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# RECONFIGURING PATRONAGE POLITICS IN MINORITY PARTIES

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The general elections held in April 2010 was significant for a number of reasons. This was the first parliamentary election held after the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009. It was also the first occasion since 1989 that a general election could be held throughout the island, particularly in the Northern and Eastern provinces, free of LTTE violence. Both Tamil and Muslim political parties, which had earlier been subject to the LTTE's coercive pressures, were able to campaign and mobilize without those constraints in the April parliamentary election. Similarly, the future of Tamil nationalist politics in post-LTTE Sri Lanka was also a theme of considerable interest.

The presidential election of January and the parliamentary elections in April show the new tendencies in which Sri Lanka's recent political changes have occurred. Of special interest is how the ethnic minority parties have fared and what tendencies their electoral performance indicate. This essay's focus is on such tendencies discernible especially among Muslim voters at a national, regional and local constituency level.

As a preliminary point, one can observe that the system of proportional representation (PR) worked in a dual way in the parliamentary elections of the recent past. When President J.R. Jayewardene introduced the PR system in 1978 one of his intentions was to weaken the small parties and perpetuate the power of the two main parties in favour of the party that polls the highest number of votes, which at the time was the United National Party (UNP). However, with the lowering of the cut-off point from 12.5% to 5.0% in 1988, smaller parties have been enjoying a greater salience in the parliamentary process. The elections in 1989, 1994, 2000, 2001, 2004 and 2010 showed that the support of minority parties had become indispensable for the survival of the major parties.

A noteworthy trend in the April parliamentary election is the change that occurred in the nature of the performance of Muslim minority political parties and regional parties. The identity of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) to a large extent used to be subsumed under the UNP, since the SLMC

candidates contested under the UNP's Elephant symbol and as UNP candidates. The National Congress (NC), All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC) and the defunct National Unity Alliance (NUA) candidates contested under the UPFA/SLFP banner. The minority parties helped boost the vote banks of the majority parties.

The United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), United National Front (UNF), Democratic National Alliance (DNA) and the Ilankai Thamizh Arasu Katchi (ITAK) contesting the April elections are more characteristic of interparty coalitions, rather than political parties in the conventional sense.

The increased number of Muslim MPs in the opposition shows a reconfiguration of patronage politics in the minority polity that seems to have moved away from the conventional patronage culture of voting for development-based issues. (for definition of terms, see last part of article)[/or put the highlighted definitions on p7 in text box near here?]

## **Muslim parties and their performance**

The electoral performance of the Muslim parties can be analyzed at three levels: national, regional and district (a specific electoral division).

### *National-level performance*

In the absence of LTTE pressures, both Tamil and Muslim candidates from the North and East were free to make their political choices and alignments. Many of them joined the two main coalitions, the UPFA and UNF, as well as minority parties such as ITAK/TNA and SLMC. This was a phenomenon prevalent in this year's elections.

The ethnic divide of the North and the East from the rest of the country is striking at very first glance at the election results. Outside the Northern and Eastern provinces, except for the SLMC (leader Rauf Hakeem won a seat in Kandy, as did national list MP M.S.M.A. Aslam in Beruwala), the Muslim parties, the NC and ACMC, as in the case of the TNA, stuck to areas where their bases were strong.

In regions where minority communities with high aspirations and self-determination goals are prevalent, there is a tendency for a number of minority political parties to emerge, as was seen in the number of parties that contested this election, especially in the Eastern Province.

According to Giovanni Sartori's hypothesis, politics where there is a:

... dispersion of the incoercible minorities (if any), impure PR formulas are likely to allow for one or two parties above the two party format, that is, three-four parties. This format will, in turn, engender the mechanics of moderate multipartism if and only if the polity does not display high polarization. However, since moderate multipartism still is bipolar converging (contingent competition), it will not tend to increase systematic polarization. (Sartori 2001: 94)

Sartori says polarized societies not practicing the positive features of the PR system to the fullest will lead to the creation of a number of minority parties. This will facilitate moderate multipartism as long as there is no high polarization. Sartori also believes, however, since moderate multipartism tends to strengthen main parties, this in turn will increase polarization in communities.

The results of the Northern and Eastern provinces would reinforce Sartori's point. In an ethnically determined way, the North and the East have clearly gone to the minority parties, and the rest of the country to the Sinhala majority parties. However, the Muslim minority parties seem to be strengthening the two-party competition at the central level.

The perception that Muslims did not vote for the UPFA during the presidential election is to some extent negated in the parliamentary election. There was a marginal swing towards the UPFA, along with a wide scattering of Muslim votes in the preferential votes, especially in electorates such as Colombo Central, Colombo North, Colombo East, and Borella.

This is also the first time since the introduction of the PR system that not a single Muslim candidate has won under the UNP/UNF ticket in the Colombo District.

This indicates that there has been a shift in the Muslim voter base towards the UPFA. The perception seems to be that the candidates fielded in Colombo district by the UNP were weak, and therefore choosing a 'strong' Muslim candidate from the three in the list (A.J.M. Muzammil, M. Maharooof and Shafack Rajabdeen) was not possible, is one explanation given by voters. This also resulted in the Muslim vote being

scattered. Out of the three preferences, it is also a general practice to vote for the party leader and the other two from different ethnic or interest groups, gender, etc. This perhaps made it difficult for the Muslim voter to vote for more than one Muslim candidate. There was also a shift in Muslim votes toward the UPFA's Muslim as well as non-Muslim candidates. A combination of such reasons adversely seems to have affected the ability of any Muslim candidates from the UNP to secure a winning number of votes. Under the UPFA ticket, Minister A.H.M. Fowzie was the only Muslim candidate to win in Colombo.

The Muslims also lost their traditional representation in the Bernwala electorate in Kalutara District. This has led to a Muslim grievance that there is no Muslim parliamentary representation south of Colombo, either in the government or the opposition.

Muslim voters in Kandy and Kegalle seem to have voted with a common resolve to return all Muslim incumbents. They elected Abdul Cader, SLMC Leader Rauf Hakeem (who contested under the UNP ticket), A.H.A. Halim in Kandy and Kabir Hashim in Kegalle, notably from the opposition UNF. However, this 'consensus' was not seen in the districts where many Muslim candidates polled in big numbers, such as in Colombo.

The strategy of the Muslim candidates of the UPFA was to erode the UNP's Muslim votes as much as possible. They were quite successful in this, but in the process also lost their own seats. For example, Azad Sully's preferential votes (14,931), which he claimed would Muslim votes away from the UNP and helped boost UPFA votes, failed to get him a seat in the government benches.

As mentioned earlier, the Muslim UNP candidates in Colombo lost owing to a combination of reasons, such as the candidates fielded by the UNP being perceived as too weak by voters and the candidates' own strategy of requesting their constituencies to vote only for them (one out of the three preferences). Political commentators in the Tamil press have noted this to be a reason for the UNP candidates' losses in the Eastern Province as well. Also, other factors, such as too many Muslim candidates in one electorate and voters not knowing what policies the Muslim candidates represented, contributed to zero representation of Muslim MPs from Colombo on the UNF ticket.

In terms of the final tally of parliamentary seats, Muslim voters appear to have preferred the opposition to the ruling UPFA.

Of the 18 Muslim members returned to parliament, 11 are from the opposition, that is, from the SLMC and UNP components of the UNF. Thus, at the national level, one sees that in regions where ethnic cleavages and tensions continued to prevail, voters' choices seem to have been shaped by rights-based issues rather than development-based goals (such as voting for a winning party).

The fact that there are altogether 18 Muslim MPs in parliament is no mean achievement for the Muslim community. However, it is at the level of the Cabinet of ministers that Muslim representation has suffered. Compared to the 15 Muslim ministers in the previous cabinet, there are now just 5 Muslim ministers.

### *Regional-level performance*

In the Northern and Eastern regions, Tamil and Muslim candidates have contested under ethnic as well as mainstream parties. However, Muslim voters have shown a preference for their ethnic-based parties over the main parties. Sartori's observation that, whenever there is high polarization in a polity the two-party mechanism tends to break down, is quite relevant to tendencies in Sri Lanka. However, since a two-party mechanism implies centripetal competition, it tends to lessen systemic polarization, as seen in Muslim representation in the South.

In the Eastern Province the three Muslim parties (NC, ACMC, and the former NUA led by Ms Ashraff who is now a member of the SLFP) contested under the ruling majority party's symbol and returned two MPs – A.L.M. Athaulla (NC) from Digamadulla and A.M. Hisbulla (ACMC) from Batticaloa. The SLMC, aligned with the opposition UNP in the UNF coalition, won 4 seats in the Eastern Province, returning Bazeercegu Dawood (Batticaloa), M.S. Tawfeek (Trincomalee), H. Mohamed Mohamed Hariz, and Mohamed Cassim Mohamed Faizal (Digamadulla). All the Muslim minority parties seemed to need majority party support to return candidates. The SLMC, in particular, successfully retained the seats it had earlier won in 2004 in the same districts. However, it did so this time in alliance with, and with the support of, the UNP. In contrast, in 2004 the SLMC won with the same number of candidates in the Eastern Province under its own symbol.

In a comparison of the two systems (a single-member district system that enhances 'personalized' politics, and a list PR system reinforcing 'party-based' or party-centred politics), Sartori says, majoritarian systems are assumed to lead to

constituency-based (local) politics and thus to decentralized parties. On the other hand, the PR system is assumed to favour centralized and stronger parties.

According to Sartori, the PR system has proven that, when there is a nationwide two-party system in place, a plurality system is a powerful factor in maintaining two partyism (Sartori: 102). This tendency has become evident in instances where minority parties have strengthened the majority parties' voter bases, as indicated in the UPFA victory in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Sartori also says that these seemingly obvious characteristics also have exceptions when one looks at the indirect or derivative effects.

Did the low voter turnout countrywide in the April parliamentary polls impact on minority representation? Low voter turnout obviously indicates that for all candidates there was a serious erosion of their vote banks. Only 55% voted in the entire country in the general election of 2010, an all-time low voter turnout. This affected the numbers polled by minority parties in the North and the East. In the previous parliament, there were 13 Muslim MPs from the North and the East. This time, the number has been reduced to 10.

### *District dynamics - Digamadulla*

The electoral district of Digamadulla (Ampara) represents a rather curious case. It is one of the largest electorates having a majority of Muslim votes. At the April parliamentary election, 660 candidates belonging to 18 registered political parties and 48 independent groups contested. In Digamadulla there were some interesting dynamics at play.

The UPFA and the UNP had to adopt special strategies in the North and East where Muslim parties had more leverage. This was quite different from areas like Colombo where the electorate was largely Sinhala and the Muslim voters did not have much leverage. For example, in the Eastern Province, where minority parties were strong, parties such as the SLMC had more freedom to select candidates with strong personal support bases, forcing the UNP to concede to their choices. Ultimately, Eastern Province Muslims managed to get five MPs, four elected and one from the national list.

However, there is also no doubt that in Digamadulla the Muslim vote base swayed towards the UPFA, although only one Muslim UPFA MP was elected out of five candidates. Despite their defeat, some of the Muslim stalwarts' preferential votes helped boost the UPFA votes. For example,

the former UPFA Minister Ferial Ashraff received 30,765, including Sinhalese votes of around 12,000, in the Digamadulla District. A.M.M. Naashaad, a former assistant secretary of the UNP and later a member of the SLMC, who contested under the UPFA this time, received 27,039, the highest-ever preferential vote in Sammanthurai for an SLFP candidate. M.L.A. Ameer's 22,208 and A. Abdul Basheer's 27,534 votes, and the winner A.L.A. Athaulah's 36,943 votes, as the highest in Akkaraipattu, also strengthened the UPFA's vote base. However, the fact that there were too many Muslim candidates fielded from the UPFA in Digamadulla caused the votes to be scattered, helping only one winner to emerge. In Battaramulla, too, the losing candidates' votes (former non-Cabinet Minister of Disaster Relief Services and Irrigation Ameer Ali's 16,246, Ali Zahir Moulana's 12,803 and winning candidate A.M. Hizbullah's 22,565 votes) helped boost the UPFA's vote banks in the East. The point then is that Muslim candidates with local vote banks helped the main parties to increase their overall share of votes in the Eastern Province.

One can also observe that the Muslim parties could not have won on their own without the help of their allied main parties, owing to their alliance strategies. For example, in Digamadulla, the SLMC's gains were possible due to its alliance with the UNP. Similarly, the ACOMC's and NC's gains, too, were enabled by their alliances with the ruling UPFA.

### Patronage versus ideology

In 2004, the pressures from Eastern Province constituencies for Muslim parliamentarians to seek development-oriented goals, and thereby leave the opposition benches (of the SLMC) to join forces with the government, witnessed the crossover from the opposition to the government of three of the SLMC's national list MPs. The only exception was party General Secretary M. I. Hassan Ali. Such crossovers have also been linked to the imperatives of patronage politics. Joining the ruling party is a sure way to mobilize power and public resources to sustain patron-client links with the electorate.

The concept of "patronage democracy," which Kanchan Chandra (2004) employed in relation to communal politics in India, has features also relevant to Sri Lanka. Patronage democracy refers to "a democracy in which the state monopolises access to jobs services and other benefits, and in which elected officials have discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state" (Chandra 2004: 6). The key feature

of this kind of democracy is "not simply the size of the state but the power of elected officials to distribute the vast resources controlled by the state to voters on an *individualised* basis, by exercising their discretion in the implementation of state policy" (ibid: 6). According to Chandra, this individualized distribution of resources, in conjunction with a dominant state, makes patronage democracies a distinct family of democracies with distinct types of voter and elite behaviour (ibid: 6). This type of patronage democracy can be applied to the Sri Lankan polity, and is evident in the dynamics of 'voter-elite' behaviour in the kind of democracy practised especially in the North and the East.

A political system as a whole, or a subsystem within it comprising specific administrative areas or particular sections of the population, may have features of 'patronage democracy.' There might also be the case that, "the relationship between these areas and/or sections of the population and the state would constitute a 'pocket' of patronage-democracy within a larger system that is not patronage based" (ibid).

Muslim voters this time, too, in the Eastern Province were keen in activating this 'patron-client' relationship for their region's benefit. They obviously sought to achieve development-oriented goals by boosting UPFA votes, knowing well that the UPFA would form the government. However, they succeeded only partially, since they could only ensure votes for the ruling party and not for Muslim candidates to win. Ironically, it was the opposition UNP that got the highest number of Muslim seats in the East.

The UPFA's two Muslim candidates' victory in the Vanni also gives credence to the 'patronage democracy' criteria, where recovery and development are paramount needs of the resettling Muslim polity, goals which they believed could be achieved only by voting in the candidates on the government's side, votes otherwise becoming votes lost. Former Minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services Rishard Badindin (27,461) and Unais Farook (10,851) were returned from Vanni, where the UPFA won two seats. Despite this crying need, the SLMC also won a candidate there, Narddeen Mashur (9,518), which speaks for the 'rights' cause. Such results give the impression that Muslim voters in the Vanni voted more with 'development' needs in mind.

'Patronage based' or 'development-based' voting: refers to benefit-seeking voting, individuals and groups who vote for candidates/parties believed to have the best prospects for providing material advancement for their constituency.

These votes are especially attracted by candidates already in the government camp.

'Ideology-based' and 'rights-based' voting: refers to voting in favour of a party's expressed philosophy or ideology. These votes imply the expectation that these parties will espouse the rights of particular communities or ethnic groups. Such voting tendencies can be expected in polarized constituencies where ethnic grievances and cleavages are high. Voters believe that such parties can more effectively raise rights-based issues than those on the side of the government.

According to Anthony Downs (1957), ideologies help voters to focus attention when there are hardly any policy differences among parties. A voter can compare ideologies rather than policies.

The lack of information creates a demand for ideologies in the electorate. Since political parties are eager to seize any method of gaining votes available to them, they respond by creating a supply. Each party invests [in] an ideology in order to attract the votes of those citizens who wish to cut costs by voting ideologically. (Downs 1957: 142)

Once a party has marketed its ideology in a region, it cannot suddenly abandon or radically alter that ideology without convincing voters of its unreliability.

Downs further says that, not only parties' ideologies, but their characteristics also may be deduced from the premise that parties seek office solely for the returns, power and prestige that accompany it. And imperfect knowledge is the key to this. When citizens do not have the necessary information nor the time to compare and contrast party policies with one another, then voters find ideology useful because "the political actors make enough 'product differentiation' to make their output distinguishable from that of the rivals" (ibid: 142). Political ideologies help to focus attention on the differences between parties; therefore they can be used as samples of "differentiating stands" in voting for a markedly outstanding ideology (ibid). The SLMC's increasing tendency to promote its image of being a party based on a political ideology has helped strengthen its vote base.

## Conclusion

At a regional- and district-specific level, this is the first time that the UPFA/SLFP has got the highest number of votes from Muslims of the North and East since the SLMC left its coalition with SLFP-based parties. The SLMC had always had remarkable victories when it was in the

government camp. Despite the SLMC's departure from the UPFA, the UPFA still had its vote base boosted with Muslim votes, through the help of the smaller splinter groups of the SLMC, i.e., the NC, APMC and the now defunct NUA. This is evident in the fact that Muslim candidates with local vote banks have helped the main parties to increase their overall share of votes in the Eastern Province and the rest of the island.

The dual role of the PR system, where minority parties strengthen major parties (with the leverage of being tied to a larger party) contrary to its conventional conception that major parties weaken minority parties, is evident in this year's parliamentary elections.

A reconfiguration of 'patronage' politics has been underscored in the voting patterns of Sri Lanka's Muslim polity. Contrary to the general expectation that voters would widely prefer to vote for a winning party that will bring material advancement, as has been the trend in the past, Muslim votes at a glance have largely belied this trend.

We see that those representing 'rights/ideology-based' votes led in numbers at a national level. In this tight 'patronage' versus 'ideologies' contest, the votes that returned 11 Muslim MPs to the opposition benches nationally ought to be treated as a remarkable victory for 'rights/ideology-based' voting, where the opposition exceeds the government camp (of 7 Muslim MPs). The writer is, however, cautious not to treat all Muslims who voted for the UPFA as a homogenous group who only based their votes for patronage's sake, as there are among them also many exceptions of 'rights-based' or 'ideology-based' voters who mainly voted for the UPFA for defeating terrorism.

Although it is plausible that the Muslims voting for the opposition may have done so with the hope of bringing about a change of government, and therefore they too are in a sense 'patronage/development'-based voters; the common knowledge that prevailed on the ground, that the chances were better for the president's party to win, dismissed such a premise. They seem to have made an informed choice in voting on the basis of their 'rights-based' issues when voting for opposition (SLMC) candidates at the general elections.

Hence, the Muslim vote for the SLMC component of the UNP in the North and the East, and for the UNP in the rest of the country, could be treated as a symbol of the 'resistance' of the 'rights-based' voter. Reconfiguration of 'patronage' politics is evident in the way Muslim voters have acted this

time, showing that the core of patronage-seeking voting is 'development' oriented, and that it is only a close second to 'rights-based' voting which is outside the patronage culture.

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## Emergency Relaxed – how far?

From our Legal Correspondent

The recent changes in the emergency regulations are limited to one set, the Emergency (Miscellaneous Provisions and Powers) Regulations, commonly known as the EMPPR. The Civil Rights Movement has listed some 18 or so additional emergency regulations that remain in force. These include provision for High Security Zones in Galle and Matara, restrictions on the use of outboard motors, restrictions on the procurement of certain items, and the "Anti Terrorism" regulations.

Many of the amendments made to the EMPPR on 2 May 2010 are to be welcomed. These include abolition of several offences, repeal of the provision for the disposal of dead bodies bypassing inquest proceedings, and repeal of the admissibility of confessions made to police officers above a certain rank. Regrettable however is the continuation of detention at the behest of the executive with restriction on the possibility of judicial intervention, and the failure to amend the provisions relating to "surrendees", which in effect provide for detention without trial. Disturbing is the reintroduction of certain provisions detrimental to trade union activity, which had been repealed earlier, but which have now inexplicably found their way back.

Making laws is normally the prerogative of Parliament, and the bypassing of the Legislature procedure by the President in special circumstances must ever be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and control. In the past MPs have been notoriously remiss in their sacred duty of familiarizing themselves with and monitoring the emergency regulations. They have never used their power to alter or revoke any regulation. Will the new MPs show any greater alacrity in protecting the interests of the people who elected them?