

GENERAL ELECTIONS 2000 - AN INTERPRETATION

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On 10th October 2000, the Sri Lankan electorate voted in the eleventh parliamentary general election since independence. It was the third general election under the system of proportional representation. The election was held at the end of the term of the Peoples Alliance (PA) government. The PA was voted into power in 1994, after being in opposition for seventeen years. Eleven months ago, in December 1999, the PA candidate won the presidential election convincingly. Despite this, there was a lot of expectation that, in the usual fashion, the Sri Lankan electorate would throw out the party in power. This has happened several times in the past, and there was a lot of hope, at least in the capital city of Colombo, that this history would be repeated.

The PA Coalition

In 1994 the PA was a coalition of four parties. The alliance brought together the SLFP and a section of the left parties, (popularly called old-left parties). In the past, this had been the combination that had defeated the United National Party (UNP) in elections. In fact, whenever the SLFP and the left had managed to come into some type of an electoral agreement (ranging from tactical agreements to not contest in some areas, no-contest pacts, and formation of coalition parties as in 1970 or in 1994), they have always been able to defeat the UNP. In this general election this coalition expanded to include the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) - a party that had been a coalition partner to the SLFP. The MEP was a coalition partner to the SLFP in the historic defeat of UNP in the 1956 election. Thus with this addition the PA brought together almost all the major parties of the Sinhala South in an electoral contest against the UNP.

The UNP on its own

The UNP contested the election on its own. It had in its fold a few members of other parties (e.g., some members of the CWC contested under the UNP ticket), but by and large keeping with its historical traditions the UNP was contesting on its own. However the UNP had to face the election in the background of the defection of several prominent and long standing members of the party to the PA. These internal conflicts of the UNP can be linked to the problems of succession in the leadership. It was the UNP of J.R. Jayewardene that gave the party its historic victory in the 1977 elections. After the end of the leadership of J.R. Jayewardene, the leadership of the party went over to R. Premadasa. But this was not a smooth process. Internal conflicts that followed resulted in the formation of a new party, the Democratic United National Front (DUNF), by some of the leading members of the UNP. Two of the leaders of the DUNF (Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake) were in the race for the leadership of the party against Premadasa. Thus it was not surprising that they soon made a move to form an alternative party. After the assassination of President

Premadasa in May 1993, there was a stop-gap leader, D.B. Wijetunge, until the general election of 1994. In the general election of 1994, the UNP was led by the present leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, who remained in the party when the other senior leaders left it to form a new party because of differences with Premadasa. However the defeat of the party in the general elections of 1994 created an opportunity for some of those who formed the DUNF to get back to the party and capture the leadership. Gamini Dissanayake (by this time Lalith Athulathmudali was dead, assassinated during an election campaign) made use of this opportunity and became the UNP candidate for the presidential elections of 1994. In the course of the election campaign Gamini Dissanayake too was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber. This meant all three leaders of the UNP who contested to succeed J.R. Jayewardene succumbed to the assassins bullet or became victims of a suicide bomber. After the demise of Gamini Dissanayake, Ranil Wickremasinghe returned to the leadership of the party.

The JVP Phenomenon

While the PA absorbed into its fold most of the parties that have had an electoral presence in the South against the UNP, the electoral map of the Sinhalese in the South saw the emergence of two new political parties into the electoral contest. The first was the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)* a party associated with two insurgencies. Despite this extra constitutional history, the JVP has taken part in electoral politics in the past. After the release of the party leadership from prison in 1977, the JVP contested the 1981 District Development Council elections. This was followed by the 1982 presidential election when Rohana Wijeweera, the charismatic leader of the party, contested. This short-lived democratic life of the JVP ended when the party was banned by the UNP regime in the aftermath of the Black July 83 anti-Tamil violence. Although it was very well known that members of the regime in power had a hand in this violence, the UNP made use of the unstable situation to victimise some of the left parties. The JVP suffered most. The subsequent violent politics of the JVP not only marginalised it from mainstream politics, but also resulted in large scale death of party cadres and a general undermining of its capacity to do politics. However in the year 2000 the JVP was coming back to electoral politics and through it into the political mainstream. In the general election it contested 18 out of 22 electoral districts. It did not contest the electoral districts dominated by the Tamil population in the North/East province. The way in which the party went about its election campaign clearly demonstrated that it was a political force to be reckoned with.

The political platform of the JVP combined a criticism of the presently dominant market oriented liberalised economic model, a projection of social consequences of this model, and a belief in a centralised state as an answer to many of the problems in society.

From all indications the JVP still seemed to believe in a centrally planned state socialist model of former Eastern Europe and Soviet Union. This also meant their slogans supported a highly centralised state, which in turn went against the demands of the minorities for devolution of power. However an important aspect of the JVP campaign was the constant projection of social injustices that this socio-economic system entails. Through this the JVP provided the only critique of the entirety of the socio-economic system as such. When it came to development ideologies all the other major parties of the South¹ have accepted the liberalised model of capitalist transformation begun in 1977. Social justice implications of the post 77 liberalised model of capitalism was the principal platform on which the JVP contested the elections.

Sihala Urumaya

The emergence of a new political party called *Sihala Urumaya* (SU) was the other significant development in the general elections of 2000. The distinguishing feature of SU is its ideological position regarding minority rights and the ethnic conflict. Basically it adheres to the extreme Sinhala position of rejecting that there is anything called a minority problem. In their view there is no such issue and what we have is only a terrorist problem. They stand for destroying the LTTE militarily and are against any form of political negotiations to settle the problem or any form of devolution. In a way the SU represents the Sinhala extremist ideology that was found in the two major parties in the past, especially when they were in the opposition. If we look back on the election campaigns of the past we can find instances when both major parties supported the type of position that the SU is advocating now. With the aggravation of the conflict and changing international context within which Sri Lanka has to develop, both major parties have been forced to revise their positions. Today both parties accept that minorities do have a problem and there is a need to rethink the structure of the centralised state of Sri Lanka in order to resolve this issue.

There are of course divisions within both these parties on this issue. The utterances of some of the leaders of these parties go against the shifts in position that have taken place their own parties. A good example are the speeches made by the incumbent Prime Minister of the PA government. Nevertheless, compared to the past, there has been an identifiable shift in the position of the two major parties. The most important aspect of this change has been the acceptance of the need to reform the centralised state in order to meet the aspirations of the minorities. With this historical shift in the position of the two major parties it is obvious that a new political formation should emerge to represent the extreme Sinhala position. In recent times it was represented by several organisations of civil society.² But it was a matter of time before a political party would emerge to represent these positions. In this election *Sihala Urumaya* sought to fill this gap. The leadership of the SU was formed by some of the personalities who have been active in civil society organisations representing Sinhala extremist views. The obvious question in the election was how well would SU perform? Some even expected it to emerge as a third force in this election.

Ideological Consensus

Finally the other important aspect for the politics of the South was the increasing similarity of the two major parties in most of their policies. For example both parties held similar positions crucial issues like the resolution of the ethnic conflict and the path of development that Sri Lanka should follow. Congruence in the development policies during this election was particularly significant. In fact the general election of the year 2000 was the first ever general election of independent Sri Lanka when there was an ideological consensus between the two major parties with regard to promotion of capitalism. In all previous elections the SLFP/left coalition has stood for a greater role of the state in various spheres of economic and social development. Some sections of these parties legitimised this with arguments for promoting socialism. Even in 1994, when the PA came back to power for the first time in the post 77 liberalised phase of capitalism, there were expectations in some sections of the electorate that the PA would reverse some of the changes initiated in 1977. The experience of the PA administration for six years has laid this speculation to rest. PA slogans during this six years were a mix of either creating an 'efficient' capitalism in contrast to UNPs 'crony' capitalism or giving a human face to capitalism. But both slogans accepted the promotion of capitalism as the path available for Sri Lanka, and accepted the broad contours of the liberalised phase initiated by the Jayewardene regime. With this ideological shift the PA regime followed the path taken by social democratic parties all over the world. As a result of these ideological shifts in development policies, the electorate in the year 2000 faced an election without much of a choice between the two parties when it came to development issues.

General trends

In order to discuss general trends in the electoral politics of the South we shall make use of the data provided by Table I, which gives a breakdown of the behaviour of the electorate from 1956 onwards. We have taken 1956 as our starting point because it was in this election the two party formation was established. The other methodological point is that the table uses the total number of registered voters as the basic unit for analysing the voter behaviour. This is due to number of reasons.

In the first place the use of the total electorate as the basis forces us not to forget those who do not vote and ask questions about why it is happening. For example, it is as important to remember that at least one fourth of the electorate did not vote in this election as to remember that the voting rate was 75.6%. Secondly, if the calculation is based on the total electorate it gives us a better picture of the electoral strength of the parties and the backing that they have obtained. For example, in the recent calls for a national government between the PA and the UNP many have pointed out that close to 80% of the voters have voted for these two parties, and if they come together they will have a considerable proportion of the country behind them. But this argument will look different if we remember that their support amounts only to 61.1% if we take the total electorate as the base for our calculation. Finally, in a context where

political violence and civil wars affect the rate of voting, if we calculate on the basis of the total polled we get a completely skewed picture of the following that parties have. A good example is the EPDP vote in Jaffna. If we go by total votes polled, the EPDP has the support of 31.4%. But if we take the total number of registered vote it is only 6.7%. This raises not only issues about the strength of

Spoilt Votes

One of the worrying features of this election was the continuing high rate of spoilt vote under the proportional representation system. In this election it was as high as 4% - a magnitude very similar to the JVP support in the total electorate. The obvious reason

Table I
Distribution of the total electorate 1956-2022

Election	UNP	SLFP and Left vote	UNP+ SLFP and left	Minority parties	Other parties	Independents	Rejected vote	% not voting	Total
1956	18.3	37.3	55.6	5.1	0.2	7.5	0.7	31.0	100.0
1960M	22.5	28.5	51.0	5.7	13.6	6.5	0.7	22.4	100.0
1960J	28.0	33.4	61.4	6.5	4.3	3.3	0.5	24.1	100.0
1965	31.5	33.5	65.0	6.3	5.8	4.4	0.6	17.9	100.0
1970	31.6	42.2	73.8	6.2	1.2	3.7	0.4	14.8	100.0
1977	44.4	31.6	75.9	6.1	0.4	3.9	0.4	13.3	100.0
1989	30.3	20.8	51.0	4.4	1.7	2.5	3.9	36.4	100.0
1994	32.0	35.5	67.5	3.0	1.5	0.7	3.7	23.8	100.0
2000	28.8	32.3	61.1	3.0	5.4*	0.2	4.0	24.4	100.0

the party, but also its legitimacy. All these debates get undermined if calculations are made on the basis of total votes polled. Therefore we prefer to use the total electorate as the basis of our calculations.

In the general election of 2000 the total strength of the electorate was 12,073,263 or close to 12.1 million.³ Of this 9,128,823 (approximately 9.1 million) or 75.6% took part in the elections. Since independence the voting rate in Sri Lanka general elections gradually increased to reach a maximum of 86.7% in the 1977 general election. From this peak the participation dropped drastically to 63.6% in the next general election held in 1989. This was one of the most violent elections that Sri Lanka had ever seen, and the situation that prevailed during the elections was symptomatic of the general deterioration of the democratic process that was witnessed after 1977. From this low, the voting rate increased to 76.2% in the 1994 general election. In this election too the figure remained in the same range.

As was expected the voting rate in the electoral process was low in the two electoral districts of the Northern Province. Jaffna recorded a voting rate of 21.3% - an exceptionally low figure compared to the rest of the country or its own historical records. In Vanni electoral district only 42.1% of the electorate voted. But the situation was different in the Eastern Province. This area recorded the following figures—Batticaloa 71.7%, Digamadulla 80.4% and Trincomalee 68.5%. This once again established the fact that despite the war the electoral process is alive in these areas. This has been the case right throughout the conflict period.

for this is the unfamiliarity with the PR system. In the last two general elections under the first past the post system held in 1970 and 1977, despite the high voting rate of more than 85%, the spoilt vote was only 0.4%. This figure jumped to 3.9% in 1989, the first general election under PR, and has maintained the same magnitude in subsequent general elections. Obviously the PR system has not been internalised fully in the electorate.

When one looks at the district figures there are districts where the rate of spoilt vote is particularly high. (Nuwara Eliya 8.7%, Badulla 5.9%, Moneragala 5.7%, Matale 5.4% and Kandy 5.1%.) It is interesting to note that these districts cover two provinces "Uva and Central. These are the districts where there is a high concentration of a plantation population and a poor peasantry living in villages hemmed in by estates and mountains. Probably it is among this socio-economically deprived population that one might find the high rate of spoilt votes.

Party Performance

Coming now to the performance of political parties, the most notable feature in the election is the drop in the share of the electorate for the UNP. In this election it has dropped to 28.8%, which is below the average that it has maintained in elections since independence. As shown by Table I, the UNPs share of the electorate dropped to a mere 18.3% during the 1956 elections. After this debacle the UNP gradually recovered its position, and by 1965 it had secured 31.5% of the electorate. It maintained the same

magnitude of support in 1970 despite its significant reduction in parliamentary seats. In 1977, when UNP registered its historic victory under the leadership of J.R. Jayewardene, its electoral support was at a record level of 44.4% of the electorate. In subsequent elections on average it maintained a support of about 31% of the electorate. But in this election it dips below the 30% mark.

But the drop in the UNP electoral base has not meant a concomitant increase in the PA support. In fact the support of the PA shows a reduction from 35.5% of the electorate in 1994 to 32.3% in this election. But this level is close to the average level of support that the SLFP/left coalition has established in the country in the period after 1956. The PA's ability to maintain this level of support, despite the reduction from the 1994 level, and some of the peculiarities of our PR system like the bonus seat and the national list, have allowed the PA to get the number of seats that it has got.

Comparing the performance of the two parties it is clear that the principal reason for the victory of the PA has been the poor performance of the UNP rather than any special achievement of the PA. There is a significant reduction in UNP support, and therefore it needs closer scrutiny. We shall turn to this question in the last section of this article.

The real beneficiary of the weak performance by the two major parties has been the JVP, which established itself as a third force with a support base of 4.3% of the electorate. The bulk of the JVP support came from more urbanised electoral districts of the Western Province, Southern Province and the Kurunegala district. 68.6% per cent of the JVP vote came from these areas, and it is in these electoral districts that they have representation in the parliament. These observations question the often repeated opinion that the JVP represents a political movement of the rural youth. On the contrary, it is a political phenomenon of the radicalised sections in the more urbanised parts of the country.

The emergence of the JVP as a third force clearly demonstrated the importance of socio-economic issues for the electorate in the South. As we mentioned before, the JVP was the only party that was maintaining a consistent critique of the dominant development model and giving a voice to the social justice issues. Its performance demonstrates the importance of these issues for the electorate. It also obtained most of its vote in areas where some of the social contradictions of this model are acutely felt.

Probably the biggest disappointment in the election was reserved for the supporters of Sihala Urumaya. As we mentioned above some expected this to become the third force. But its support amounted to a mere 1% of the electorate. The bulk of this support, 41.4%, was concentrated in the Colombo district. Probably it was the noise that it could make in Colombo which got multiplied through the media and an influential Colombo middle class and gave the illusion of a country-wide support and possibilities of it being a third force.

Defeat of the UNP

In order to look at the performance of the UNP a little more closely we have made use of three sets of indicators brought together in Table II below. Through these indicators we would like to compare the performance of the UNP in the 1994 general election and the election held in October 2000. Such comparison which gives us a better picture of spatial differentiation in the UNP performance by comparing the data for these two elections.

The first indicator is the percentage shift in the district vote for the UNP between 1994 and the election in 2000. It reflects how the UNPs performance has changed in each district. The districts are arranged in a descending order, with the district showing the worst performance on top.

In the next column we have information showing the shift in the weightage of each district for the total UNP vote. What we have

Table II
District-wise comparison of UNP performance 1994 and 2000 elections

Electoral District	Shift in the district vote from 1994 elections (%)	Shift in the contribution of the district vote to the total UNP vote	Number of elected members in the 10th Parliament	Number of elected members in the 11th Parliament
Nuwara Eliya	-14.2	Decreased	5	3
Kandy	-11.6	Decreased	7	5
Kegalle	-8.5	Decreased	5	4
Matale	-7.2	Decreased	2	2
Badulla	-6.8	Decreased	5	5
Ratnapura	-6.3	No change	4	4
Kurunegala	-4.9	Decreased	7	6
Puttalam	-4.8	Decreased	3	3
Anuradhapura	-4.3	No change	3	3
Kalutara	-3.1	No change	4	4
Gampaha	-2.7	No change	7	7
Pollonnaruwa	-2.4	No change	2	3
Moneragala	-2.1	No change	2	2
Galle	-0.9	Increased	4	4
Matara	-0.2	Increased	3	2
Colombo	+0.6	Increased	9	10
Vanni	+1.0	Increased	1	1
Batticaloa	+1.7	Increased	1	1
Jaffna	+1.8	Increased	-	1
Trincomalee	+3.6	Increased	2	1
Digamadulla	+3.6	Increased	3	2
Hambantota	+3.9	Increased	2	4

done is to calculate the ratio between the contribution of each district to the total UNP vote and contribution of each district to the total electorate. This we have done for each election and the table indicates how this indicator has changed between elections. Through this indicator we get an idea of how important each district is for the UNP vote, and how this has changed between elections.

In the last two columns there is information on the number of elected UNP MPs in the 10th and 11th Parliaments.

On the basis of these three indicators it is possible to categorise the districts in the following manner.

a. Districts where there is a drop in the total district vote, drop in the contribution to the total UNP vote and a drop in the number of members elected. These are areas where UNP has performed worst compared to the 1994 elections. This category includes Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Kegalle and Kurunegala electoral districts.⁴

b. Districts where there is a drop in the district percentage, a drop in the contribution to the UNP vote, but no change in the number of members—Matale, Badulla and Puttalam. Although UNP has performed badly in these districts compared to 1994, its magnitude is not significant enough to make a difference in the number of members. To a certain extent the UNP has been helped by the peculiarities of the electoral system in these areas.

c. Districts where there is a drop in the district percentage but no change in the contribution to the UNP vote and numbers of members are Ratnapura, Anuradhapura, Kalutara, Gampaha and Moneragala. In these districts UNP has retained its strength at a level similar to 1994. The drop in the district percentage is not significant.

d. Districts where there is a drop in the district vote, increase in the contribution to the UNP vote but no change in the number of members are Galle, and Matara. These are areas where UNP has improved its presence in the district compared to 1994, but this improvement is not significant enough to make any difference.

e. Areas where there is an increase in the district vote and contribution to the UNP vote but the number of members remain the same are Vanni, and Batticaloa. Here the improvement of the UNP performance is much better than districts in group (d). Compared to 1994 it has improved performance in two indicators. But still it is not good enough to increase the number of members. To a certain extent the UNP could have been cheated by the peculiarities of the electoral system in these areas.

f. Districts where there is an increase in the district vote, contribution to the total UNP vote and in number of members elected are Colombo, Jaffna, and Hambantota. These are the areas where the UNP has improved its position compared to 1994 and because of that increased the number of members elected.

g. Other districts where the performance of UNP cannot be placed into this categorisation are Pollonnaruwa, Trincomalee and Digamadulla

Traditionally the UNP's electoral performance has been much weaker in the Western and Southern Provinces, and in the districts like Kurunegala that adjoin these provinces, with the exception of Colombo district. The challenge of the SLFP/left alliance to the UNP has been prominent in these areas. These are the areas where there have been significant changes in the socio-economic structures from the colonial period. These tendencies have intensified in the post-colonial period. Generally in these areas conservative and traditional structures have been challenged, and it is not a surprise that the entire JVP representation has come from these areas. In

contrast to this, the UNP has been much stronger in the more conservative Central and Uva Provinces and in parts of Sabaragamuwa. The SLFP/left alliance have had to make a greater effort in these areas to make a headway. The third important area for Southern politics are the North Central Province and parts of the North Western Province have been battle grounds where the gains of the parties have varied.

If we look at the above categorisation of the UNP's performance, keeping in mind this history, what is apparent is that the UNP has performed badly in areas where they have been traditionally strong. All the districts in the top two categories of (a) and (b), with the exception of districts of the North Western Province, are areas where the UNP has been traditionally stronger. But it is here that the UNP has had difficulties in the 2000 general election. One possible explanation for this is the shifts in alliances that are taking place within the UNP because of struggles associated with the succession of leadership. As we have mentioned before, succession struggles within the UNP after the leadership of J.R. Jayewardene ended have still not come to an end. Ranil Wickremasinghe is in the course of consolidating his position as the leader in the party. But in the process he could be losing some of the traditional power bases the UNP had. A similar process seems to operate in the plantation sector, where there is a struggle for the leadership of the CWC after the demise of Mr. Thondaman. Although a section of the former CWC leadership is with the UNP, their capacity to mobilise the plantation vote for the UNP seems to be limited.

The difficulties the UNP has had in the areas where it traditionally had a wider electoral base is not compensated by their performance in the other areas where UNP has improved its position. For example, although the UNP has maintained its electoral base and sometimes slightly improved it in the Southern and Western provinces, this improvement has not been significant enough. In these areas the UNP has either maintained its position or made slight gains. But these gains are not appreciable enough to make any differences. Colombo has been the exception.

In our view the basic reason for the difficulties that the UNP faced in these areas lies in the development philosophy that it projected. As we have mentioned these are areas where social contradictions of the development policies presently followed are not only felt, but are also sharply politicised in the public debates. It is these contradictions and politics that the JVP managed to capture in its election campaign. But the UNP campaign offered nothing new to the people who were facing acute socio-economic problems. On the contrary UNP offered more of the same and sometimes tended to propose ideas that would have worsened the social contradictions even more. Basically the UNP stood for a neo-liberal orthodoxy, but tried to project themselves as better managers of the economy. Hardly an argument that would go down well with a population who are suffering because of systemic problems. But there was one exception to this UNP strategy in the Southern Province—the campaign of Sajith Premadasa in Hambantota. Making use of the traditions promoted by his father, in his own way he presented an alternative to the problems faced by the population. The population of the district responded and the UNP achieved a victory that they have never seen at Hambantota.

factors. On one hand the party faced problems in securing its traditional electoral base due to fall-out from the succession struggles. On the other hand this was not compensated by improvements in other areas. These areas have been traditionally difficult for the UNP and because it was following an economic philosophy that believed in a market orthodoxy, it did not have any new ideas to make headway in these areas.

End Notes

1. Exceptions were smaller left oriented parties like New Left Front and a few other independent groups.
2. There are many organisations in civil society that uphold this position. Organisations such as ACBC, and YMBA, represent civil society organisations of the older generation with such views. Organisations such as National Movement Against Terrorism and Sinhala Veera Vidhana are new organisations that represent this point of view.
3. There seem to be many shortcomings in this figure. A number of factors would have contributed to it. It is not clear whether the process of registration of voters has been able to capture the demographic shifts that have taken place amidst to the war. Quite a number of people have been displaced due to the war. It is not clear whether they get counted in the process of updating the electoral lists. There are reports of shortcomings in the registration of the Indian Tamil population from the plantations. Some

of them have been granted citizenship recently. But the process of registering them in electoral registers seems to be proceeding at a slower rate. Quite a number of Sri Lankans now work abroad. They certainly do not enjoy the right to vote. There could be a significant proportion among them who do not get registered. There is also a section of the population who do not want to register. For example this was observed in the case of sections of the Tamil population living in Colombo.

4. It is necessary to make a comment about the impact of violence at this point. Some of the districts in group (a) witnessed widespread violence during the election day. However even if we take the highest estimation of number of votes affected by violence reported by the election monitoring groups, it alone cannot explain the drop in the UNP vote. This is assuming that violence affected only the UNP vote. When it comes to the influence of violence on the final result the case is even more difficult. Under the PR system the apportioning of seats takes place after defining the qualifying number, which is obtained by dividing the number of valid votes by number of seats in the district. In the case of Kandy this was little more than 50,000 in this election. Therefore violence has to have an affect in this scale so as to make a difference in the final number of members elected. It is under the first-past-the-post system where few votes can decide whether a party gets a seat or not. The groups who are fighting for free and fair elections should concentrate on the process argument rather than getting caught to the trap of influence on final results, which is very difficult to prove. It is the dominant legal discourse of Sri Lanka that likes to take this route in order to legitimise violent elections. Progressive civil society groups should not get caught to this trap.

Ethnic Futures

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