
CROSSOVER AND MIXED PUBLIC REACTION

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The latest survey conducted by the Social Indicator, the survey research unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives, reveals that Sri Lankans express mixed opinion on the recent crossover by the 18 UNP parliamentarians along with 6 Muslim Congress MPs. 37% of people approve of this move while the same percentage disapproves. Interestingly, a quarter of Sri Lankans are either unaware of the crossover or do not have an opinion on whether to approve or disapprove of it has despite the chaos it has triggered in many corners that yet to be settled.

In the wake of numerous interpretations and reinterpretation of the present political situation as a result of the recent crossover by the political elites, the authors of this article attempt to discuss how citizens perceive the crossover. The results of the latest poll, are used to discuss the public views in this article. This survey was conducted amongst 1300 individuals residing in 17 districts using the interview technique. It should be noted that this survey was conducted Islandwide with the exception of the North and East and therefore does not capture the opinion of the Sri Lankan Tamil community.

Who's Hurt the Most: UNPers or JVPers?

Despite the rationales put forward by the MPs who have crossed over, the present political accusations and counter-accusations indicate that the crossover has hurt many parties who lost their MPs as well as who lost their political positions. If we were to look at the UNP itself, it lost a group of heavy weights including its deputy leader as a result of the recent crossover. Also it led the opposition leader Mr. Wickramasinghe to a new battle in order to retain the opposition leadership from the JVP a party that has shown a remarkable capacity in mobilizing the masses against any ruling party. The present government too is faced with issues resulting from the crossover. President Rajapakse's main electoral ally, the JVP, permanently walked into the opposition while vowing to topple the government, accusing it of going against the electoral mandate it received in November 2005. Not only that, but this parliamentarian exodus triggered a battle between the president and the two ministers, Mr. Mangala Samaraweera and Mr. Sripathi Suriarachchi, who have done tremendous work in bringing President Mahinda Rajapakse into office. On the one hand

the crossovers shook the status quo of the government while on the other hand it annulled the memorandum of understanding signed between the SLFP and the UNP even before its ink dried. In addition, this disappointed the groups who were optimistic and overjoyed about the rare opportunity of a southern consensus.

The disapproval of the crossover is highest among JVP loyalists – 68% disapprove while 15% approve of it. Perhaps this could be a reflection of the feeling of humiliation that they are undergoing after the SLFP sidelined them ignoring the crucial role they performed at the elections. Among the UNPers, only 48% disapprove of party members crossing to the SLFP while 34% could not decide whether to approve or disapprove of it. However, 18% of the UNPers approve the crossover. While on the one hand this reflects the frustration of the UNPers with their leadership on the party reforms, on the other hand this is a clear indication of the confused status of the UNPers in the aftermath of losing a group of the most senior members of the party. Interestingly, this survey does not indicate that the SLFPers are over-jubilant about the newly captured elephant herd. This is apparent as only 50% of them approve of the crossover while 30% disapprove.

Crossover for Democracy or Vice Versa

In the present electoral system, more primacy has been given to the parties than to the MPs. When selecting candidates for an election, most members are at the mercy of party leaders. Even after being elected to parliament, MPs will have to support the party decision rather than act on their conscience. In this context, MPs do not have much option other than crossing over to another party that allows them to voice the concerns of their communities or adhere to one's conscience. Therefore, MPs crossing over to another party can be considered as an expression of democracy that one may want to practice. This was not the first time that MPs crossed over to another party in parliament and neither, we suppose, the last time. However, when analysing the history of crossing over, usually it has been opposition MPs who cross over to the ruling party instead of otherwise. Some get cabinet portfolios with other privileges while others allegedly receive huge sums of money. Therefore, it is very

difficult to decide whether it is principle or perks that matter when deciding to crossover.

It is interesting to see on what grounds people have approved or disapproved of the recent MP drain from the opposition to the ruling party. Amongst the people who approve of the recent crossover, 50% think that the move strengthens the government and the president while 24% think that it would help the government's present war with the LTTE. Only 6% approve of the crossover on the basis that it is an expression of democracy. Interestingly, more SLFP loyalists than UNP loyalists approve of the recent crossover as it strengthens the government and the president. Nevertheless, even for UNPers who support the crossover, the main reason for their approval is that it strengthens the government and the president.

Among the people who disapprove of the recent crossover, 46% disapprove on the basis that it adds a bigger burden to the public due to the increased number of ministerial posts. However, 9% disapprove on the basis that it damages democracy while 7% and 6% reject the crossover as it goes against the 'Mahinda Chinthanaya' and as it will lead to the abrogation of the SLFP-UNP MOU, respectively. It is interesting to see the varying reasons on which different party loyalists disapprove of the recent crossover. The primary reason for the SLFP and UNP loyalists to disapprove of the crossover is the fact that this will become a bigger burden for the already suffering Sri Lankans. However, JVP loyalists who disapprove of the crossover seem to have two main arguments. They think this is a clear violation of the 'Mahinda Chinthanaya,' which they successfully advocated during the presidential elections, and that the large number of present ministerial posts would (will?) increase the burden on citizens. 29% of JVPers see the recent crossover as against the 'Mahinda Chinthanaya,' while only 9% of SLFPers think that way.

Hence, when looking at the rationales for approvals and disapprovals, it seems that they are based on three arguments, namely forming a national government, waste of public funds and betraying the mandate received for the 'Mahinda Chinthanaya.' According to Mr. Karu Jayasuriya, his motive of crossing over was the dire need to join the two main parties in the South in order to solve the ethnic conflict and establish good governance. When analysing the (often vague)

interviews of President Rajapakse in the wake of the crossover, it seems that both the President and Mr. Jayasuriya are trying to voice that they have the same objectives. If this is the case we do not think anyone would disagree with such a noble objective. Nevertheless, unfortunately what we see in the government today does not reflect the stated objectives.

If the recent crossover aims to assist the government in solving the protracted ethnic conflict, then the government must be keen on a negotiated settlement on the basis of a federal structure, because the heavyweights of the reformists who crossed over led the UNP Government's peace process that insisted on such a solution. However, having received their cabinet portfolios, they have not yet shown any active engagement in such activities. Therefore, Minister Tissa Vitharana has to be engaged in a solo battle at the APRC in bringing forward a constitutional transformation. Given the SLFP's negative stand on the CFA and the passive commitment to constitutional arrangement, it is not clear what the role of UNP reformists is in transforming SLFPers to accept the federal solution that has been agreed in the Oslo Communique in 2003.

Given the wastage of public funds in maintaining the large number of ministries, which was the primary result of the crossover, and the prevailing impunity that has high potential to worsen in months to come, a rosy picture on good governance that Mr. Rajapakse and Mr. Jayasuriya are dreaming about does not exist. Therefore, the rationales given as the basis for the crossover are difficult for people to stomach.

However, it is undeniable that this recent crossover has made President Rajapakse stronger – a personage whose popularity is anyway on the boom in the context of the recent military victory in the East. Therefore, we believe President Rajapakse enjoys a stronger political position, empowering him to make drastic political decisions in order to solve the country's ethnic conflict even if he is unable to clean the office of corrupt officials and politicians.

Therefore, in next few months the public can witness the real impact of the crossover on the Sri Lankan society and how distant the reality is from the claimed motives of the UNP reformists. ■

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