
ELITE MOBILIZATION, SYMBOLIC POLITICS, AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN SRI LANKA

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Democracy and Elite Mobilization

In democracy, the vote plays a key role. Politicians and leaders, either as individuals or in teams, sometimes both, fiercely compete for votes. While some of these politicians present rosy social and economic promises and policies during the election period, so-called nationalists employ the hostile—or what political science strategically calls symbolic politics—to maximize votes. Whatever policies/tactics politicians adopt as an election strategy, their aim is to win votes.

It is not an evil practice to offer promises or policies to the masses, because the system pushes politicians to plead to the masses, at least during the elections. The key question here is: do politicians honour their major promises? History proves, and political science researchers claim, that the only major aim of politicians and party leaders is power, and once they attain that goal, they merely forget the voters who voted them into office, and instead find ways to serve their real masters, namely those who have the ability to apply great leverage on the entire system and on the ruling leaders. This is a general trend in the world, whether in Western or non-Western countries.

Who then benefits from this so-called people's democracy? If not the masses, whom? The one word answer is the 'elite'! Though democracy proudly speaks of 'people power', the sad truth is that it does not offer real power to the people. As in non-democratic systems, democracy authorizes a tiny minority to taste power in the name of the people's sovereignty. Thus, the real winner of every election is the elite, not the so-called sovereign masses.

As influential political sociologist Joseph Schumpeter (*Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, London: 1961) argued, "democracy is a political method and democracy means only that the people have the opportunity (at election time) of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them." And political scientist Robert Dahl said that elites carefully plan and approve every single key decision of the state. Dahl (*Power, Pluralism, and Democracy*, Boston: 1967) in his

conference paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, in 1964 said that the key political, economic and social decisions" are made by "tiny minorities," and "it is difficult—nay, impossible—to see how it could be otherwise in large political systems." This helps explain how tiny minorities (elites) have an influential role in the process of state decision-making.

Another big target of elites is the bureaucracy which implements state decisions. Although the establishment of modern bureaucracy helped to discourage direct interference from the political class, it is still very vulnerable to the influence of ruling political leaders whose policies and decisions are formed by elites. In the form of political chiefs or ministers, bureaucracy comes under the control of politicians. These politicians generally control all the activities of the bureaucracy such as policies, recruitment and implementation. When the state allows politicians to interfere in the business of state institutions the bureaucracy loses its spirit of impartiality, and what follows is institutional decay and conflict.

In Sri Lanka, minorities, particularly the Tamils, think that state institutions discriminate against them in favour of the majority Sinhalese because state institutions are controlled by Sinhala politicians who formulate policies and influence the state institutions to win the Sinhalese votes. When politicians attempt to control state institutions, not only do the masses lose their liberty, but society itself will be destabilized if the marginalized lose trust in those institutions. This is the reason why, as early as 1861, J.S. Mill warned of the influential individual's role in the bureaucracy. According to Mill, liberty needs to be safeguarded against the tiny elites. But elite domination would prevail as long as the system fails to offer real authority and influence to the masses.

Literature points out that democracy offers sovereignty to the masses to elect the government they think best. This proves the classical democratic political formula that government is of the people, by the people, and for the people. Government in a democracy might be of the people, it might even be by the people, but, in my opinion, it seldom is *for*

the people because the major beneficiaries of state decision-making and implementation are elites, NOT the masses as democracy theoretically claims.

Elites, in my opinion, do not bother much about the form of government, i.e., democracy or illiberal regime. Elites would be comfortable if the system accepts their aspirations and delivers their needs. In other words, the more the state satisfies the elites, the stronger the elites support the state. This explanation suggests that elites do not believe in democracy. They pretend to be interested in the public and engage in deceptive patterns of behaviour in appealing for public support.

Understanding the Presidential Elections Economy: Reform or Revolution?

Let me bring Sri Lanka's major presidential candidates, Premier Mahinda Rajapakse from the UPFA and Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe from the UNP, into this theoretical context. Both candidates maintain that they have different ideologies and approaches to liberate the country from the current political, social and economic instability, which is a dire product of the five-decades-old democratic experience and economic policies.

Mr Wickremasinghe openly identifies himself as a good friend of international elites, who recommend a neo-liberal recipe for the 'disease' brought about by the incumbent government. On the contrary, Mr Rajapakse, with his charismatic style, is vigorously attempting to show a picture to the people, particularly non-northeastern rural Sinhalese, that he is a member of the oppressed Sinhalese masses.

Mr Wickramasinghe's election manifesto attempts to comfort ordinary people with colourful promises. In Sri Lanka, many villagers and a strong section of the urban people do not have a decent life. This unhealthy situation is dire result has been the growth of southern-based Sinhala extremists, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), with its two brutal rebellions (1971 and 1987-89) against the state, and the ethnic minority Tamils' violent mobilization led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against the state in the northeast.

In my opinion, both the radical JVP and militant LTTE are a revolutionary product of the political and economic policies and system Sri Lanka has been carrying since independence. Mr Wickremasinghe seems to have forgotten the roots of the current social instability. He thinks that his neo-liberal economic magic will give social justice to the millions of

poor people in the island. I do not have any evidence to believe that Ranil's neo-liberal economic policies would rescue these suffering poor people.

Does Mahinda have a real recipe for the crisis ordinary Sri Lankans face? Mahinda's economic policies are not clear. His manifesto attempts to prove the poor masses an optimistic future, but his so-called middle path approach, that is to say, a combination of a liberal and a nationalistic solution, is not convincing.

Studies point out that small and/or weak states will have to face tough international leverage, and will surrender their own policies to win international support. Also, a strategically located country like Sri Lanka will receive tough international pressure concerning domestic affairs because external forces have their own interests in the country. Rajapaksa is well aware this. He may simply be thinking that he can retract all his nationalistic economic approaches once he is voted into office, and will then be able to satisfy the real masters of the state. I would say, if Rajapakse has a crafty plea to win the votes of the poor masses, then the state will face more instability in months to come and will lose even more of its legitimacy. The more the ruling party faces crisis, the more it will lose legitimacy, and the deeper the country will sink into social instability.

Ethnic Question: liberal peace vs. hostile emotional politics

With respect to the resolution of the ethnic conflict, which is product of the five decades of democratic government in Sri Lanka, the candidates submit very different sets of proposals. Wickremasinghe, man of neo-liberal views, openly supports peace with the LTTE. His pro-peace stand should not be interpreted that he loves peace and he sincerely hates to see minorities suffering. In point of fact, his pro-market economic policies require peace. Literally, economic progress will not succeed in the absence of social stability.

What China's experiences confirm is that foreign (western) investors' main concern is a country's stability, because investors pour their hard-earned money into a particular country to make a profit. Thus, they need and require stability as a precondition before they invest. Civil war weakens country's stability and gives a dreadful signal to investors who are drawn to cheap labour with a high literacy rate. This is not a literal political-science explanation of how to understand the situation of post-colonial states, but it helps to understand Sri Lanka's precarious reality. Therefore,

Wickremasinghe pretends to be a friend of minorities who have been marginalized by the Sinhalese political elites, in order to help create social and political stability.

However, Wickremasinghe's eagerness to explore a political solution based on a federal state structure, through the concept of internal self-determination, is fascinating and a right step to restore minorities', particularly Tamil, trust. The more the state gives space for a political solution in the context of wider political autonomy, the less the country's chances of facing civil war. One may raise doubts over the real intention of Wickremasinghe's peace effort, but it would be a crime if the state denies peace with justice to the Tamils and other minorities who think they are victims of the Sinhala elite's mobilization to gain power.

Despite the fact that Wickremasinghe tried to extend his pleasant peace message; minorities, particularly the Tamils, seem still doubtful about his ability to deliver as he promises. They have very slim hope on Wickramasinghe because they think he needs a southern consensus to introduce a new constitution or to amend the current one in order to deliver a federal solution. Consequently, his current promises may face a fate similar fate to that of the Banda-Chelva Pact of 1956 or the Dudley-Chelva Pact of 1965 due to southern Sinhala opposition. Tamils think that the southern Sinhala polity, which denied the tsunami-rehabilitation mechanism or PTOMs this past June through the judiciary, will not do any justice to them; hence, Wickremasinghe is just pretending to be a peace messiah to win the presidential race.

Rajapaksa's election strategies showed that he employed what political scientists call symbolic politics to win votes, particularly the southern Sinhalese votes. Political researchers consider these tactics a central strategy of southern Sri Lanka political elites to maximize Sinhalese votes. Recent political studies on the Sri Lankan conflict argue that Sinhala politicians outbid their opponents on anti-minority issues to maximize the Sinhalese votes (A.R.M. Imtiyaz, "Conflict and Constitutional Solution," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, January 2005; Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, 2004). Rajapakse's anti-federal peace solution and radical Sinhala-Buddhist symbolic messages confirm that he tactfully applied symbolic politics to attract Sinhalese votes.

Rajapaksa may think he can retract his symbolic promises once he wins power. However, recent political studies on outbidding express that, when politicians employ symbolism

such as religion and/or ethnicity to maximize votes, those politicians or their successors find difficulties in withdrawing their promises. For example, in Sri Lanka, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, a man who introduced Sinhala chauvinism into Sri Lankan politics, found himself unable to control the emotions he had unleashed. In 1959, Bandaranaike was assassinated by an extremist monk who thought Bandaranaike had made the first step to compromise with the country's Tamil minority.

Furthermore, Rajapaksa's electoral alliances with the JHU and the JVP fundamentally scare and dishearten the minorities. Large sections of the Tamils, Muslims and Christians believe that the JVP and JHU are essentially anti-minority, and any government controlled by them would not proffer any political consensus on ethnic questions.

Sri Lankan minorities' concerns are very similar to that of minorities living in other ethnically divided societies. When the state and its institutions act in favour of particular ethnic group or majority ethnic group, minorities become more distrustful of the system and of politicians representing the majority ethnic group.

Conclusion: End of Instability?

Both Mr. Wickremasinghe and Mr. Rajapakse had the backing of some minorities and minor parties and have signed electoral pacts with them. The parties that entered into electoral pacts with the major presidential candidates declare that the purpose of entering an electoral pact is to ensure the rights and prosperity of their respective communities, and to end the prevailing social and political instability.

I would be glad if these electoral pacts were sealed in the best interests of the common masses. But world reality and literature on electoral pacts make one cautious about this sort of explanation. Political leaders and elites cite the interests of the masses for their every policy and action, including making electoral pacts with their counterparts. If that is the case, one may have valid reason to ask why the masses are still suffering and instability is still at large.

With respect to ending political instability, the famous political scientist Samuel Huntington (*Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven: 1968) warned that instability will occur if political reform lags behind socio-economic development. But Sri Lanka's current political and economic instability, in fact, is a result of political reforms

