

Sri Lanka: Parliamentary Elections: Opposition parties in a dilemma

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Sri Lankan political parties have been forced to prepare for the Parliamentary Elections before the exhaustion of campaigning for the Presidential Election has worn off. Particularly, the parties of the losers among the main presidential candidates have to face a national election again before they can recover from the impact of the defeat.

The new President, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, dissolved Parliament a day after taking office and called a General Election, as he had promised the people during the election campaign. The process of accepting nominations, which began last Friday (4), will be completed next Friday (11). The election will be held on 14 November.

President Dissanayake will ask the people who elected him as President to give him a resounding victory at the Parliamentary Elections to form a strong National People's Power (NPP) government to facilitate the firm continuation of his rule.

There are those who, judging by how the people voted at the Presidential Election, predict that it will be impossible for the NPP to gain an absolute majority in Parliament. The votes of the three main candidates in the Northern and Eastern Provinces will not be available to their parties at the Parliamentary Elections, so these estimates are not very accurate. Also, the same factors do not fully influence both national polls.

A vote for change

Although President Dissanayake did not win 50% of the vote, the people voted for him for a change. The people who identified Dissanayake as the candidate for change and made him victorious will certainly expect him to form a stable government and give him enough support to fulfil his promises.

At Parliamentary Elections, people usually vote for the party that wins the Presidential Election to form the government. This time, the chances of the NPP getting more votes at the Parliamentary Elections than it got at the Presidential Election are higher in the backdrop of the people's strong dislike for the parties that represent the traditional political elite.

It was widely believed that it would be impossible for Dissanayake, who received 3.16% of the vote at the 2019 Presidential Election, to make a giant leap to 50% to win the Presidential Election this time. But Dissanayake, who said that politics was not mathematics but social science, remained a firm believer in his victory based on the growing support for the NPP in the country at large.

It is no exaggeration to say that no previous political leader in Sri Lanka has achieved what President Dissanayake did two weeks ago. Some observers even describe his victory within five years as unprecedented, not only in Sri Lanka but also in other parts of the world, with a 14-fold jump in the percentage of votes he received at the previous Presidential Election.

A new political landscape

President Dissanayake is also credited with showing that a Left-wing party can win the election without the old vehicle of the United Front. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) could only form coalition governments with Leftist parties against the United National Party (UNP), which was the single largest party in the last century. The old Left-wing parties usually relied on alliances to gain parliamentary representation.

It is a milestone in Sri Lankan politics that today the NPP has become a force that can stand alone and win elections when all those Leftist parties have become history. There can be different opinions about the policies of the NPP; that's a different thing. Here the focus is only on its electoral performance.

It is no longer appropriate to call the UNP, the SLFP, or the Rajapaksas' Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) the main parties. They are not likely to have a significant impact on the country's politics in the current scenario. Gone are the days when other parties came in search of these parties to form alliances; now leaders of these 'main parties' are running in search of other parties. However, no other party is ready to ally with them.

Today we are witnessing a new political landscape with the NPP as the ruling party and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) led by Sajith Premadasa as the main Opposition party.

Alliances and exits

Immediately after the announcement of Parliamentary Elections, former President Ranil Wickremesinghe's UNP called for an alliance with the SJB. But Premadasa declined the invitation. Some leaders of the SJB claimed that they were ready to take over the UNP under Premadasa if Wickremesinghe stepped down as its Leader.

Although Wickremesinghe has announced that he will no longer contest elections, he cannot be expected to relinquish the leadership of the party any time soon. It seems that the leaders of the SJB put forward a condition that he could not agree to in order to avoid an alliance with the UNP.

Former Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, the Leader of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), and a few others have decided to contest the Parliamentary Elections under a different symbol and with the People's United Freedom Alliance (PUFA) as their party, even though a group of politicians who earlier belonged to some parties, including the SLPP, which supported Wickremesinghe at the Presidential Election, have said that they will contest the Parliamentary Elections under the 'gas cylinder' symbol. Eventually, the UNP and other groups will have to contest under this symbol.

Those who deserted the Rajapaksas and joined Wickremesinghe could not get him a substantial number of votes at the Presidential Election. The election results clearly showed that just as the Rajapaksas had lost their support among the people, those who were with them earlier were also despised by the people.

Meanwhile, some former ministers have decided not to contest the Parliamentary Elections. UNP Deputy Leader Ruwan Wijewardene and Assistant Leader Akila Viraj Kariyawasam also did not want to contest the election. All of them were only hoping for Wickremesinghe's victory at the Presidential Election for their political prospects. When he failed, their hopes were shattered.

In the NPP's favour

The disarray within the Opposition creates a more favourable political situation for the NPP than

before. President Dissanayake seems to have stumped the Opposition parties by announcing Parliamentary Elections in a short time.

Therefore, this time the people have got a wonderful opportunity to elect people to Parliament who are concerned about maintaining cleanliness in public life and giving priority to the interests of the people. All the political parties that were in power are full of corrupt politicians. Those parties can't exclude the majority of them and appoint completely new candidates.

The NPP will certainly be keen on fielding young candidates with good education and concern for the interests of the people. It has no difficulty in identifying such new candidates as it has not been in power so far. The other parties may also be forced to field new faces, but the NPP is in a much more advantageous position in this regard than other parties.

In general, people see politicians as a group of unscrupulous people. No one will ever forget that during the popular uprising two years ago, people not only demanded that the Rajapaksas and those with them go home, but also that the 225 Members of Parliament (MPs) should do the same.

Politics today is an easy way to accumulate wealth in a very short period of time. The people can certainly use the upcoming Parliamentary Elections as a step towards changing that ugly political culture.

Tamil politics

Meanwhile, the Tamil political parties in the north and east continue to divide while talking loudly about the unity of the Tamil people. There is no discipline within any party. Tamil people are confused as to who is talking about the real stand of the parties.

Hardly two weeks have passed after the Presidential Election and contradictions have already emerged within the so-called civil society-cum-political formation, the Tamil National Common Structure, which fielded the Tamil common presidential candidate to convey the current political stand of the Sri Lankan Tamils to the south and the international community.

Some groups and money bags among the Tamil diaspora community are corrupting the politics of the north and east in a perverse desire to control Sri Lankan Tamil politics.

There is a danger that the north and east Tamil people may not have a solid representation in the next Parliament. People are bitterly disgusted with Tamil politicians who are simply chanting ultra-nationalist slogans without adopting any concrete approach or time-befitting strategy.

Just as people in the south have begun to reject traditional political parties and leaders, a rejection is also needed in the north and east.

It is no secret that a section of the Tamil population has started thinking about voting for NPP candidates at the Parliamentary Elections as a change.

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