

Meanwhile, the readers of Colombo's two English dailies, the *Daily News* and *The Island*, have been witnessing a fascinating reversal of roles. Reflecting the UNP's internal squabbles after the Southern defeat, the government-controlled *Daily News* has been giving prominence to prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and Housing Minister Sirisena Cooray, at the expense of President Wijetunga. For an entire week after the election, Wijetunga's place was in the inside pages of the *Daily News* while Wickremasinghe and Cooray were repeatedly featured on the front page. Not to be outdone by the

"Anti-Wijetunga Clique", *The Island* gave generous space to Wijetunga on its front page, with reports worded in an openly pro-Wijetunga idiom.

*The Island* in a way needs to be genuinely concerned with Wijetunga's political fortunes. Wijetunga's oft-quoted dictum, 'the majority Sinhalese are a massive shady tree entangled around which are the creepers of the minorities', is borrowed word to word from the Upali Group's newspapers and their preferred columnists.

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## POLLS IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE: THE BIG LIE

Ketheeswaran Loganathan

**T**he *London Economist*, speaking of the local government elections in the Eastern province states that "to many people's surprise, the elections on March 1st, 1994 went off fairly peacefully and the results are reckoned to be a triumph for President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga. For the first time in a decade, the Government can claim that there is some kind of civil administration in an area that has been controlled by the army."

Similarly *The Island* of the 13th of March carried the considered and expert opinion of Dr. de Costa with the caption, "Polls in Vavuniya and East — a victory for democracy."

I would imagine that all sections of the Sinhala media, irrespective of political affiliations, would have expressed glee at the fact that the Eastern Province (EP) polls symbolised the demise of Eelam!

On the whole, the Government appears to have scored a propaganda point over the international community, with the "Fifth Estate" consciously or unwittingly playing its part in this campaign.

On the other hand, the TULF and the EPRLF which boycotted the polls on the ground that this was the first step towards the de-linking of the presently merged North-East and that conditions did not exist for the holding of free and fair polls, have indicated in no uncertain terms the fraudulent nature of the polls. The so-called high turn-out of voters was, they claim, due to impersonations, the stuffing of ballot boxes and political interference by the

security forces in directly influencing the outcome of the polls. The role of the security forces was characterized by the EPRLF as a case of "militarization of the electoral process."

Even if one were to dismiss the claims of the EPRLF and the TULF as being "politically motivated," it is somewhat difficult to treat lightly the charges made by the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) which contested the polls with much enthusiasm. As M.H.M. Ashraff, the leader of the SLMC, commented in a recent interview, "it was a nightmare. In addition to the other parties contesting us we had to contend with the Sri Lanka Police Party which took a very personal interest in the election." (*The Island*, 13 March)

And certainly, the Election Commissioner's resolve never to permit a repetition of what transpired in Eravur and Kaththankuddy in the Southern Province cannot be taken lightly. To quote, "What had happened in Eravur and Kattanaduddy, at the March 1 local government polls must not take place in the south." (*The Island*, 15 March).

### Vague Interpretations

**I**t is, however, a moot point as to whether the official admission of widespread fraud and irregularities in Eravur and Kattanaduddy means a denial of misconduct and irregularities in other areas. It is my contention that it is not. On the contrary, by revealing only a **part**, one is also concealing the **rest**, hence, subjecting the **whole** to varying and vague interpretations.

So how does one interpret these contradictory claims? Are the claims of the Government a conspiracy to mislead public opinion? Or, are the claims of fraud by the Tamil

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and Muslim parties themselves a conspiracy to discredit the Government?

Let us examine the issues a bit more closely.

First, irrespective of the outcome of the polls, did the polls itself conform to democratic norms and traditions? Dr. de Costa seems to think so. Further, he has attributed the "high turn-out" to "many Tamil political parties" which supported independent groups, despite their decision to boycott the polls.

The above argument borders more on wishful thinking than reflecting concrete realities. Had Dr. de Costa or any election monitoring committee (which, curiously, made themselves scarce during the EP polls) been present in the Eastern Province on the day of the polling, they would have observed the police coming out full force in mobilizing the "masses." Where this was difficult, the contingency plan was set in motion, namely, to close the polling stations as early as 9:30 a.m. In other words, where the masses could not be mobilized, the ballot papers were!

And had Dr. de Costa or any election monitoring committee been present in the Eastern Province in the run-up to the polls, they would have observed the Army, led by the General, and the Special Task Force (STF) putting together independent groups, not to mention conscripting candidates. These matters were brought to the attention of the Election Commissioner on more than one occasion, preceding the polls, by Tamil political parties.

As regards the claims made by Dr. de Costa that even those Tamil political parties which called for a boycott extended their support to independent groups is, mildly speaking, untenable. Neither the TULF nor the EPRLF called on the people to vote for any independent group. On the contrary, the call was for the people to go to the polling stations and cast their ballot - **after** having duly spoiled them. And this the people did with much gusto. A cursory look into the voting pattern in Batticaloa District makes this abundantly clear. The high percentage of spoiled votes has been conveniently left out in most analyses of the polls in the Eastern province.

Now let us take the point of view of the *London Economist* that the polls were a triumph for President Wijetunga and that for the first time in a decade there is some form of civil administration in an area that has been under the control of the army. And this, the *London Economist* claims, "to many people's surprise."

If anyone was surprised, if at all, by the outcome of the polls, it is certainly not the people — since they directly witnessed and experienced the charade and the indignities that took place in the name of democracy.

And certainly, the President himself would not have been surprised by the outcome of the polls — since it was so

willed! So, who was surprised? The media and the political commentators?

Now to the "restoration of some form of civil administration after a decade" scenario. First, this argument is false, in addition to being ahistorical. The proponents of this argument have conveniently forgotten the period 1988-1990 when the now defunct North-East Provincial Government was functioning. Despite the LTTE menace and, of course with the assistance of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF), the civil administration was widened and deepened in the Eastern Province and parts of the Northern Province — until the late-President Premadasa decided to strike a deal with the LTTE with the objective of destabilizing the Provincial Government.

The question that needs to be counterposed is this: When the Provincial Council System itself remains ineffective, due to resistance on the part of the central government, will Municipal Councils or Pradeshiya Sabhas in the Eastern Province be able to provide a civil administration that caters to and is responsive to the needs of the people?

The truth of the matter is that no conclusions can be derived from the outcome of the election in the Eastern Province - since it was a sham from beginning to end. However, it appears that the designs of the Government, effected through the security forces, to hoodwink international opinion may have succeeded — as evidenced by the gullibility of the *London Economist*.

This takes us to another issue that has now been linked to the EP polls — declaration of the intent by the President, on more than one occasion, to de-link the presently merged North-East through the holding of a referendum. Invariably the declaration of such an intent follows the observation "now that the polls for local government are over... we shall confine the disease to Jaffna..."

Here, I do not wish to venture into the issue of de-merger or the mechanisms through which the Government seeks to achieve it. But, what needs to be highlighted is that even if a referendum is held in the Eastern Province, despite the objections that have been levelled against such a step by the Tamil political parties, including the SLMC, the outcome can no longer be taken as reflecting the "popular will" of the people. This is because the recently concluded polls in the Eastern Province has made it abundantly clear that the "popular will" need neither be voluntary nor real. And the haste with which the Western and pro-establishment media seem to be wanting to give legitimacy to whatever the Government seeks to do in the Eastern Province, under the guise of "restoring democracy and normalcy," does not augur well for confidence building and serious negotiations which are necessary for a just and durable peace. ■