

Election violence in Sri Lanka

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Observers of the March 21st local elections in Sri Lanka predicted a poor result for the ruling Peoples Alliance. They were wrong.

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These long overdue local elections came half way into the centre-left Peoples Alliance [1] five year term in office, and were widely perceived as a referendum on the Government. The result appeared a foregone conclusion: a stinging rebuff of the PA, to the benefit of the right wing United National Party, and the smaller nationalist and radical left parties.

Instead, the Peoples Alliance (PA) won the same proportion of votes as in 1994 (48 per cent), when it won the parliamentary elections. [2]

Back then, the PA was riding high on a tide of popular anger and revulsion against the United National Party (UNP), which had been in power for 17 years. The UNP government had directed communal riots against the Tamil minority, made war against them; broken the back of the workers movement in the 1980 General Strike; and opened the economy to trans-nationals and the World Bank.

These policies created great disparities in wealth, and increased youth disaffection in the north and south. The terror and violence in the south peaked during the 1987-89 southern youth insurgency led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, in which 60,000 people were killed. In the 1994 election campaign the Peoples Alliance promised to restore human rights and democratic freedoms. They acknowledged the historic injustices committed against the Tamil nation and assured a speedy end to an unpopular war which had devastated society and destroyed tens of thousands of lives.

While economic liberalisation would not be reversed, they promised that it would be given “a human face”. The poor and the marginal would not be neglected.

It didn't take long for the PA government to back-track. The cost of living spiralled upwards. Bread, kerosene and gas prices rose, and energy supply and agriculture are threatened by drought. Press freedoms came under assault. [3] Workers protesting the accelerating privatisation programme were attacked by the police and threatened by the authorities.

Meanwhile, the anti-Tamil war in the north-east raged more ferociously than ever. [4] Hundreds of thousands of Tamils were displaced from their homes in a military offensive on the northern Jaffna Peninsula. [5] The behaviour and atrocities committed by the armed forces in the region have not differed from the pattern during the UNP regime. [6]

Even President Chandrika Kumaratunga (PA) recognised the disillusionment of PA supporters: “the war does harm to us in no small measure the problems of employment, housing, cost of living,

threat of poverty, other basic requirements and slow progress are still with us” she said. [7]

The PA was delivered from a humiliating defeat in these latest elections by an outbreak of violence which reminded voters of the “bad old days” of UNP rule. While violence has been a feature of political life in Sri Lanka since 1956, these elections were marred by almost 2,000 reported incidents and nine deaths.

The PA leadership turned a blind eye to violence provoked by its faithful, prompting Vasudeva Nanayakkara, a critical LSSP MP to publicly denounce his Governments’ failure to act decisively in preventing rigging, intimidation and harassment of election monitors as well as its reluctance to rein in its own supporters.

The most dramatic moment was when PA Member of Parliament (MP), Nalanda Ellawala, was murdered by a UNP MP. Ellawala was a member of the “Mulberry Group”, a progressive back-bench caucus within the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, committed to keeping the PA to its manifesto promises and rooting out corruption. His assassin was his political rival in the area and thought to have killed three students in 1988, among other murders.

The next day angry pro-Government mobs set fire to buildings and homes owned by UNP supporters in Ratnapura town, scene of the killing. A few days later two people died and a hundred were injured in clashes between PA and UNP supporters at Ellawala’s funeral.

The Government was quick to make political capital out of these incidents, reminding people of the terror during the UNP regime and warned that the UNP hadn’t fundamentally changed.

Voting against the past

A new PA poster campaign incorporated a 1988 photograph of a naked man tied to a lamp-post and burned to death. This was a common enough sight in 1988 and 1989, when partly burned bodies were floated down rivers and waterways and the air was filled with the acrid stench of burning flesh. The poster caption read “Remember the lessons of the 17 years of brutal and murderous rule” - referring to the UNP period. [8] The people did and cast their votes accordingly.

Public opinion was outraged by the flagrant possession and illegal use of fire-arms by politicians. Guns were distributed to all political parties between 1987 and 1989 when the JVP and its military wing the Deshapremi Janatha Vyaparaya (Patriotic Peoples Movement) were killing UNPers, SLFPers and Leftists. Most of these arms had not been surrendered after the suppression of the JVP, and some have been used in robberies and in political thuggery.

The Government was stung into action decreeing that all weapons were to be surrendered before the end of March. Only a few have to date and the police have shown no enthusiasm to disarm members of the Government.

Such violence surprised many Sri Lankans. After all, the elections were to the lowest tier of government, responsible for “repairing broken roads and drains, clearing the garbage and catching the stray dogs” as one newspaper editorialised. [9] Local government continues to be regulated by an Ordinance of colonial vintage, reflecting the paternalism and biases of that era and many of those elected view it simply as a stepping stone to higher office. There is little patronage to be distributed here and it doesn’t have the status and perks associated even with Provincial legislatures.

Curiously, in a country where political debate has been dominated by schemes to decentralise and

devolve power, there was little discussion about making local government more participatory and accountable to the community, even from the Left.

Left campaigns

The Nava Sama Samaja Party [10] contested 14 councils in working class and poor areas polling under 8,000 votes. Vickramabahu Karunaratne, a leading member of the Party, was elected to the Colombo Municipality with 2,911 votes and 1,810 preferences.

In the trade union sector, the NSSP has been gaining support and leading well received initiatives against privatisation; as well as being identified as a fearless opponent of the war in the north-east. But with the Left still unable to propose a credible alternative to the bourgeois parties, the working class overwhelmingly preferred to vote for the PA, signalling their opposition to a return to UNP rule and a new cycle of violence.

"In general, working class voters did not select the NSSP as a radical alternative," Karunaratne admits. "Though the response to our campaign was good. Tamil working people in particular went out of their way to show their sympathy to our party. Most, however, then followed the advice of Tamil leaders and voted for the TULF and other pro-PA Tamil parties."

"The masses have voted for the lesser evil, in a context where they are not too sure about the radical alternative Karunaratne said. Nevertheless," around 5% nation-wide, and as many as 10% of urban voters, did choose a third force. Clearly an advanced layer is breaking away from both capitalist parties to search for a radical way out. This is a sign that a radical period could dawn in the near future. "According to a 14 April NSSP press statement, "the UNP was rejected even in urban areas. The party is now broken and disorganised, without a combative leadership. Also, to a great extent the major capitalists have rallied around President Chandrika, supporting both her economic and military policies. Some Tamils did, however, vote for the UNP out of disgust with the current government's militaristic and oppressive policies.

"Radical parties polled 5% nation-wide. Among those who did reject the two main capitalist parties, there was a slight swing to the JVP, which contested 200 seats, polled 260,000 seats nation-wide, but only received two council places under the country's complicated voting system. [on the basis of 8,000 votes in two specific localities]. According to NSSP leader Vickramabahu Karunaratne, "the JVP has emerged as the left party benefiting most from this election. In spite of some broken illusions, they have managed to attract the majority of the left-moving masses. They even gained votes in urban areas, demonstrating a presence within the working class."

An early general election?

Boosted by its strong performance the PA is considering calling an early general election. It needs a two-thirds majority, which it doesn't have, to approve a draft Constitution, which includes measures aimed at persuading Tamil separatists to lay down their arms. These are greater powers for regional councils which will replace the existing provincial council system. But the proposals have been diluted in the face of Sinhala chauvinist reaction and do not offer any greater sovereignty to the mainly Tamil north-east where the clamour for self-government is loudest, over other regions. Peace campaigners believe that these proposals, the most radical to have been offered so far to Tamils could break the 'logic of war'.

Even if the new Constitution with its devolution package intact passes the Parliamentary hurdle and

then wins popular acclaim in a referendum, neither the Government nor the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam show any willingness to stop the fighting.

The recent bout of political violence and the Government's response is a sign that, as under the UNP, war in the north may be accompanied by state repression against the Left and workers movement in the rest of the island.

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 288 - May 1997.

Footnotes

[1] The PA is a fractious coalition of parties centred around the (historically) bourgeois populist Sri Lanka Freedom Party but including the right wing Democratic United National Lalith Front (a split from the UNP), the Muslim Congress, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, Communist Party and others. It is supported by all the Tamil parties represented in Parliament who endorsed it in these elections

[2] Elections were held for 3567 seats in 238 Municipal and Urban Councils and Pradeshiya Sabhas (Village councils) throughout the island excluding the war-torn north-east Province. The Peoples Alliance won control of 194 local bodies doing particularly well in rural areas among the peasantry and petty-bourgeoisie while the United National Party took control of 43 councils reduced from 193 in the 1991 elections, mainly in the urbanised metropolitan areas and among the middle class. The prestigious Colombo Municipal Council was retained by the UNP.

[3] Article 19, "Reform At Risk: Continuing Censorship in Sri Lanka", March 1997 (London). Also for a general survey, E. Nissan, "Sri Lanka: A Bitter Harvest", January 1996 (London).

[4] *International Viewpoint* no. 268 July 1995.

[5] *Socialistisk Information* (Copenhagen), December 1995.

[6] Following a military offensive in the north in February, the timing and prosecution of which was not unrelated to the election campaign, villages were shelled and people forced to flee their homes leaving rice fields unharvested. In one of the many horrors, 130 Tamils drowned on February 19th when a boat they had hired sank as it was transporting them to safety in south India.

[7] *Sunday Times* (Colombo) March 9th 1997.

[8] In fact the murdered man was a UNP member who had been killed by the JVP but it made little difference, these brutalities remain associated with the UNP.

[9] *Sunday Times* (Colombo), March 23rd 1997.

[10] Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International.