

CULT OF CELEBRITY & THE ELECTIONS

Maya

The world over, the preoccupation of people with the life histories, lifestyles and private lives of celebrities has become obsessive. Sri Lanka is no exception and the choice of celebrities as candidates for the 8 April election is revealing. Several celebrities are contestants as well as nominees on the National Lists of the two major political parties. The UPFA leads the way with a galaxy of 'stars' from the film and sports world including Malini Fonseka, Geetha Kumarasinghe, Susanthika Jayasinghe, Sanath Jayasuriya, and Someratne Dissanayake. The UNP has Upeksha Swarnamali (a.k.a Paba), Rosy Senanayake, and Ranjan Ramanayake.

What are we to make of this phenomenon of celebrities in politics, which is nothing new in South Asia or elsewhere. In India there have been film celebrities such as M.G. Ramachandran, Jayalalitha and Jaya Bacchan, and in Sri Lanka, Vijaya and Jeevan Kumaratunge, Gamini Fonseka, Ranjan Ramanayake and Anarkali have entered politics after successful film/teledrama careers.

M.S.S. Pandian, in his book *The Image Trap*, writes about M.G. Ramachandran's transition from Tamil films to politics, and how actors 'constructed biographies' out of their film personas. Playing celluloid stereotypes such as tough guys, good guys, gods or brave men, or even as women fighting injustice, they have projected these roles onto real life, constructing a favourable image for themselves for political advantage – so much so that it sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish the actual identity of the actor/actress from the fictitious one. Life imitating art, as they say!

Alternative faces

We have had celebrity endorsements of politicians before. Every key election sees famous figures in the arts, business, sports, and academia co-opted to sanction politicians. The last presidential election also saw the phenomenon of key public servants endorsing the president, thereby compromising the integrity of their institutions. But while the celebrities added, at best, some glamour on the

stage, never before have they come forward in such large numbers to be nominated, or to contest the polls.

Why does the coming election in particular have this feature? Does the entrance of celebrities indicate that people are, by and large, fed up of the current lot of MPs – for their corruption, thuggery, inefficiency and self-serving interests? If so, this indicates that all political parties are aware of how unpopular their MPs are with the general public. But if there is a need for fresh faces, why celebrity faces?

A quick fix

Having actors, actresses, beauty queens, businessmen, military figures, sports men and women contest elections is a quick fix in the face of unpopularity and uncertainty as to the outcome of the general election. They are the big guns parachuted to give leadership to a district. Under the PR and *manapa* system where everyone contests against everyone else, each contestant also needs a significant amount of money to run a campaign that has an impact on the whole district. Consequently, we see politicians with newly airbrushed, digitally enhanced faces that are part of a whole marketing package. Moreover, thanks to the media they are already household names. Given this 'professionalization' by the entry of marketing/advertising agencies, an election campaign is said to cost Rs. 6 million upwards per contestant. Given the shortage of cash, the media coverage that a cricketer, athlete, or award winner can already command, it is a tremendous advantage. It can be seen as half the campaign done and half its costs covered.

Role of the media

The celebrity contestants in this election are certainly high achievers whether in the field of cinema, sports, or art. The media has played a significant part in popularizing their names, images, and achievements in their respective fields. But in which way? When it comes to the film stars and producers, we have been fed a regular diet of gossip and trivia about their lives. We are informed of their birthdays, favourite foods, and names of their pets. Once in a way there

are serious reviews of their work. We do not know much about their activism in social movements, or what they have achieved outside of their films and teledramas. Given the sound bite culture that now colonizes our prime-time news bulletins, all we are given – parallel to the trivia about their lives – are short excerpts of what they scream from election platforms and the counter bellow from opposing politicians. Very often in the case of actresses turned politician, the sound bites are those that sexually titillate, insult, and provoke laughter.

Commitment to social change?

The media, which has played a key role in ushering these celebrities into politics, now has a responsibility to interview and write about them in ways that enlighten the voter about their seriousness and commitment in solving social and economic problems. The media has to highlight their experience in management, community development and statecraft. It has to make us aware of whether these celebrities have the vision necessary and the implementational capacity for the development of this country. Everyone is entitled to a second or third career path. But the political future of a country that has such a long way to go to establish its democratic credentials and develop its economy, needs to be in the hands of those who are experienced, principled and visionary. Glamour does not preclude these – but we need to be sure why we are voting for these people. If one reason why celebrities have been catapulted into politics is as an antidote to unpopular politicians, it is not good enough to merely replace the latter with those who have glamour or once had the stamina to score a hundred runs or run a hundred meters.

Ethnicity and celebrity

We also need to reflect on why all the contesting celebrities are of Sinhala ethnicity, who have come through the Sinhala cinema or through sports which have a special appeal to Sinhala fans. This is not coincidental and says something about the media and national cultural policies which, over the years, have predominantly supported the Sinhala language arts to the detriment of others. Where are the Tamil actors/acresses not to mention cricketers such as Muraditharan? It also indicates the calculations of parties who assert that the main constituency is Sinhala.

Blow to democracy?

Where does this leave the committed rural politician who has worked steadily within a party to build a base, or the aspiring young politician, or social worker propelled by the community to become a politician? If this current trend is to continue, then these grassroots groups will be marginalized from national politics given their inability to garner the colossal numbers that political parties seem to be looking for. It is therefore another blow to democratic ideals and practices that this country seems to be fast shedding.

How these celebrities perform at the polls will indicate whether we are comfortable with the blending of politics and celebrity culture. Those who want politics to be a serious business will find the current shift to celebrity politicians distasteful and cynical. Others may want to give them a chance. Still others who have given up on politicians in Sri Lanka may well feel there is nothing more to lose. ■

Women's Manifesto

Peace	Politics & Governance	Law
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