

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Elections: Misuse of State Resources

The distinction between the state and the ruling party has become extremely blurred in Sri Lanka, so that the use, or rather the misuse, of state resources for party purposes has become commonplace.

There have been numerous reports during the just concluded campaign of the use of state personnel and resources like government offices and vehicles by the UNP. In this comment, however, we want to speak of the use of television and newspaper advertising by the UNP.

Television time for party broadcasts was allocated in accordance with legal requirements. About this there can be no complaint; even small parties and independent groups got their quota of time. Of the effectiveness of these telecasts we are not sure; they were most often repeats of election platform speeches delivered in a wooden manner. No party or politician has yet learned to use the immediacy and intimacy of the television medium to advantage. But what concerns us here is the UNP propaganda that went on outside these programmes.

Even musical programmes were not outside the reach of UNP propaganda. We recall a large number of such programmes where the visuals accompanying songs strove to project a picture of harmonious peaceful economic growth. Special programmes on several development projects, particularly those commissioned by the Janasaviya trust, were also blatant examples of UNP propaganda.

This was seen in newspaper advertising too. We were treated to full page advertisements by the state banks, the state insurance companies and various other state agencies like the Board of Investment and the Janasaviya Trust which spoke fulsomely of their achievements; these were in effect extensions or additions to the advertisements inserted by the UNP.

However, the most heinously offensive was an interview with Gamini Iriyagolla, telecast over both Rupavahini and the so-called Independent Television Network on August 15th, the day before the election and during a period when canvassing was forbidden by law.

Mr. Iriyagolla was asked about the election manifestoes of the UNP and the PA on two questions: constitutional reform and the settlement of the ethnic problem. On the first issue, he criticized the PA manifesto primarily on the basis that it would erode the sovereignty of the people and give more power to politicians. On the second issue he took up the position that the country was faced with a terrorist problem and that there was no choice except to defeat it militarily; he argued that those who spoke of a political solution would merely surrender

to Tamil demands, giving them power over a part of the country at the expense of the rights of the Sinhalese and that this would be the first step in a process of dismemberment; the Tamils would thus achieve their aim of a separate state. This also happens to be the current position of President Wijetunga and the UNP.

Mr. Iriyagolla offered no criticism of the UNP manifesto. He was obviously indicating that a vote for the PA would be a vote against the interests of the Sinhalese and for dismembering the country; the PA was set to betray the historical interests of the Sinhala people and make them vassals in a state where they had been masters.

That this interview was telecast over two channels over which the government had control was indicative of the total contempt that the UNP often displayed of election laws as well as of the conventions of democratic practice.

Sinhala Nationalism in Decline

The main articulator of Sinhala nationalism at the political level has been for some time the *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna* (MEP) led by Dinesh Gunawardena. It has taken an unequivocal stand for the interests of the Sinhala people, for the dominance of Sinhala Buddhists in the culture, society and polity of this country.

This is not to say that these are the only politicians who espouse this view. There are many politicians in the other parties, even in the Communist Party, who are basically Sinhala nationalists; sometimes they have grouped together and tried to achieve some identity, like the *Hela Urumaya* group of the SLFP. But no other political party has adopted this stand as the official party line.

However, there have also been a group of intellectuals, unaligned to political parties, who have been the principal articulators of Sinhala nationalist views in the mass media and at public meetings and seminars. They pleaded for the unity of the Sinhalese on the basis of their ethnic identity and saw differentiation along political party lines as the main obstacle to unity. Their argument was that, if the Sinhalese remained fragmented, the minorities would exploit these differences and achieve their objectives. The Sinhala Buddhist nature of Sri Lankan society would then be irreparably damaged. This view was also shared by many other individuals and organizations like, for instance, Mr. Gamini Jayasuriya and his Organization for the Defense of the Sinhalese.

In this election these ideologues were faced with a dilemma. To stand outside the political process was no longer possible. The PA and the possibilities of ethnic reconciliation that were embodied in it were anathema to them. Where then to put whatever political strength they had?

Mr. Gamini Jayasuriya, Mr. Gamini Iriyagolla and many others chose to back the UNP, as the one party that had some chance of stopping the PA. Others like Mr. Gunadasa Amerasekera and Dr. Nalin De Silva had a more difficult choice; they combined their Sinhala nationalism with a strong anti-capitalist anti-western economic bias; they wanted a self-reliant, self-sufficient economy with no dependence on foreign capital or the multilateral financial organizations. They opted to join the MEP which shared also this same kind of economic thinking. Dr. Nalin De Silva contested on the MEP ticket from the Kalutara district and Mr. Gunadasa Amerasekera was on its national list.

The MEP suffered an ignominious defeat. It lost the three seats it had in the dissolved Parliament and was unable to get in even a single member. This defeat symbolized an important political development - the electorate will not support official policies of ethnic discrimination and Sinhala hegemony.

This is certainly a development to be welcomed and it augurs well for the possibility of a political solution to the ethnic conflict that will be broadly supported. However, we must not delude ourselves into thinking that the extreme forms of Sinhala nationalism are dead; they still have their representatives in the political parties and among the intelligentsia and will no doubt try to regroup and intensify their attack on PA moves to settle the conflict.

Monitored Election

It has become customary in the last few years for the Commissioner of Elections to invite a team of foreign observers to look at the polling and to expect from them a snap judgement on whether the elections were free and fair in the best democratic tradition. The observers have generally been distinguished men and women, retired judges and civil servants generally.

This time too the same procedure was adopted, this being the fifth such occasion. As indicated in the report of the International Observer Group, 44 persons from 12 different countries were invited to form the ION; the invitation had the backing of all political parties. What the observers were expected to achieve is in their own words set out below:

It was evident to the Group that their presence was intended on the one hand to demonstrate the bona fides of the election authorities to uphold the rules of free and fair elections and on the other hand to reassure the contesting parties and the Independent groups that deviations might be deterred by the presence of such a group and in any event that deviations witnessed would

be objectively reported. Some of the contesting parties had emphasized that in order to judge whether the elections were free and fair not only must the observers seek to cover as many polling stations as possible but must also apprise themselves of the political and law and order situation in order to assess whether the overall situation and security arrangements had a bearing on the conduct of a free and fair election. In this context particular attention was drawn to the security situation in Jaffna.

Unlike on earlier occasions, the ION was also briefed by NGOs concerned with civil and political rights who were mounting their own observations.

In its final report, the ION commended the elections staff saying that the "staff were well trained, procedures clear and the necessary documents in place and on time. Sri Lanka's example in this respect could be a model for many other countries." The report also spoke of the violation of election laws as regards the exhibition of posters, of the misuse of official state resources by members of the ruling party and of the unfair advantage that was given to the ruling party by the state ownership of Lake House.

However, its final conclusion was put as follows:

The majority of Observers have the opinion that the elections were free and fair subject to the qualification they make concerning Jaffna and Vanni.

The qualification was:

All the factors listed gave the impression that the elections in the Jaffna district were not representative. It was also considered that the number of seats, 10 awarded, on these results, almost 5% of the total number of seats in Parliament was totally disproportionate since only slightly over 2% of the registered voters in the district actually cast their vote.

However, 8 members of the IOG were not quite satisfied with the report which they considered as inadequate in several respects. We reproduce their separate note to the report in full in this issue.

The elections were also observed/monitored by several organizations. One of them, the Movement for Free and Fair Elections set up for the purpose by a number of human rights organizations, was also able to mobilize some international assistance; its monitoring teams were accompanied by a team of international observers put together by the International Human Rights Law Group. It was active in 16 of the electoral districts. We await their report with interest.

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