THE EMERGENCE OF PAROCHIAL PRIORITIES, PROVINCIAL POLITICS AND PATRICIAN PERSONALITIES

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he local government elections to select members of pradeshiya sabhas and some urban and municipal councils were held on 17 March 2011 in 234 local area. These included three municipal councils, 30 urban councils and 201 pradeshiya sabhas.

This was the first time (except for the Jaffna municipal elections in August 2009) that local government elections were held in the Northern and Eastern provinces since 1982-83. The local government elections in the Tamil and Muslim-dominated areas in the North and East were held amidst an ongoing process of post-war resettlement and rehabilitation work. They were also in a context of natural disaster, due to torrential rains and the resultant floods that produced yet another displacement of people. The multiplicity of displacements accompanied by the loss of livelihoods, destruction of harvests and crops in a predominantly agricultural area together, with a return to a dependency on dry rations, temporary shelters and the inevitable loss of morale, was not the most conducive atmosphere to gauge the political pulse of the populace in the North and East, where the elections involved the choice of representatives at the lowest and most accessible level of representation. It was, indeed, not the best possible time to gauge the popularity of the government.

The main parties contesting the elections in the Tamil and Muslim areas in the North and East were the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), United National Party (UNP), Ilankai Thamzh Arasu Katchi (ITAK/TNA), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), National Congress (NC) and independent groups. The All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC) contested under the UPFA banner.

Islandwide Results as Announced by Respective District Secretariats

Party	Votes Received	Percentage	No. of Councils	No.of Seats
UPFA	3,338,401	55.00	205	1839
UNP	2,032,891	33.89	9	892
JVP	1,81,220	3.01	0	57
SLMC	88,592	1.4	4	50
UPF	41,032	-	1	21
ITAK	71,171	2	12	76

The Sunday Times, March 2011.

All Muslim parties who contested these elections were in alliance with the ruling UPFA at the national level, although the SLMC and the NC opted to contest under their respective party symbols. This, of course, was to test their own strength in their own backyards, such as Akkaraipaththu of M.L.M. Athaullah (NC), and Ninthavur of M.T. Hassan Ali (SLMC). Muslim politicians in the Eastern Province jealously guard their own turf. With the withdrawal of Ferial Ashraff from active politics, it was more than a turf war among the disciples of the charismatic founder of the SLMC, the late M.H.M. Ashraff. It was, indeed, a battle among the various claimants to the legacy of the Quaid-e-Azam of the Eastern Province Muslims, who envisioned a Muslim-centric islandwide political movement with its critical mass in the Eastern Province. The splintering of the SLMC was, indeed, the result of a battle for succession after the demise of its founder.

How did the Muslims of the Eastern Province respond? They have sent a clear and unequivocal message to their leaders. The objective of this article is to explain that message from discernible trends in the voting patterns and results.

The Tamils of the Northern and Eastern provinces have held on to their firm resolve of sticking to the party that they perceive as the most promising advocate to articulate both

their grievances and aspirations – the Tamil National Alliance. Contesting under the name Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK/TNA), they won almost every single local government body that they contested in the North and the East, where Tamils command a majority. It must be noted that in the Eastern Province, Chief Minister Sivanesaselvan Chandrakanathan (a.k.a. Pillayan) and MP Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, who led the Tamizh Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) and UPFA campaigns, made an ignominious exit, which surprised only a few. The Tamils of the North and East voted against the government during the presidential election and gave their mandate to the TNA in the parliamentary elections of April 2010. They only reaffirmed their will in the local government elections of 2011. They seek a solution to their main grievance, that of meaningful devolution of effective power to the provinces. The TNA, they believe, will help them achieve the goal of having a stronger voice in the process of governance in the form of participatory democracy in post-conflict Sri Lanka. The TNA has succeeded in being the main repository of Tamil hopes and aspirations.

As for Muslims in the North and East, it was an entirely different and a more complicated narrative, where the defectors and dissidents of the once powerful Muslim Congress became the 'comeback kids,' scoring resounding victories over the SLMC. This to some extent has destroyed the SLMC's mistaken belief of a hegemonic hold on the Muslim constituency.

Parochial Loyalties and Regionalism

The successful return of the defectors and regional strongmen and their parties in capturing a majority of the local government bodies have shown that in the Eastern Province Muslim-majority areas, the Muslim voter has the luxury of displaying parochial loyalties. This explains the electoral success of stalwarts such as Minister M.L.M. Athaullah (NC), A.M.M. Naoshaad (SLFP), Ali Zahir Moulana (SLFP), A.M. Hisbullah (ACMC) and Ameer Ali (ACMC). They belong to different factions and have their own agendas at the national as well as the grassroots level. However, their success on their home turf does not reflect the true political aspirations of Eastern Province Muslim voters. Another pertinent fact is that the leader of the SLMC, Rauf Hakeem, despite his claims to be the heir of the legacy of founder-leader M.H.M. Ashraff, remains outside of the critical mass that was referred to earlier – he is not an Eastern Province Muslim.

Regionalism certainly influences Muslim politics in Sri Lanka. It is a pivotal factor in Muslim politics. There is, however, another reason that explains this. Muslim voters do have their political allegiances and identities. This explains the abject failure of the SLMC outside the Eastern Province in the local polls. Muslims outside the Eastern province are generally a contented lot. They do not suffer from the general minority malaise of being underdogs. The SLMC's success in the parliamentary elections of 2010 was due to its alliance with the UNP and the elephant symbol. Sans the UNP umbrella, Mr Hakeem has discovered his true constituency at the local polls, in the Central Province.

The Muslim voter outside the Eastern Province identifies her/himself as a general rule with the UNP. This is due to the historical reason of the UNP being perceived as a party that is the national vehicle available for minority communities.

As Donald Horowitz (1985) has identified this phenomenon, the Muslim minority opts for a "coalition of commitment" outside the Eastern Province and a "coalition of convenience" within the Eastern Province, where they are in a majority in a given electoral context.

According to Horowitz there are two categories of alliances visible in coalition behaviour. There is first the 'coalition of convenience,' stimulated by little or nothing beyond the requisite for ethnic parties to form a government. The second kind, according to Horowitz, is the coalition of mixed convenience and commitment, referred to as the 'coalition of commitment,' again nourished and sustained by the need to form a government, but also by some hope of having a beneficial impact on ethnic conflict with a "blend of conviction and convenience" (369-88).

A closer look at the types of coalitions commonly made by Muslim political parties helps us to understand how Muslim interests are served in political alliances they make at the centre. According to Horowitz, a 'coalition of convenience' is often formed with the intense desire among ethnic parties to build majorities of seats for governing across ethnic lines. However, the pressures and strains between the electoral process and the governing process that are common to political settings also affect such multiethnic coalitions. "In a divided society votes are best won on an ethnic basis but governments cannot always be formed by ethnic parties alone," says Horowitz (Ibid.).

How the SLMC Fared in Predominantly Muslim Areas Where They Contested under Their Own Tree Symbol

In Ampara, the SLMC fielded 91 candidates in 9 local authorities. Of these 9, one was postponed (Karaitivu). Compared to the 2006 elections where the SLMC elected 29 members, it increased its numbers by one seat. This resulted in the election of 30 members with a total poll of 49,29 votes, excluding its strongholds of Kalmunai (MC) and Karaitivu (PS). It lost Sammanthurai and won the newly established pradeshiya sabha in Irakkamam. "Although SLMC did not win Sammanthurai it was not a major loss. Last time, too, we won in Sammanthurai by contesting with the UNP. This time, part of Sammanthurai had gone under Irakkamam where SLMC won. In Sammanthurai this time, we contested under the tree symbol and emerged with a difference of only 2,500 votes and got a satisfactory share, although the UPFA won this time. Had SLMC contested under the UPFA, too, it would have certainly won Sammanthurai. However, overall it has done very well in Ampara and nobody can beat us there" (Hassan Ali 2011). Retrospective wisdom is the privilege of all politicians.

"The strong message that the SLMC results convey to the government is that it is wise to have SLMC on its side to be able to win the region without a strong opponent. In the Northern Province, although UPFA won in small margins, SLMC's alliance with the government would bring in a clean sweep victory for UPFA" (Ibid.). Future hopes are also the privilege of politicians.

This is also the first time since 1989 that the SLMC faced its Waterloo in Batticaloa in all three local bodies (Eravur, Kathankudy and Koralipattu). In Batticaloa, the areas contested are clearly the domains of such erstwhile SLMCers and UNPers as Ali Zahir Moulana (Eravur), Hizbullah (Kathankudy) and Ameer Ali (Koralaipattu West/Ottamavadi), which brought in effortless sweeping victories for them. Ameer Ali had lost his seat in the general elections of 2006 and has made a comeback.

In the Trincomalee District, where all Muslims parties contested under the UPFA banner, it is not possible to disaggregate the particular votes that the different Muslim parties obtained. The SLMC won the Mutur Pradeshiya Sabha, and lost Kinniya Pradeshiya Sabha to a UPFA Muslim candidate.

In the Northern Province (Mannar and Vavuniya), there are pradeshiya sabhas where Tamils (in majority) and Muslims live, such as Mannar and Manthai West in the Mannar District and Vekalacheddikulam in the Vavuniya District. There is also Musali, the predominantly Muslim majority pradeshiya sabha in the Mannar District. The SLMC went solo, contesting under its tree symbol in these areas. In the Tamil majority areas, ITAK won handsomely, followed by the UPFA in second place. The SLMC came in a poor third and won two seats. It also lost control of Musali Pradeshiya Sabha, a Muslim majority area, when the UPFA (ACMC) won (Mr Rishard Badiuddin-backed candidates). This marks the clear defeat of the SLMC in the Northern Province, as well.

In Mannar, the SLMC claims that the rival Muslim groups were more successful in deploying resources such as transport, which allegedly tilted the results by enabling voters from Puttalam to reach the polling stations in Mannar. This again is one side of the story.

Local Councils Secured by Muslim Candidates/Parties in Muslim-dominated Areas in the East

Parties/Muslim Contestants	Local Councils	Ampara District	Batticaloa District	Trincomalee District
UPFA	UCs	0	2	not analysed
	PSs	1	1	not analysed
SLMC	UCs	0	0	0
	PSs	40		1
NC	MCs	1	did not contested	did not contest
	PSs	1	Do	Do
Total		73		9

Table based on results in *Daily News*, 21 March 2011.

SLMC's Performance in 2006 and 2011 in the Eastern Province

District	No of Candidates Elected in 2006	No of Candidates Elected in 2011
Ampara	29	30
Batticaloa	11	4
Trincomalee	11	7

Department of Elections.

In the Eastern Province, in the 10 local bodies (7 in Ampara and 3 in Batticaloa) that the SLMC contested alone under their tree symbol, they won four and lost 6. This is a remarkably poor performance in this province.

The SLMC outside the North and East

Outside the North and East, the verdict is clear. Muslims voted for the UNP. The SLMC lost members in most of the councils where it contested under the UPFA banner.

The striking demonstration of this assertion is to be found in Kandy. In Kandy, the SLMC fielded 207 candidates contesting 9 councils (3 postponed) and won only 4 seats, compared to 9 seats won in 2006 when it contested under the UNP. In Matale and Nuwara Eliya it retained one member, as in 2006. In Kurunegala, too, the SLMC contested 3 councils under its own banner and one under the UPFA banner. It lost all seats, compared to the 3 won earlier when contesting in alliance with the UNP and with the elephant symbol. In Puttalam the SLMC fielded 44 candidates, where 3 councils were contested under its own symbol and 2 with the UPFA. The SLMC won two under the UPFA and two under its own symbol.

Another case where the SLMC lost due to its abandoning the UNP alliance was in the Central Province. Anuradhapura, too, was a major flop, where it failed to win a single seat. In the previous poll it had won three seats. In Badulla, too, it had two members when contesting with the UNP, but won only one member when contesting under the UPFA.

The SLMC's Overall Performance

In the 68 local bodies it contested, the SLMC won 50 seats under its own symbol and 10 under the UPFA banner, and there are more results to be added in 15 councils where elections were postponed.

In a sense this could be read as a growing disenchantment with the government. The SLMC won 6 MPs from the Eastern Province (out of 11 in the island) while in the opposition in the April 2010 general elections, as there was a rising sense of grievance among the returning Muslim paddy farmers who had lost their land in the aftermath of the war. The last time around the people believed that being in the opposition under the executive presidency would give them the opportunity to raise such issues in parliament. Now, the thinking seems to be that with the SLMC being in government, it can still speak on their behalf. Whether within or out of government, the SLMC's role in Ampara remains intact, and unchallenged.

The SLMC's decision to join the government en masse unconditionally in August 2010, owing to five of its eight members threatening to join the government, has had a

negative impact on the party, as clearly shown in the local government polls. The dilemma the party leadership faced was to either reduce the party to a miniscule minority of three members of parliament, or go along with the five parliamentarians who had already decided to join the government. The party succeeded in preserving the semblance of a political group that will have some bargaining power with the government in power (Thaheer 2010a: 9).

Such a decision has resonated a discordant note among Muslims, as it was mainly carried out with the intention of not losing its party members, and not in the best interest of voters.

The author had noted in an earlier edition of *Polity*, after the parliamentary elections, that "contrary to the general expectation that voters would widely prefer to vote for a winning party that will bring material advancement as has been the trend in the past, Muslim votes at a glance have largely belied this trend ... those representing 'rights/ideology-based' votes led in numbers at a national level ... The Muslim vote for the SLMC component of the UNP in the North and the East, ... could be treated as a symbol of the 'resistance' of the 'rights-based' voter" (Thaheer 2010b: 23-24). However, the voting patterns in the recently held local government polls show the complete opposite, where development-oriented issues have outweighed the rights-based voting pattern.

Conclusion

The consistency of the voting patterns displayed by the average Muslim voter in successive elections since 2006 and up to the local government elections of 2011, and the politics of expedience of the founding members of the SLMC, illustrate a basic reality. The raison d'être of the SLMC at the time of its formation was the accidental combination of the ambitions of a charismatic Muslim leader, Ashraff, and the rudderless drift of the Muslim community at the height of the communal conflict, especially in the Eastern Province. The SLMC has lost its relevance to the Muslim constituency to a great extent. If the SLMC wishes to continue as a Muslim-centric political party which represents majority Muslim aspirations, it will have to operate within the two main majority-dominated parties or opt for regionalism (Eastern Province) and the coalition of convenience.

Strong personalities emerged as leaders in the Muslim community due to the Islamic culture of recognizing gifted

leaders. The present upheaval in West Asia is yet an unfolding of traditional Muslim societies rediscovering individual freedom. Even in Sri Lanka, the Muslim constituency tended to be more tribal than individual. Now, individuality is beginning to emerge.

The people's verdict at the local polls also indicates that the average Muslim voter does not live in isolation. They are concerned with contemporary issues such as development, education and employment opportunities.
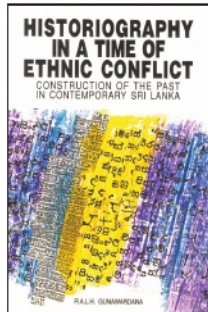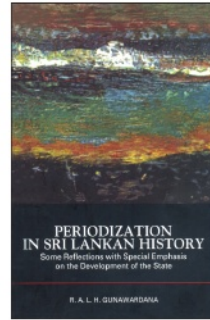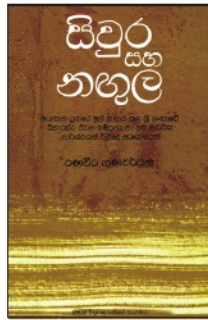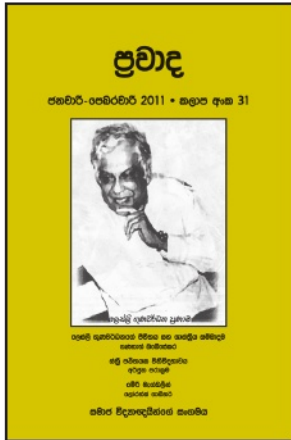
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In Memoriam - Leslie Gunawardana