

SOUTHERN PC ELECTIONS: THE POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION, ETHNICITY AND MEMORY

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The keenly contested elections for the Southern Provincial Council are now over and hitherto unknown oracles such as Gamini Dissanayake and Anura Bandaranaike have stated that they knew of the ultimate outcome — the defeat of the UNP — beforehand. This is hardly surprising since various types of political oracles tend to emerge in this country in the context of its post election culture. The UNP itself has stated that it is not too worried about its defeat since its vote base is still intact — whatever that means. In keeping with this line of thinking, Sirisena Cooray is said to have stated that “one swallow does not make a summer” (*Sunday Observer*, 27th March, 1994). At least at the level of mere symbolism, such a statement seems rather problematic particularly in the context of a country where the four seasons are meaningless, and the sun shines throughout most of the year. In such a context one swallow may encourage others, given the ideal circumstances, and may mean that the chilly “winter” has begun to get warmer.

The ultimate point, however, is that election results are not simply a topic for smart talk; neither are they a matter of statistics and percentages of the total number of registered voters, margins of victory, spoilt votes and so on. All those mundane figures and mathematical calculations represent real people and their conscious decisions. Any analysis of the Southern elections should therefore go far beyond mere statistics.

In this article, I only want to raise some questions on the outcome of the election based on some field information, received two months prior to the election and immediately afterwards. My questions would be focussed on three issues: politics of ethnicity, politics of consumption and dirty tricks, and politics of memory.

It seems to me that the following socio-economic and political problems generally experienced by many inhabitants in the Southern Province as a whole had an impact on the electoral process:

- i. The escalating cost of living and inadequate sources of income generation.
- ii. The uncertainty of and the associated frustration with the political process in the Southern Province.
- iii. The memories and the unresolved social problems emanating from the period of intense political violence in the late 1980s.

My analysis would be in the context of the concerns outlined above.

Politics of Consumption and Dirty Tricks

What do I mean by the politics of consumption and dirty tricks? In fact, it should be called the politics of vulgar consumption. Let me explain first the consumption part. Meet any middle class Sri Lankan who lives in an affluent European or North American society and ask him how he saw Sri Lanka during his two weeks vacation. They would all say, for instance, that Sri Lanka is “fine”, that it has really “developed”, and that it has “all the foreign stuff one would need”— cellular phones, plenty of TV and FM radio channels with foreign accents, high rise buildings, and above all California-style malls. What more would one want? Everything is just like in the “States,” “England” or wherever. The answers are so consistently similar that one would be tempted to assume that all these folks had probably met in some Colombo club simply to come up with the same set of answers. These are the fragile and illusive components of the NIC (Newly Industrialized Countries) dream. These are also the only significant indicators such holiday makers would see or prefer to see during their ritual “homecomings”. This blindness is mostly the result of extravagant consumption.

But the reality behind this vulgar consumption is quite different. Just look at the contradictions within the California-style shopping malls themselves. Disregard for a moment the foreign goods and the *nouveau riche*, and talk to the workers who open the doors for you to enter the super markets, search your cars and handbags for concealed weapons, and clean the floors. To them, the indicators of the NIC dream are simply symbols of the lop-sided income distribution that has become so pronounced over the last decade or so. Given their lowly salaries, they cannot even buy groceries from the very stores they clean and open the doors and usher in the rich (and sometimes the not-so-rich university academics!). The internal contradictions of a country where income distribution is so lop-sided are visible everywhere including the hotels to which some of these holiday makers and the *nouveau riche* descend upon on week ends. But very few would actually bother to talk to the waiters, the pool attendants, the children who are trying to sell cigarettes or to themselves with a desire to find out about the other reality. The reality in the villages and towns which are not popular tourist destinations are also non-existent as far as these ‘tourists’ are concerned. The point is that the larger reality of the country is seldom perceived by the aforementioned



holiday makers or by many of the *nouveau riche* domiciled within the country.

So, what has all this got to do with Southern elections? Well, everything. Unpleasant realities of the country or its contradictions cannot be wished away by the politicians in power, business tycoons or anyone else, and certainly not by people to whom those contradictions make a real difference. Many of the people who voted in the Southern elections had experienced and perceived the nature of this dual reality, and tried to transform their frustrations into action through the vote. Above all, it was a symbolic protest vote. They did not cling to any lofty dream that an opposition victory in the Province would make a great and quick improvement their lives. In fact, many were quite sceptical about any real change even if the UNP is defeated island-wide.

The point, then, is that talking about reaching NIC status in the year 2000 or about the tall buildings in contemporary Colombo makes no difference to teachers who have to conduct tuition classes and engage in small business just to get by, or to farmers who are desperately looking for loans to get the next bag of fertilizer. Many small farmers I spoke to told me that, while working in the fields, they had to sell their labour for daily wages at urban centres such as Galle and Matara, because their earnings from farming were not adequate to support their families. They expect their children to spend more time in the fields so that they could engage themselves in wage labour. This has had a direct negative impact on the formal education of rural children.

Farmers also complain that credit facilities available for agricultural and housing purposes are inadequate. According to some, the loans they have acquired to buy fertilizers or to build houses have become serious problems, because they had to “work all the time” to pay off the loans since there were no opportunities to save money for any emergency. But the basic patterns of consumption and behavior of their political leaders in power do not seem to symbolise any of the problems these rural voters face on a regular basis.

Meanwhile, contrary to middle class perceptions, many villagers are quite proud of the new clock towers they have got. But when some of them have to perform their compulsory *janasaviya* labour on the estates of the village elites with links to the ruling party, and when the supply of irrigated water to their small farms is controlled by the same elites, they are unlikely to vote *en masse* for

the ruling party just because they have been given a clock tower.

Many consider the government responsible for their plight, particularly because the opposition, which has not been in power for the past 17 years, cannot be blamed for this unfortunate state of affairs. At the same time, people who have benefitted from some policies of the UNP are not particularly vocal about their economic problems, even though they also face some of these same problems.

But the policies of consumption do not end only with contradictions in the economic sphere. They are bound up with the political process itself. Among other things, the opulent life-styles (real or imaginary) of the UNP power dealers and the Pajero culture so publicly associated with the political hierarchy of the UNP, did not appeal to the voters.

When posh European cars—(with tinted glasses that are meant for the people’s ‘representatives’ to hide their faces from the people, when they travel in air-conditioned comfort)—scream down the dusty roads, accompanied by a couple of Pajero jeeps filled with menacing armed men, it can hardly create the ideal image for folks who are asking the people to vote for them. Incidentally, the opposition was not so tarnished with this image, more due to their lack of resources than to choice.

The gulf between those seeking the vote and the voters themselves became most obvious when top UNPers were visiting the electorates. In meetings attended by the President and the Prime Minister, the security clamp down

was a clear nuisance even to passers by. As a result many people actually kept away from such meetings. When voters had very little or no access to leaders who came seeking their support, they began to ponder about a set of inevitable questions. “If we voted these people to power, will they ever be able to do anything for us? Will we ever get a chance to enter their well fortified fortresses? Will they ever forego one of the many vehicles in their fleets and offer to finance a small van for the villagers to travel to the nearest town for medical treatment?” Many, it seems, have decided in the negative.

Compared to other recent elections, the provincial council election in the South was relatively clean. However, certain activities that led to the elections clearly worked against the UNP. Since the May 1993 provincial council elections, many people in the South became quite uncer-

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tain of the political future of the province. Much of this frustration can be traced back to the manner in which the UNP attempted to install itself in power after the elections in 1993. Despite the majority (a slim margin though it was) the opposition had won, the then Governor of the Southern Province acted in a patently dubious manner when he invited the UNP to form the provincial government. After that decision was challenged in court and the court ruled against the UNP, the Chief Minister-designate had to travel to three provinces to search for the Governor in order to get himself sworn in. Four days after the October 8th (1993) court decision, the new Chief Minister finally took his oaths. Soon after this, UNP and opposition politicians and their supporters clashed in the city of Galle, resulting in the killing of two by-standers. Many people perceived the UNP behavior as an unwarranted dirty game, and an insult to the popular verdict of the electorate.

But the UNP's resolve to undermine the opposition controlled Southern Provincial Council did not end there. At a crucial council vote an Opposition member, Wimal Franciscu, failed to show up, and consistent rumors suggested that he had been kidnapped by UNP operatives to turn the vote against opposition controlled provincial government. Some people have claimed that there was no "proof" of the UNP's involvement in the alleged kidnapping. However, in situations such as these, proof is a relative concept, particularly when dealing with a perceptive electorate. They clearly knew that Franciscu's disappearance and later re-appearance as well as the mildly exciting soap opera that followed did not take place due to divine intervention. Many people, including UNPers — quite a few middle class elements among them — not only believed that the UNP was responsible for the entire operation, but also thought that this was an absolutely unwarranted course of action.

Consequent to the 'Franciscu affair', a concern emerged that the South may be thrown again into the politics of terror as a result of UNP antics. The ultimate dissolution of the Southern Provincial Council in December 1993 and the scheduling of fresh elections for March 1994 were seen by many Southerners as a total waste of money as well yet another political game, manipulated by of the UNP. As we see now, such political games played in the context of the rather obnoxious politics of consumption did not go down well with the voters.

Politics of Memory

As we know, the Southern province experienced intense political violence during the so called period of terror in the late 1980s. Despite the hollow cries of normalcy, and the externally imposed images of normalcy (eg. tourists enjoying themselves on the beaches where bodies had once washed ashore), the social problems and trauma resulting from those experiences are still quite real for many people. For them "normalcy" is a crude subversion of reality, and it is something that has yet to be restored. Similarly, justice is a distant and probably unrealizable dream. The claims of normalcy are akin to the denial of the past, the history and the collective memories of many people.

These issues regarding the murdered, the tortured and the disappeared acquired some national prominence with the discovery of mass graves at Suriyakanda. These

unresolved problems clearly became a powerful factor in the election. This does not mean that only the UNP was responsible for the reign of terror in the late 1980s. Those who suffered know that the JVP was also responsible. But the point is that the JVP as an organisation was not a factor in the elections. The UNP with its bloodied hands was. As noted earlier, incidents such as the Franciscu affair reaffirmed fears that the UNP would bring back politics of terror. Compared to

this, the combined but fragmented opposition's track record in the immediate past was more tolerable. Moreover, even the victims of JVP violence were not satisfied with the measures taken by the government to help them. They also saw in the vulgar claims of normalcy the government's intention to forget their pain. In such circumstances a protest vote favoring the opposition was quite natural.

Politics of Ethnicity

Already a number of minority political parties and groups as well as commentators have claimed that the Southern election results were indicative of the Southern people's rejection of racist politics. At best this would seem to be quite a sweeping and vague statement. However, ethnicity certainly was a factor in the election as it would be in any election in this country under the present conditions.

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Then what kind of role did ethnicity play in this election? Without a doubt the President has alienated many minorities, particularly the Tamils, with his insensitive statements such as that "there is no ethnic conflict in the country, only a terrorist one." His non-existent relations with the CWC leader had also alienated that vast vote base located primarily in the central hills. During the Southern elections the CWC membership in the South was encouraged to vote for the opposition. In the post-Premadasa era, President Wijetunga symbolized the UNP's attempt to attract more Sinhala voters by taking a tougher ideological stand on the ethnic issue and the military conflict in the North and East.

Moreover, the President's stand on the ethnic question had motivated certain Tamil groups to campaign primarily on that issue during the recently held local government elections in the Eastern province. In the meantime Colombo-based Tamils met recently at the BMICH where the overwhelming majority had wanted to withdraw their support from the UNP. Some wanted to campaign as independents in future elections. Naive as that may be, this is also indicative of the dissatisfaction which considerable sections of minority voters throughout the country have with some key UNP slogans, primarily emanating from the President.

Within the context outlined above, what are the ethno-political factors that have emerged from the Southern election results? Of all the parties that contested the elections, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) could be considered the most progressive insofar as minority rights are concerned. For long it has had a clear policy towards the ethnic question. Recognizing the right of self-determination of Tamil people, the NSSP has actively campaigned for it. In fact, the TULF requested minorities to vote for the NSSP. On the other end of the spectrum is a Sinhala nationalist outfit, the Sinhala Maha Sammatha Bhumiputra Pakshaya (SMSBP). If the rejection of racist politics was an overwhelming concern, the logical choice of the Southern voter would have been the NSSP. But both the NSSP and the SMSBP were clearly rejected by the voters.

In this context, it would be more accurate to say that rather than clearly rejecting ethnic politics of the variety pursued by the UNP and SMSBP, many voters found ethnicity as not directly relevant to this election. More important were the concerns outlined earlier. In other words, the result was more a vote against the UNP's general politics and its negative reputation than a vote against ethnic politics per se. However, as on-going research as well as comparative data from the early 1980s would show - at least superficially - there is a clear change in how the ethnic conflict is perceived by the

average Sinhala. For instance many are unwilling to justify unrestricted violence against Tamils living amongst them, which was clearly not the case in 1983. On the other hand, civilians dying as a result of military activity in the North and East still do not receive routine sympathy from the same people. The more distant the conflict is, the less sympathy towards victims or understanding of the situation.

Were any of these indicators reflected in the election results? To a certain extent, they were. The kind of naive Tamil or minority phobia expressed by SMSBP was of no significance to the Southern Sinhala who constitute an overwhelming majority in both numbers and potential for collective action. On the other hand, the kind of war-oriented ethnic politics the UNP attempted is also of no relevance except for one crucial exception. For instance, the war is being fought in a distant land and the immediate threats of any military fallout are not felt this far down in the South. Of course, such anxieties are a concern for Sinhala peasants living in areas more closer to the combat zones. The only exception where people directly experience the war is when dead soldiers are brought home for burial or when MIA (Missing In Action) notifications are delivered. In such a context, to mobilize an entire polity on the basis of anxieties that they do not routinely feel simply cannot work, and it did not.

Conclusion?

Can any conclusions be drawn from all this? Lessons are perhaps available for both winners and losers if they are inclined to look for them. If democratic politics is what this country aspires to, then there are certain rules that have to be observed. One, we are dealing with a relatively perceptive electorate. Second, a nasty track record in human rights violations or corruption will continue to remain a nasty track record. They cannot be wished away. History cannot be "de-historicized" even though it is a favorite endeavor of Post Modernists, in addition to politicians with dubious track records. There are always memories, and memories cannot be erased or "dememorized". More importantly, people always vote with their memories. Third, there is no such thing as a sure trump card in a world where political behaviors change over time. For example, ethnicity which is still an overall political issue cannot be mobilized in a parochial sense as was attempted by some in these elections. Finally, the results of the elections should not be taken lightly by the UNP as unimportant in the national context. Similarly, the opposition cannot afford to think that the major hurdle has been cleared. It has simply entered the game in a serious manner despite being utterly fragmented. ■