

Sri Lanka: Reading election results 2015

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It is natural to interpret phenomena in the way the interpreter likes it. Maithripala Sirisena's victory at the presidential election held on January 8, 2015 has been subjected to multiple interpretations. Most pronounced one is that it was a victory for democracy. My friend Prof Jayadeva Uyangoda, who has a better understanding of democracy, thinks the election result was a victory for good governance. Some have even interpreted it as a victory for women. Of course, in social science one may not definitely propose that these multiple interpretations are incorrect even though they are sometime contradictory. I would like to ask somewhat a provoking question.

Do the election results reflect democratic reawakening in the country as a whole? Do the results indicate a wholesale rejection of the policies and practices of the Rajapaksa regime? To answer these and related questions, a comprehensive analysis of election results is imperative. Since limited time and resources do not allow me to engage in the exercise of that sort, the objective of the present article will be limited to a few observation.

Observation 1: According to the Department of Election, the total number of registered voters has increased from 2010 presidential election to 2015 presidential election by more than 950,000. To support the idea that democratic reawakening can be witnessed in election results, we may show that there was a significant increase in voter enthusiasm as the percentage of votes polled has increased from 74.49 to 81.52. However, this increase was primarily due to the increase in voter participation in the Northern Province. In 2010, voter participation in Jaffna and Vanni poling districts were 25 per cent and 40 per cent respectively. There was no significant increase in voter participation in Sinhala speaking south and marginal increase in the Eastern Province.

The substantial increase in voter participation in Tamil dominated areas may be attributed to three reasons. First, in 2010, the Opposition fielded the former military commander. Although TNA requested people to vote for him, people in the North were reluctant to do so. Maithripala Sirisena is a civilian candidate with moderate views on Tamil question that appeared to have changed the attitude of the people. Secondly, there has been a noticeable increase in political engagement of people especially with the provincial council election. Thirdly, since 2009, the general movement of people in spite of many restrictions imposed by the security forces has recorded significant increase that in turn help advancing political engagement. This is even reflected in the slight increase of votes of Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Observation 2: Although not very instructive but definitely interesting to compare the number of votes Maithripala Siresena received in 2015 with that Sarath Fonseka did in 2010. In 2010, Sarath Fonseka received 4,173,185 votes while Maithripala Sirisena got in 2015 6,217,162 votes. The increase that is little over two million votes was recoded in almost all the electorates. (See. table 1) How do we explain this substantial increase?

Of course, a mono-causal explanation may not be adequate. It is clear that the opposition campaign against Mahinda Rajapaksa regime over authoritarianism, waste and corruption, family nepotism and destruction of institutional autonomy worked quite handsomely. However, its influence in voter preference appears to be marginal except in urban areas. Forceful eviction, economic hardships, inadequate support at the time of disaster might have played a role of significant importance. In

2010 election, the UNP did not actively participate in the campaign so the UNPers at grassroots level did not see Sarath Fonseka as their candidate. After the Uva Provincial Council election, the UNP was able to resolve some of its internal issues so that party had become more coherent at the eve of 2015 election. The active involvement of grassroots level UNPers might have contributed to increase of votes.

Observation 3: Main contribution to Maithripala Sirisena's victory came from the areas populated by Sri Lankan ethnic minorities. It can be mainly attributed to the failure of Mahinda Rajapaksa regime to address the issue of national integration. In spite of the repeated promises made by Mahinda Rajapaksa to successive Indian governments, the government refused to introduce its stated 13 + reforms. He refused pointblank the demands of the TNA to appoint a civilian governor to the Northern Province. In fact, Mahinda Rajapaksa gave an extension to him. Similarly, the TNA's demand to appoint a new provincial secretary was turned down. Since 2010, there had been regular attacks on Muslim religious places and properties. These attacks were done by extreme Buddhist organisations. The government refused to take actions against perpetrators. As a result, both Tamils and Muslims voted overwhelmingly for Maithripala Sirisena to teach a lesson to UPFA regime. If we take North and East, two provinces gave 654,521 majority to Maithripala Sirisena over Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Observation 4: The 654,52-vote majority Maithripala Sirisena gained in the North and Eastern provinces was reduced to all island majority of 449,072. This shows, in spite of the fact that the total vote Mahinda Rajapaksa received in 2015 was 247,840 votes less than what he received in 2010, he was able to get the majority in the south.

The conclusion I submit is that Mahinda Rajapaksa was defeated at the last presidential election primarily because of his policy on the national question. Of course, all the other issues raised by the Opposition might have contributed to Maithripala Sirisena's electoral victory. He put the so-called state security over every other issue, particularly over human security. Hence, how this important issue will be dealt with by the new administration would be critical for its success. So, I would propose that the new government should include the policies it suggests to resolve national question into its 100 days programme. Of course, it may be some revision to already finalised programme but all programmes should be changed to reflect real situation at the ground level.

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*http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=117518

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