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MORE ON ELECTIONS AND POLITICS

A second round of provincial council elections has just been concluded. The outcome of this election, which was held on April 6th to elect representatives for five provincial councils, reflects some hidden as well as emerging features of contemporary Sri Lankan politics.

In the five provinces where elections were held, a clear outcome emerged only in the North-Central province. There, the People's Alliance (PA) obtained an absolute majority of seats and thus could form an administration of its own. In all the other four provinces, the PA's majority is insufficient to form provincial administrations to be run by the PA alone. A consistent trend demonstrated in these four provinces is that without the support of the ethnic and political minority parties, both PA and United National Party are not in a position to form administrations. In the Central province where there is a sizeable presence of Tamil plantation workers, the political wing of the Ceylon Workers' Congress has won six seats, which makes it absolutely necessary for the PA to come into coalition arrangements with the CWC. The situation in the Western province is somewhat similar, with the only difference that the JVP, with eight seats, holds the balance between the PA and the UNP. Even there, four other minority and smaller parties have obtained representation, indicating that the system of proportional representation makes space for minor political players in a two-party dominant electoral polity. This overall outcome is to a large extent a repetition of the outcome of the 1994 parliamentary elections. With a marginal majority over the UNP, the PA could form a government and stay in power, mainly

because of the support of ethnic minority parties.

This development, once again, is a reminder of one defining feature of Sri Lanka's institutional democracy, its multi-ethnicity. Sri Lanka is often called a multi-ethnic democracy. That characterization is usually derived from the fact that Sri Lankan society is multi-ethnic in its composition and that the country has a parliamentary form of government. A more credible reason to call Sri Lanka a multi-ethnic democracy would be that regime formation through parliamentary-democratic means requires coalition-making among political parties of the majority Sinhalese community and those representing Tamil and Muslim minorities.

If the outcome of April provincial election is an indication of the political scenario to emerge after parliamentary and presidential elections to be held in this or next year, Sri Lanka's next regime is most likely to be formed through a coalition among political parties of the Sinhalese, Tamil (North-eastern and plantation) and Muslim communities. The political balance is evenly divided between the PA and the UNP with the JVP as well as Tamil and Muslim political parties making minor, though politically significant, claims in the reckoning of the arithmetic of regime formation.

The way in which Sri Lanka's party system and political allegiances have been shaped at present has brought ethnic identity to the center of electoral competition. The PA and the UNP appear to obtain the vast majority of their votes from the Sinhalese electorate. The chances of these two main political parties obtaining the ethnic minority votes

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in the coming national elections are quite marginal. Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe has not yet managed to persuade the Tamil voters, who were estranged from the UNP in the pre-1994 years, to return to his party's support base. Likewise, Mrs. Kumaratunga's PA has done nothing imaginative to prevent large sections of the Tamil and Muslim voters alienating themselves from PA's popular base. Tamil voters in the northern and eastern provinces, the Western province and the plantation areas are unlikely to vote for the PA as they did at the 1994 Presidential elections. Meanwhile, the only Tamil and Muslim vote which the UNP can rely on is that of the small-business class of these two communities in Colombo and a few other urban pockets. In that context, Tamil and Muslim political parties, that are likely to contest future elections by fielding their own lists of candidates, will continue to attract large shares of ethnic votes of their communities.

The implications of the above scenario for the outcome of next presidential and parlia-

mentary elections would be quite far reaching. At the presidential fray, unless Mrs. Kumaratunga and the UNP candidate enter into coalition compacts with the minority communities, the Tamil and Muslim voters may not be inspired to vote *en bloc* for either of the two Sinhalese candidates. The two main Sinhala parties do not appear to offer any positive political hopes, in their next election campaign, in the form of a vision of ethnic conflict resolution. Meanwhile, Mr. Thondaman's CWC leadership may find it comfortable to remain uncommitted, unless a deal could be worked out in CWC's favor either with the PA or the UNP. The same circumstances will prevail at the next parliamentary elections too. Actually, at parliamentary elections, all parties will be more inclined not to form electoral alliances with other parties. The present mood among big as well small parties is to strengthen the parliamentary representation of their individual parties. This mood is particularly strong in Tamil, Muslim and Left parties.

In the backdrop of these possibilities, there is no likelihood of a major re-alignment of political forces taking shape at Sri Lanka's forthcoming two national elections. This scenario may be contrasted with the context in which the 1994 elections were held and the PA came into power. The PA then, under the new leadership of Kumaratunga, was the main political rallying point for a range of democratic and progressive political forces in the country. In that re-alignment of forces, the active constituencies were not only political parties, but also democratic civil society forces that were active in various fronts of the democratic struggle--human rights, media freedom, women's rights, ethnic harmony, peace and conflict resolution, social justice and economic welfare. The reformist promise of the PA 1994 was thus largely a making of that powerful alignment of new political forces in the country. But this coalition among political parties, ethnic communities and civil society forces is now in disarray. The PA no longer represents the broad alliance that was there in 1994. Alienated from the broad democratic and reformist forces in society, the PA is

presently reduced to a 'normal' political party with a right-wing agenda. It has neither the capacity nor an inclination to rebuild a broad alliance again. It has now become an entity run by political managers whose world-view is shaped by the corporate managerial thinking.

Thus, Sri Lanka's next parliamentary and presidential elections and the subsequent regime formation will occur in a context that can be described as 'clinical'. This context will be clinical, precisely because of the likely absence of a reformist vision, either in the election campaign or in the exercise of regime formation. The fact that no political party is capable of setting in motion a new political imagination, involving the broad masses of the people may make this 'clinicality' easy to grasp. In such conditions, no political party would have the capacity to generate either mass enthusiasm at elections or voter participation at the polling. Then in the absence of a wave of voter enthusiasm in its favor, each party vying for governmental power may find dirty tactics and manipulation exceedingly useful for electoral victories.

Let us assume that after parliamentary elections, a new regime is formed with the parliamentary support of ethnic minority parties. The question we should ask against that scenario is: will a Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnic coalition be committed to solving Sri Lanka's most pressing problem, the ethnic question? Or would such a coalition be merely a site for partisan political bargaining and sharing the privileges of governmental power among one dominant Sinhalese political party and one Muslim and a few Tamil parties? A plausible answer may be worked out when we prepare a balance sheet of the ethnic coalition forged in 1994 under the PA leadership. Indeed, this coalition had all the potential and promise to work towards building a new social contract for Sri Lanka in which ethnic relations could be re-constituted through a process of reconciliation and peace. The government's peace initiatives as well as constitutional proposals for greater power-sharing were direct outcomes of that initial re-alignment of political forces. But that promise could not survive. It may not be revived.

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