many efforts have been made to resolve the conflict, the most successful of which was the now abrogated 2002 Ceasefire Agreement signed between the United National Party government led by Ranil Wickremasinghe and the LTTE. The agreement was brokered by the Norwegian government and monitored by the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) – a consortium of Scandinavian peace monitors. What the CFA did introduce to the process, also, was the overwhelming force of the international community—the USA, the EU, Japan and Norway. India, however, continued to play a silent but vigilant role. While the Norwegians managed to make both parties agree to seek peace under a federal framework in 2003, the commitment and gravity that both parties

extended at the beginning of the CFA soon deteriorated into manipulation and political mud-slinging.

In April 2003 the LTTE announced that it would not be participating in any direct talks with the government and put forward a proposal for an Internal Self-Governing Authority for the North and East. Instances where the pact was violated began to rise and the credibility of the peace monitors themselves began to crumble, creating a hot seat for both the incumbent government and the Norwegians. This situation was well manipulated by the Executive President Chandrika Kumaratunge – and the UNP regime was dissolved in just under two years. At the 2005, presidential election, Wickremasinghe was beaten – marginally – by the SLFP leader Mahinda Rajapakse. The government formed by the latter eventually dissolved the CFA in January 2008.

II. Identified polling on the conflict

Unlike many developed nations, Sri Lanka does not possess an entrenched tradition or a history of Opinion Polling⁵. Polling on the ethnic conflict began as late as 2001, even though actual peace negotiations were initiated in 1985. In early 2001, National Peace Council (NPC) – a Colombo based NGO – commissioned a poll on the ethnic conflict. The results – that a majority of the country wanted peaceful negotiations and an end to the war – were shared with the public by means of an islandwide poster campaign. Since then, the NPC has been a part of several polls on the ethnic conflict – either as the commissioners of the survey or as partners in a survey initiative. Their most recent foray into this was a deliberative poll on constitutional reform.⁶ The underlying purpose of this poll was to enhance the government's endeavours at the formulation of a southern consensus for the drafting of a new constitution. In late 2001, ORGMARG SMART⁷, a marketing Research Company also conducted a poll with some selected business institutes in Sri Lanka. In addition, they continually included some peace questions in most of their pre-election polls in May 2001. Social Indicator (SI) initiated a polling series called the Peace Confidence Index (PCI)⁸ to measure the changing trend of public opinion on the peace process. The PCI has been the longest uninterrupted poll conducted on the ethnic conflict. In addition to the PCI, SI has conducted a number of other detailed surveys including – the KAPS surveys series – on attitudes and perceptions on issues surrounding the ethnic conflict during the last eight years.

iii. Polling and public policies

The 2002 Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) began a heady new chapter in the history of peace negotiations in Sri Lanka. The pact itself gave birth to a new set of institutions and introduced a host of new players and processes. The resumption of peaceful negotiations was at the focus of the agreement, as well as the formulation of a political solution. And the role of the international community, subsequently, became increasingly paramount.

Negotiations

By the year 2000, the conflict had reached a state of bitter stalemate in the battlefield and the country's economy seemed on the verge of collapse. The prospect of peaceful negotiations was welcomed by most leaders as a more pragmatic and progressive option than war. However, as people – at least those hailing from the south – demonstrate a high degree of cynicism about the sincerity of the LTTE at the negotiating table – many felt that engaging the LTTE would not be an option that most of the public would look upon with favour.

Polls conducted in early and mid 2001 indicated the opposite. However, results show that the people were also in favour of the government engaging in peaceful negotiation with the LTTE. The poll conducted by NPC in early 2001 revealed that 76% of the sample surveyed supported peace talks. The PCI May 2001 wave also showed a greater support (82%) for negotiations. This confirmed that initiating peace negotiations with the LTTE was not only a pragmatic idea but also a timely one. Therefore, it explains why Mr. Ranil Wickremasinghe who lost the election a year previously on the basis of peace negotiations, did not change his position on negotiations in the snap election held in 2001 and still managed to win that election. The incumbent regime too extended their willingness to negotiate with the LTTE on the eve of the election diverging from their policy of the previous year. As promised, soon after the electoral victory, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe signed a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE and paved way for a negotiated settlement to the country's ethnic conflict. This shows the influence that public opinion polling had on policy makers' decisions at the commencement of the peace negotiations.

Negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE began on 16th September 2001 at Sattahip, Thailand. The State Secretary of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign

affairs, Vidar Helgesen in his opening speech used the results of the PCI to emphasise his point by saying:

... But standing behind them are some formidable forces for peace. Recent opinion polls indicate that more than 80% of the population shares the parties' desire to find a negotiated solution to the conflict...

Public support for negotiations also rose since the commencement of the same and this fact has been used by the Government media for its own credit. For example, the *Daily News*⁹ of October 21st 2002, gave front page coverage to the PCI findings under the title of "Opinion Survey shows more people believe peace will come". The same newspaper devoted its editorial of 6th January 2003 to the PCI findings, emphasizing that the polls showed broad support for the government's strategy of bringing peace through peaceful means. In April 2003, the direct negotiation between the UNP Government and the LTTE collapsed as the latter decided to pull out from direct talks while extending its commitment to the 2002 CFA. This triggered some sporadic violence initially but later grew into a tit for tat killing spree. As CFA violations increased, the public's sentiment corresponded with the morbidity of the times as their faith in negotiations and the parties involved took a negative turn. The LTTE and the Norwegian facilitators were the especial recipients of this jaundiced view.

According to a poll conducted in the period immediately preceding the April 2004 elections, the people stated that they were most desirous of economic relief while sustaining the CFA.¹⁰ Further, the poll reported that while a majority of the Sinhala community were disappointed with the incumbent regime a majority of all minority ethnic communities still favoured the UNP regime. A majority rated the economy as a top priority while only one fifth gave the same ranking to the recommencement of negotiations.

The election manifesto of the then opposition, United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) – the SLFP led coalition – and its election rhetoric confirmed the influence of the polls. More importantly, policies of the UPFA government after the electoral victory show the influence of public opinion in their policies. For example, despite being severe critics of the 2002 CFA during their election campaign, the UPFA regime did not abrogate the CFA until January 2008.

The polls show that support of the Tamil community remained unchanged while the Sinhala community's faith in negotiations showed a gradual decline between 2004 and

2006 in response to growing hostilities between the LTTE and the security forces. When President Rajapakse assumed power in December 2005, he did not do much to revive the stalled peace talks except for two meetings held in Geneva and Oslo in 2006. In November 2006, 57% of the Sinhala community supported peace talks although this declined by 10 percentage points by February of 2007. The polls showed that limited military operations begun in February of '06 were well received by the Sinhala community. The February 2007 PCI showed that 48% of the Sinhala community was confident in the President's ability to wage a successful war. While the President and his government must have a number of reasons to go into battle, one can hardly dismiss the idea that the public's demonstration in favour of war in the face of a debilitating economic situation may have spurred on the decision to re-engage the LTTE on the battlefield. This conjecture is confirmed by a comment made by Dayan Jayatilaka, an adviser to the president and the permanent representative to the UN in Geneva.¹¹

We shall of course have to go North and then finally into the Wannu heartland. Prabhakaran (the leader of the LTTE) must surely be waiting the time we get caught in the classic manpower crunch: too few troops to capture and hold terrain; overstretch which permits him to concentrate his forces for a devastating breakthrough at an unexpected point in space and time. The way to avoid that would be to generate a surge in recruitment by tapping into the present patriotic mood: the most recent Peace Confidence Index/Social indicators of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) registers a figure of 54% support among the Sinhalese for a policy of ratcheting up the military response right up to all-out war.

Political Solution

Since 1994, every government has stressed the importance of a political solution to end the country's protracted conflict. However, polls show that despite a consensus with regard to the need for a peaceful solution, different ethnic communities and social and political groups begin to differ when it comes to the nitty-gritty¹². Therefore every successive regime has to face a grave challenge in formulating and implementing a meaningful political solution for the ethnically polarized community. On one hand Sinhala nationalists advocate power-sharing within a unitary state while Tamil nationalists lobby for the creation of two separate states. Due to this, both governmental and non-governmental institutions have found polling to be an excellent supplement

to their search for a political solution.

Of those political proposals that have been most bandied about in public discourse, the federal idea, advanced primarily by Tamil political parties, must take centre stage. When Ms. Kumaratunge assumed power in 1994, she re-introduced the federal debate to the constitutional discussion. She not only supported the federal idea but also advocated it to the Sinhala community through various programmes. She maintained that 76% of the country was in favour of a federal system¹¹. Actual poll results, however, differ. Polling results from 2001 reveal that only 19% of Sri Lankans demonstrated any level of awareness regarding the term federalism. This vindicates political analysis that debate on federalism has always been limited to a few academics and elitist groups.

In 2001, the federal idea gained new momentum and also a few non-traditional advocates. This time around the UNP government proposed a federal framework during a round of negotiations held in Norkon, Japan. At this point, the LTTE used the PCI findings to attack the government's proposal. The LTTE's chief negotiator, Anton Balasingharam asked the government delegates to educate the southern Sinhalese first as results of a poll showed that only 19% of the south knew anything about federalism¹².

Civil society has also involved itself en masse in the exploration of political solution. "One-text"¹³ is one amongst such civil society initiatives. They invited the author many times to learn about public opinion on matters related to the negotiations. In these meetings the major political parties were present. Not only did they deliberate on the poll results but they also asked that the PCI poll include some of the questions that they felt were interesting and useful for their initiative. Though there is little or no documented evidence which demonstrates the extent to which polls are being used in formulating a political solution, the use of poll results by such groups – proxies to the Government, the opposition and the LTTE – indicate that there is effective channeling of the poll data to key policy makers.

Sinhala nationalist political parties oppose the federal concept primarily on three cardinal principles i.e. 1. Federalism will lead to secession, 2. It will unfairly affect the Sinhala majority, 3. It will be detrimental to the status of Buddhism. However, poll results showed that a significant majority (64%) of the Sinhala community were not able to decide whether federalism would result in any of the three. Only 20.8% of them believed that federalism would lead to secession¹⁴. The results of the KAP¹⁵ survey that was conducted in 2004

revealed that the support for federalism increased and more people would accept it if it was advocated by one's political party leadership or one's religious leader.

The overwhelming ignorance of the federal idea that the polls indicated was best used by the nationalist political parties and the SLFP to shape their election campaign strategies and overthrow the UNP regime which openly advocated federalism. For example the main accusation of the nationalist parties was that the UNPers were traitors simply due to their strong advocacy for a federal system. This may be an example of an instance where a poll has been more an instrument in underpinning electoral strategies than for public good.

In 2006, President Rajapakse – who was elected through the votes of nationalists – set up an all party representative committee (APRC) to form a southern political consensus. It was believed that this decision was largely due to the influence of foreign governments instead of public demand. Two years of futile deliberations at the APRC have proved the difficulty of building consensus amongst the parties on any political solution. Later, Prof. Vitharana, the head of APRC, has indicated his desire to seek the assistance of polling¹⁶ in order to persuade its members to build consensus on a political solution. This exemplifies the direct use of polling in policy making on vital and difficult issues in peace building. The head of the APRC further extended his assistance in formulating the questionnaires with pertinent questions that could be instrumental in his policy dialogues. However, the role of peace polling in the APRC process is yet to be seen.

International community

The international community has been a powerful force and has had direct or indirect influence since colonial times. Due to the internationalization of the Sri Lankan peace process, the international community has found a large and prominent role in the policies related to the ethnic conflict. Various financial pledges and many other techniques have been used by the international community to push both the Government and the LTTE to stick to the much strained peace negotiations. For example, at the Tokyo Donor Conference in July 2003, donor countries pledged financial assistance to Sri Lanka over the course of a four year period so long as there was "substantial and parallel progress in the peace process" (Uyangoda: 2006). In that same year, the total amount of aid coming into the country was at Rs.61.2 billion (Central Bank Report: 2003).

Since its inception, PCI the poll series has been funded by various individual donors and of present it is being financed by a coalition of donor agencies¹⁹. They believed that the perceptions and attitudes toward peace negotiations revealed by this poll is vital in the decision making of the donors in order to influence the government and the LTTE. In 2003 and 2004, USAID funded a KAP survey on the peace process through Academy for Educational Development (AED) an American NGO. In Washington and in Colombo the survey team engaged in briefing the survey results to the US Mission, members of the Government and the Government Peace Secretariat.

Polls not only help them to influence the government policies directly or indirectly but also to review their own – the international community – policies with regard to the Sri Lanka's peace process. The credibility of Norway started diminishing in the backdrop of growing CFA violations and protracted hurting stalemate condition. Sinhalese did not reject the idea of third party facilitation but refused to accept Norway as an impartial and effective mediator. Therefore, unlike the UNP which was in government from 2002 to 2004, the UPFA regime that formed a government in 2004, and President Rajapakse distanced themselves from Norway because of their policies on the ethnic conflict.

Polls showed that the Sinhalese increasingly extended their preference to India, while Tamils continued to prefer Norway as the best country to mediate the peace negotiations²⁰. However, a substantial percentage of minority communities extended their support to an Indian involvement. In this context, some Sinhala nationalist political parties of the current government stated that they wanted a more active role of India in Sri Lanka's peace process. Capitalizing on this Indian friendly public mood, President Rajapakse invited India to play an active role in the Sri Lankan peace process and expressed his desire to use the Indian power sharing arrangement as a model for Sri Lanka. Further, a group of parliamentarians from the APRC was sent to India to study the Indian '*panchayat raj*'²¹ in 2006. Not only that, in January 2008, President announced that his government wanted to find a solution to the ethnic conflict though implementing the 13th amendment to the Constitution which his party had criticized for decades. This amendment to the constitution was introduced by the late President J.R. Jayawardene under the influence of the Indian government. Meantime, since 2006, India too has expressed a desire to play an active role in Sri Lanka again. They denounced the LTTE aim of a separate state but emphasized that a solution to the ethnic

conflict should preserve the dignity of the Tamil community²².

Conclusion

Polling is by no means the traditionally accepted means of information that politicians and governments have used since time immemorial. Editorials, media commentary, informants, constituency mail and the like have preceded polling as the public's thermometer. Nevertheless, polling provides an instant snapshot, if you will, of any political climate. The casual effect of public opinion polling maps out three distinct possibilities; that public opinion can constrain policy, exert strong influence upon it or be entirely ignored in a government's policy making process. The Sri Lankan context, as discussed above, exhibits the occurrence of all three.

The present government's policy toward the Ceasefire Agreement is an excellent example for an instance where public opinion polling has functioned as a policy constraint. Although there were many violations of the pact and endless criticism of the peace process, polls did show that the people still wanted the CFA to be sustained. Thereby, it took until January 2008 for the government to find the correct moment to abrogate the CFA. Rajapakse's approach to foreign policy shows the direct and indirect influence of public opinion polling. The government has neither embraced nor rejected Norway. It has instead extended a warm welcome to India and Indian models of governance and constitution making. This shows a positive correlation with the current public opinion trend.

It is from the UNP regime that we see an instance where public opinion was completely dismissed. During the 2002 to 2004 period there was a growing sense of public disappointment over the way the peace process and the economy were handled. Wickremasinghe's easy embrace of the World Bank and the IMF in these matters was not well received by the public, a fact that he ignored on the grounds of public ignorance. Page and Shapiro contend that even in the face of individual ignorance, aggregate preferences will reflect real world trends. Thus Ranil Wickremasinghe lost after only a two year stint.

Certainly, the role of public opinion polling in the Sri Lanka peace process only provides a limited overview of the nexus between polls and policies. However, it shows the substantial contribution that polling can make in the intricate and

sensitive exercise of solving an ethnic conflict. Polling may not be the magic wand that brings peace and happy endings to Sri Lanka, but it will certainly fortify the endeavor to find a democratic and sustainable resolution.

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Notes

1 This paper was presented at the annual general conference of the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) which was held in New Orleans, USA from 12th to 15th May 2008.

2 Wlezien, Christopher & Soroka, Stuart N: *The Relation between Public Opinion and Policy*, 2006.

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5 Peiris, Pradeep and Thavaraja, Joseph; *History of Public Opinion Research in Sri Lanka*. Paper presented at the regional WAPOR conference held in Hong Kong in December 2006.

6 This poll was conducted in collaboration with the MARGA institute one of the oldest Colombo-based NGOs.

7 ORG MARG SMART was the Indian Sri Lankan Marketing Research Company that was later bought over by AC Neilson.

8 Peace Confidence Index (PCI) is the only repetitive and uninterrupted polling exercise on the peace process in Sri Lanka that has been conducted since 2001. The idea of PCI was inspired by survey program in Israel and Palestine.

9 *The Daily News* is Sri Lanka's most widely circulated English daily and is published by the Government owned Associated Newspapers of Ceylon.

10 Social Indicator, 2004 pre-election poll, *Daily Mirror* 18th March 2004.

11 Jayatilaka, Dayan, <http://www.dailynews.lk/2007/01/29/fea01.asp>

12 Social Indicator, KAPS 2003.

13 Peiris, Pradeep; "Federalism" – "Some Debates Never Die", *Daily Mirror*.

14 *Sunday Leader* 5th December 2002, "Can the ETT settle for federalism?"

15 One-Text was set up by a South African journalist with the support of international donors in order to bring all the political parties and players together to produce a political solution that is acceptable to a majority of the country.

16 *Social Indicator*, PCI, November 2006.

17 *Social Indicator*, KAPS 2004: Potential for Peace, pp.62

18 Social Indicator and Dr Colin Irwin briefed Prof. Tissa Vitharana on his peace polls and received his assistance.

19 Currently PCI series is funded by a donor working group in Sri Lanka that comprise of the development agencies of various countries and multilateral agencies like IMF and World Bank.

20 Social Indicator, PCI September 2006.

21 A village level power sharing system.

22 *Daily Mirror*, 28th March 2008, "India warns Lanka against deals with Pak-Islam".

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