

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Karu Jayasuriya and the Clean-up Phenomenon

In the recent provincial council elections, Mr. Karu Jayasuriya of the UNP emerged as the candidate with the highest preferential votes among all contestants. He polled over 250,000 individual votes in the Colombo district. Jayasuriya was also the UNP's candidate for the office of the Chief Minister for Western Province. When he contested provincial elections, he was holding the office of Colombo city's Mayor. Jayasuriya is also the party chairman of the UNP. In some political quarters he is tipped to be the next UNP leader. The pro-PA Lake House press has been quite active in suggesting that the UNPers who are disappointed with the Ranil Wickramasinghe leadership might push Karu Jayasuriya to be the new UNP leader. In Colombo's political debates and speculations, Karu Jayasuriya has been made into a political phenomenon of a sort.

Karu Jayasuriya's appeal to the electorate is an issue worth some reflection. People who voted for Jayasuriya at the last local government as well as provincial elections appear to see certain political virtues in him. Some say he is an honest and clean politician. This belief emanates in a context where politicians in general are associated in public mind with corruption, inefficiency, abuse of power, nepotism and lack of moral qualities. Politicians, along with policemen, earn lowest marks in public esteem. And in that background, Karu Jayasuriya is seen by a good number of voters as a man with virtues with which people are happy to identify their political concerns. Secondly, Jayasuriya is seen as an efficient administrator. The evidence for this quality for efficiency comes from two sources. The first is that he is a politician who has come from the private sector. With the middle class infatuation with the efficiency in private sector management skills, Jayasuriya is seen by urban, middle class voters as a 'good manager'. The second is an achievement Jayasuriya made as the Mayor of Colombo—efficient disposal of garbage through private sector participation. Then lastly, there is this idea of 'man with a vision'. Jayasuriya is perceived, again in the middle class quarters of Colombo district, as a politician possessing a vision. Jayasuriya's election campaign also harped on his visionary qualities.

What is this vision which Mr. Karu Jayasuriya appears to offer to the electorate? What is his magic? In an informal survey of voter opinions, *Pravada* found some interesting responses. On Mr. Jayasuriya's vision, those who believed that he had a vision repeatedly cited Mr. Jayasuriya's successful campaign to keep Colombo city clean. They also said that Karu Jayasuriya had a vision of a clean, uncorrupt and efficient government for the whole country. From these responses, it is quite clear that Mr. Jayasuriya's visionary image is nothing but a belief in a functional, managerial efficiency. In none of his election campaigns did Karu Jayasuriya offer any broad political ideas concerning economic development, social

justice, democracy, ethnic conflict resolution, human rights, gender equity, employment generation, education or any area of reforms. When he was running for the office of the Chief Minister of the Western province, he did not even talk about how he would strengthen the provincial council system. He could have at least presented to his largely urban electorate a plan to make the Western province a livable area without urban degradation, garbage proliferation, environment pollution, traffic congestion, or flash floods and with basic civic amenities required under conditions of rapid urbanization. Actually, he has not so far offered to the electorate any fresh ideas about public policy either at national or provincial levels. Instead, he is offering himself to the electorate as a charming, nice gentlemen committed to 'civilized politics'. But 'civilized politics' is a much-abused slogan in contemporary Sri Lanka.

The important question then is why is it that at least a section of the electorate appears to believe in a new visionary without a vision? The answer to this question lies largely in Sri Lanka's present crisis of political leadership. The middle and professional classes in Sri Lanka appear to be totally disenchanted with the existing political leadership of both the PA and the UNP. Among PA politicians, there is hardly any leader who the middle and professional classes appear to trust. All PA Ministers, Deputy Ministers and leaders are viewed by this important segment of the electorate as unmitigated failures. Inefficiency, corruption, arrogance, dishonesty are some of the key qualities which the disenchanted electorate attribute at varying degrees to PA political leaders. Meanwhile, the UNP leadership is seen as the continuation of the same corrupt and arrogant bunch of politicians who refuse to reform themselves. In this atmosphere of disenchantment with the existing political leadership, the electorate tends to pin its hopes on a political newcomer. And people attribute to the newcomer the political virtues that are desecrated by traditional leaders. This was the atmosphere of the magic that propelled Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga into national politics in 1993 and 1994. And this is also the present atmosphere which has led a fairly significant section of the Colombo electorate to see a little magic in Mr. Karu Jayasuriya.

Absenteeism and Protest at Elections: A Sign of Discontent?

No commentator on the recent provincial elections has failed to notice the high proportion of absent and spoilt votes. The fact that it rained on the election day does not explain the relatively low voter turnout in the Western province where transport is easy and polling centers are located in or near neighborhoods. Voting figures suggest a clearly downward trend. In Colombo District, the average voter turnout this time is 64.45% as opposed to 77.6% at the parliamentary elections of 1994. Figures vary in electoral divisions. In Maharagama electoral division, the turnout at April provincial elections is 62.44 whereas in Ratmalana it is 56.97%. Colombo East-

recorded voter participation at 58.83 % while in Colombo-West , Dehiwela, Kotte, Borella and Maharagama, the percentages were 52.49, 59.17, 62.71, 62.63 and 62.44 respectively. In 1994 all these electoral divisions reported over 75% of voter participation.

The most noticeable feature in these statistics is the concentration of absenteeism in urban electorates with large upper class and middle class populations. Similarly, both PA and UNP have suffered from this absenteeism. Compared with parliamentary election results in 1994, the two main parties have suffered significant losses in almost all urban electorates. For the PA, losses run into thousands in each electorate. In Maharagama, the PA's loss is over 14,000 votes while in Kaduwela it is over 15,000. Moratuwa records a loss of 13,000 for the ruling party whereas in Colombo central, the figure is nearly 18,000. The UNP's decline of votes in Colombo electoral divisions is generally in the range of 2000. One interpretation of this tendency is that the urban electorate is by and large disenchanted with all the existing political parties and leaders. This is not a good sign for the future of Sri Lanka's democracy. Indeed, it reflects a general political trend in all South Asian democracies.

The eighties and early nineties were the period in which South Asia witnessed a return to parliamentary democracy, shifting from a variety of anti-democratic systems of regimes. Pakistan and Bangladesh appeared at last to have said farewell to military authoritarianism while Nepal ended its authoritarian monarchy through a pro-democracy popular movement. In 1994, Sri Lanka saw the termination of an authoritarian regime. A popular quest for a democratic alternative to the UNP resulted in the PA's election victory in that year. But all over South Asia, including in India, public disenchantment with the way the democratic governance is managed by the political parties, leaders and bureaucracies is now a visible and felt fact in political life. The inauguration of democracy in Nepal has opened up political space for an entirely new stratum of career politicians to make democratic politics a means of corrupt living. The emergence of a plethora of political parties is viewed by the Nepalese public with cynical disdain, because of the highly opportunistic games of alliance-making and alliance-breaking often resorted to by political parties. Elections as well as representative institutions in Nepal are fast losing public confidence. A slightly similar situation prevails in Bangladesh too. There, the unending

tussle for power between the two main political parties has brought political havoc, often promoting street riots, and strikes leading to the disruption of every-day life and the party in opposition constantly harassing the regime in power only to bring it down. Meanwhile, Pakistan offers an extreme case of democracy's deterioration. Exceedingly high levels of corruption among politicians and bureaucrats, constant and bitter bickering among leaders of main political parties, and deep divisions of polity constantly promoted by political leaders have created an atmosphere of political despair in the public mind. Sri Lanka, it seems, has now entered this path of public discontent with democracy.

When South Asian masses began openly to display their disenchantment with varieties of authoritarian and anti-democratic regimes, democrats celebrated. But when masses begin to disenchant with democracy, there is hardly any reason for celebration. Public disenchantment with authoritarianism usually brings people to the street, to direct political action. But disenchantment with democracy makes people politically inactive, passive and cynical. Then, boycotting elections and spoiling ballot papers can be seen as signs of passive resistance opted for by some politically conscious segments of society.

Provincial Councils: Baptism Completed at Last

A feature of the April provincial elections that should not go unnoticed is the final legitimacy granted to the system of provincial councils by Sri Lanka's all political parties, except the LTTE. Three political parties that had in the past rejected the provincial councils and actively campaigned against the system of devolution took part in the elections this time. The JVP has been the most ardent opponent of provincial councils. Its armed insurgency in 1987-89 was partly in opposition to devolution. In the past, the extreme Sinhala nationalist *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna* and the *Thri Sinhala Bhumiputra Pakshaya* also vehemently opposed the provincial councils. While the JVP and MEP managed to get representation in the Councils, the *Bhumiputras* were routed by the electorate. In Sinhalese society at least, the system of devolution introduced in 1987 has now received its ultimate legitimacy.

P