

# SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION: DISTURBING REALITIES OF SRI LANKA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM

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The general election held on 8 April 2010 was the sixth parliamentary election to be held under the proportional representation (PR) system introduced by the 1978 constitution. Its results provide very useful insights into the ways in which the Sri Lankan electorate behaves, which in turn also enables us to assess the health of our democracy. In this brief essay, I discuss three aspects of the 2010 election, namely: (i) success of UNP defectors, (ii) appeal of celebrities over party stalwarts, and (iii) success of Sinhala nationalists when they contest with a winning coalition.

Although the above-mentioned aspects have been usually present in our electoral process for quite some time, they have continued to be absent in any serious political analysis. This parallels the fact that since the introduction of the 1978

constitution, no comprehensive analysis has been made on how the new electoral system has shaped the nature of parties and party systems, and how it has impacted on the behaviour of politicians as well as the strategies of voters. In this paper, I will provide readers a descriptive account on these three intriguing aspects along with possible explanations for them. Of course, my explanations are no more than tentative hypotheses warranting further research.

In the following discussion, I will first present the case of UNP defectors. Then, I will discuss the performance of two celebrities in this election. Finally, I will focus on the performance of the Sinhala nationalist JHU and JVP parties while in and out of coalitions with the UPFA at different points of time.

Table 1: Preferential Votes Obtained in 2004 & 2010

Preferential votes

A. MPs who crossed over to the UPFA	B.	C. Total UPFA voter gain by district	D. 2004 (UNP)	E. 2010 (UPFA)
1. Bandula Gunawardena	Colombo	66,208	57,460	64,654
2. Gamini Lokuge			53,810	49,750
3. Milinda Moragoda*			99,146	24,296
4. Rohitha Bogollagama*	Kalutara	22,628	44,216	45,605
5. Rajitha Senaratne			97,001	66,710
6. Mahinda Samarasinghe			93,758	97,778
7. Susantha Punchinilame	Trincomalee	28,731	96,591	22,820
8. Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena	Matara	54,920	66,498	67,510
9. S.B. Dissanayake	Kandy	71,688	71,723	108,169
10. Keheliya Rambukwelle	Puttalam	24,985	110,720	133,060
11. Lalith Niyomal Perera			45,150	32,781
12. Johnston Fernando			112,601	136,943
13. P. Dayaratne	Digamadulla	71,688	31,215	32,915
14. Nissanka Manoda Wijeratne*	Kegalle	24,985	44,271	28,881
15. Mahinda Rathnathilaka*	Ratnapura	43,877	36,289	23,796

\* Milinda Moragoda, Rohitha Bogollagama, Manoda (Mano) Wijeratne and Mahinda Rathnathilaka failed to secure their seats, while all others who crossed over to the government not only were reelected but most performed better than many longstanding UPFA MPs.



## Tale of UNP defectors

The 2010 electoral success of the former UNP crossover MPs is quite fascinating and deserves political analysis. Except for four candidates, the rest of the crossover MPs (who joined the Rajapakse government in 2007) managed to secure their parliamentary seats even while contesting under the once-rival UPFA coalition, led by the SLFP. They did not only secure their seats but most of them also recorded a resounding measure of electoral success by receiving the highest preferential votes. For example, Johnston Fernando, who had been a strong UNP MP until he crossed over to the UPFA just a few months before the general election, obtained the highest preferential votes from the Kurunegala district. The electoral performance of Susantha Punchinilame, minister of Nation Building, was also quite spectacular. After leaving the UNP and joining the UPFA government in 2007, in the April parliamentary election he not only topped the UPFA preferential votes, but did so even after changing from his home electorate. Until he crossed over to the UPFA, Punchinilame had been a strong UNP politician who belonged to a traditionally UNP political family in Ratnapura District. What surprises the observer is that Punchinilame topped the UPFA list in the multiethnic Trincomalee district where he launched his political campaign only recently.

Table 1 shows the electoral performance of the UNP's defectors in the parliamentary elections held in 2004 and in 2010. Columns D and E give the total number of votes received by each candidate in the 2004 and 2010 elections. Columns B and C indicate the district from which each candidate contested the 2010 election and the total vote gain that the UPFA achieved as compared to the 2004 election in each respective district.

Apart from the above-mentioned four who lost their seats, the rest managed to be successfully reelected on the UPFA ticket. Without serious inquiry we would not be able to understand the determinants of the electoral success of these defectors. When they contested the parliamentary election of 2010, these candidates exhibited some common characteristics (perhaps the secrets of their success). They generally enjoyed the confidence of the president, which they may have earned on various grounds. They all played a prominent political role during the military campaign against the LTTE and/or during the election campaign against Rajapakse's main contender, General Sarath Fonseka. They

used their ministerial portfolios to strengthen and maintain their vote bases using clientelistic goods. Most of them built up their political image as 'strong and able leaders' in their districts and carried out efficient election campaigns backed by plentiful material resources. Even though most of the UNP defectors left their old party as a team, while in the UPFA government they maintained individual loyalty to the president, rather than to the UPFA coalition or their own team of defectors. For example, most of the defectors claimed they joined the president to support the government's war against the LTTE or the president's endeavours in establishing good governance. "Strengthening President Rajapakse's hand" is the key phrase all of them used in explaining their goal.

It is obvious that this group was a vital strength to the president in the last parliament. Without their support, the UPFA government could have succumbed to the pressures mounted by the UNP and the JVP. Nevertheless, it is interesting to examine how much their presence contributed towards the UPFA's spectacular election victory. Have they too contributed to strengthen the UPFA vote bank through their preferential votes? The above table could assist us to find the answers.

Column C shows the total number of votes that the UPFA received this time as compared to 2004. As Table 1 depicts, the UPFA received more votes than those in 2004 in every district concerned. Nevertheless, the total votes gained by the UPFA were far less than the preferential votes that UNP defectors received in these districts. This suggests that the traditional UPFA supporters, too, have placed their trust in the recent crossovers (despite their arriving from the opposition camp), rather than trusting the known UPFA incumbents in their respective districts. This shows that, despite the efforts of traditional UPFA leaders to convince their electorate to cast only a single preferential vote (*thani manape*) without giving preference votes to the 'outsiders' (ones who joined recently), the UNP defectors succeeded in amassing higher percentages of preferential votes. Of course, they may have instigated some voter influx from the UNP, but certainly that voter shift is not significant when compared to the volume of preferential votes they received. This somewhat confirms the survey findings that, in the wake of 18 UNP MPs crossing over to the government ranks in 2007, 50% of the SLFP supporters approved of the crossovers while only 30% denounced them (Peiris and Ranasinghe 2007).



## 'Celebrity-craving' electorates

The second observation I discuss is the remarkable electoral success of two celebrities in the 2010 election. Electoral appeal of such celebrities is not a new phenomenon in our politics and is also observable across the world. Successful Hollywood star Ronald Reagan was elected as the president of the United States in 1980. Former President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines was also a popular actor before he began his political career. A number of examples can also be drawn from our neighbour India, with popular cricketers making successful bids to parliament (*Lok sabha*). Therefore, it is quite understandable that candidates' personal fame can contribute to electoral success. However, what is quite difficult to understand is how 'celebrity status' can become the sole qualification to be elected to parliament, even getting some candidates more votes than career politicians serving in a particular constituency for decades.

In the recent provincial council elections, parties put forward celebrities to attract more votes, and most of those individuals exhibited great success. The success of celebrities at the provincial council elections did not surprise political analysts, as usually the contest at the provincial level is largely left to the second-tier leadership of the parties. However, the 2010 parliamentary election confirmed that celebrities can succeed not only at the less-powerful provincial council elections but also in the general elections where national legislators are chosen. In Matara District, the cricket legend Sanath Jayasuriya, despite being fully engaged in his sports career, topped the UPFA's preferential list. As shown in Table 2, Jayasuriya received more preferential votes than even the UPFA district leader and veteran politician, Minister Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena. Jayasuriya achieved this feat while spending considerable time away from the campaign to take part in the Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket tournament. His cricketing schedule was so busy that he could not even cast his vote on election day, and the Election Commissioner had to organize a special voting facility for him on a prior date. Yet in the end, Matara District voters preferred him over the party district leader.

Similarly, Upeksha Swarnamali, actress in the popular teledrama *Paba* who is in her early 20s and without any identifiable political background, came second in the UNF preferential list in the Gampaha District. Even though she came into the political limelight only three months before the parliamentary election by extending her support for defeated presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka, she received more votes than the UNP's deputy leader and veteran

politician, Karu Jayasuriya. These are only two examples, but the election results indicate the success of many candidates who are celebrities, having earned their fame in various vocations other than in a political career in any particular electorate. Of course, it should be noted that there are at least two 'perceived' celebrities – Geetha Kumarasinghe and Susanthika Jayasinghe – who failed to secure a parliamentary seat.

Table 2: Preferential Votes Obtained by Two Celebrities

UPFA Matara preferential votes		UNF Gampaha preferential votes	
Sanath Jayasuriya	74,352	Upeksha Swarnamali	81,350
Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena	70,439	Karu Jayasuriya	60,310

In addition to the above two candidates, many other individuals possessing celebrity status due to various reasons also performed well in this election. It was a common factor for most of them that they did not have an identifiable voter base, developed either on the basis of social cleavages, political ideologies or clientalism. Most of them did not even advocate any particular policy stand other than of extending their loyalty to the party and party leadership. Those celebrities who contested from the ruling UPFA implied that they would be able to deliver various patronage benefits if they were elected. The main message of Jayasuriya's election campaign was that he entered politics on the president's invitation, implying his close personal association to the president. (*Daily News*, 5 March 2010).

## Winning formula for Sinhala nationalists

Even though the total JHU seats has been reduced to three in this parliament, two elected candidates received a huge number of preferential votes at the 2010 election. The JVP, after it had contested the 2004 parliamentary election under the UPFA coalition and won 40 seats, in the 2010 election was reduced to 7 seats while contesting with the DNA. However, what is of great interest is the performance of individual politicians in these two elections. The JVP heavyweights, who topped the Anuradhapura, Matale and Kurunegala districts at the 2004 election, could not even secure their seats in the 2010 election after they left the ruling UPFA coalition. Those who managed to get reelected to the 2010 parliament from the JVP received substantially lower numbers of preferential votes than they got in the 2004 election (Table 3). In contrast, despite limiting their presence in the parliament to just three MPs, JHU candidates like Champika Ranawaka (from Colombo District) and Ven.



Athuraliye Rathana (from Gampaha district) scored high preferential votes as a part of the ruling coalition. Ranawaka came second in the Colombo District preferential vote list. Ven. Rathana received almost ten times what he got in the 2004 election from Kalutara. It should be recalled that the JHU contested independently as a party in the 2004 election.

**Table 3: Preferential Votes for JHU & JVP Candidates in 2004 & 2010**

JHU & JVP Candidates	General Election 2004	General Election 2010
Ven. Athuraliye Rathana	10,772	112,010
Chandika Ranawaka	-(national list)	120,333
Vijitha Herath	215,540	50,967
Sarath Handunnetigala	152,942	78,126
Ajith Kumar	128,000	15,872

Interestingly, both the JVP and JHU exhibited much similarity in terms of their national policies and ideology. They both advocated a military solution to the country's ethnic problem and served as the main propaganda machines to the local audience in support of the military campaign. Therefore, both parties appealed to the same – Sinhala Buddhist nationalist – constituency, which is largely the vote bank of the current UPFA coalition. As shown in Table 3, these Sinhala nationalist politicians (JVP or JHU) enjoyed heavy popularity in the elections due to the fact that they contested with the UPFA coalition.

### Tentative explanations

I strongly believe that the above phenomena are direct consequences of the PR electoral system, introduced by the late President J.R. Jayewardene in his 1978 constitution. According to this PR system, 196 MPs of the total of 225 seats are to be elected for the 196 electorates. The rest of the 29 MPs are chosen from the nationalist lists put forward by each party, based on the vote share each party commands. Unlike in the previous first-past-the-post system, candidates have to contest at the district level instead of comparatively smaller parliamentary electorates. Of course, this also increases the opportunity for smaller parties to get elected to parliament as long as they have achieved the 5% threshold. However, this system demands contestants to compete in a larger geographic area; hence, it requires more substantial levels of individual spending capacity to contest an election. Since candidates are not nominated on the basis of

electorates, they have the liberty to collect votes from all over the district as long as they have the resources to do so.

Perhaps the most problematic feature of the PR system is the ability to cast a maximum of three preferential votes for three candidates. This allows voters to cast two votes for two other candidates, in addition to their main candidate. In this context, it is reasonable to assume that voters would cast their first preferential vote for the candidate who they feel closest to, usually being the one representing their constituency (*ape gamme manthri*), maintaining a longstanding relationship either by representing their interests or by demonstrating patronage benefits. However, since voters can cast two more votes for two other candidates of the same party, for these they might not use as strong criteria as when selecting their first preference. Politicians are well aware of this phenomenon, and, therefore, most of the candidates focus on these two additional votes, rather than first choice, when engineering their election campaigns. It is comparatively easier to persuade voters to cast one of those two extra preferential votes for a particular candidate, than asking for voters' first preferential vote. In this context, candidates see no strong incentives to work for a particular electorate or to represent a particular community or ideology. Hence, interaction between the party, the candidate and the voter has declined, and whatever interaction remains is largely limited only to election time. This trend of declining interaction and representation of party candidates makes the voter's electoral choice much more difficult, as the average voter becomes confused about who actually represents their ideology, interests and needs in parliament. Therefore, this dialectical relationship between the behaviour of the candidate and the voter widens the opportunities for the political 'Mega Stars' who can afford multimillion campaign budgets or the celebrities who often make voting choice much easier for less-educated electorates. In addition, when voters feel ignorant about the choices available to them and find the necessary information to make rational choices is too costly, as Anthony Downs argues in his rational choice theory, they use ideology to make their voting decisions (Downs 1957). This explains to a great extent why the 'ideology-masters' of the two Sinhala nationalist parties, the JVP and the JHU, received more popular votes when they contested as UPFA coalition partners.

In addition to the effects of the electoral system, the parties have also changed and are no longer what they used to be. It is becoming more and more difficult for the voter to place any party in the axes of left-right, liberal-conservative, or any other. For example, the ideology and policy stances of



the UNP under President Premadasa and the present leader Ranil Wickremesinghe are not quite the same. Similarly, the SLFP and the UPFA coalition, respectively under President Kumaratunga and President Rajapakse, are also very different in terms of policy and ideological positions. Even the JVP sent mixed signals to its voters by agreeing to support the socialist-nationalist UPFA coalition in 2004, and then becoming an active partner with the capitalist-liberal UNP in 2010 in their bid to support the common presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka. Therefore, the behaviour of these parties must have confused voters about the policy and ideological stance of the parties. Perhaps this also explains why politicians were able to cross between parties and still be successful. This has also made it possible for celebrities, who do not stand for a particular policy or ideology, to win more votes than traditional politicians.

### What do these observations tell us?

These observations provide valuable insights into the country's political culture. More importantly they highlight the deficits of the current political party system in Sri Lanka. These observations raise many questions about the nature of our representative democracy. Who are the constituents that these MPs are representing? And, what will they do to represent them? Do these indicate the changing character of the social bases of Sri Lankan political parties?

If one examines the features of the election campaign of the candidates who performed exceptionally well, most spent exorbitant amounts of funds for their election campaigns. Most of them succeeded in communicating to the potential voter the message that they possess enormous wealth and authority, and are capable of delivering clientelistic goods if elected. These candidates rented hundreds of luxury vehicles and used various state-of-the-art advertising techniques to impress their electorates by branding their images as trustworthy philanthropists. As shown in the Table 1, these politicians proved that their techniques were more effective than those who were exclusively dependent on the traditional methods of voter allegiance, such as based on 'social cleavages' and 'patron-client networks.'

Scholars of Sri Lankan electoral politics (Wilson 1975, Jupp 1978, Jiggins 1979) have observed the role of social cleavages, such as class, caste, ethnicity, religion and ideological differences in the community, in amassing votes by the parties and politicians, as described in the voter allegiance model of Lipset and Rokkan (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Similar literature, particularly Dilesh Jayanntha's

scholarly work *Electoral Allegiance in Sri Lanka* (Jayanntha 1992), indicates the use of patron-client networks by parties and politicians to maintain their voter bases in their electorates. In the developing world it is quite common for parties and politicians to use public office to provide individual goods (jobs, promotions, job transfers, welfare schemes) or club goods (roads, schools or electricity) to potential voters, expecting their votes in return (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2005). I believe, in the social cleavage model, parties represent the interests of their electorate; while in the patron-client model, they attempt to make some sort of representation on the material needs of their voter base.

However, what we observed in the 2010 election was that politicians do not need to be effective representatives of their communities to be elected to parliament. These three observations further indicate that politicians can afford to appear to be for conflicting ideologies or opposing policies, against what they stood for in the past. Therefore, politicians can change their parties and still be quite able to win elections. They may not receive the votes of the same voters, but still there are enough votes available as long as they have the resources to amass them. Hence, unless parties take initiatives to change themselves by accommodating to these realities, their role will continue to shrink – as Diamond and Gunther (2000) argue, political parties are declining across the world.

Calvin Woodward, in his pioneering work *The Growth of a Party System in Ceylon* (Woodward 1969), observed the transformation of Sri Lankan politics from "politics of notables" to "parties of notables" during the early years of post-independence Sri Lanka. In light of this, one can argue that the observations that I have made on the 2010 election suggest that presently political parties are in somewhat of a reverse swing. That is to say, the organizational capacity of the parties is largely dependent on the capacity of their candidates. Perhaps, it may be too early to make any generalizations by analyzing one election and three observations; nevertheless, these observations I have presented in this paper surely confirm the agency of the politician in forming voter allegiance.

E.E. Schattschneider (1942), in his seminal work *Party Government*, claimed that democracy is "unthinkable" without parties. Similarly, there are many other contemporary scholarly works (e.g., Corrales 2000, Mainwaring and Scully 1995, Mainwaring 1999) that argue that parties remain critical to the achievement of democracy. Hence, the currently emerging phenomena of individual-centric politics and



weakening party-based politics need to be studied carefully, in order to strengthen the country's political party system. For the parties to stand stronger, they also have to realize the need to change themselves, not only by altering their ideological and policy positions, but also perhaps by even including celebrities in their ranks.

Finally, I would like to remind readers that this paper only seeks to provide some tentative explanations for its observations. These informal interpretations need to be tested using scientific research, before accepting any as conclusions. In addition, this article is meant to highlight the lacunae in Sri Lankan electoral analysis under the PR system.

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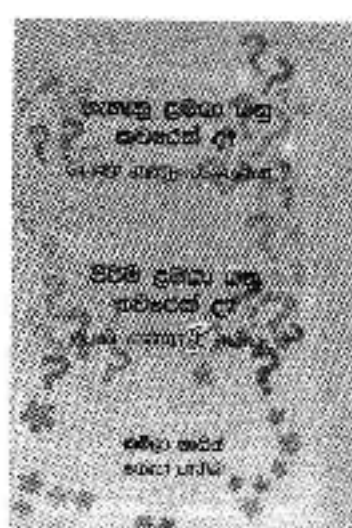
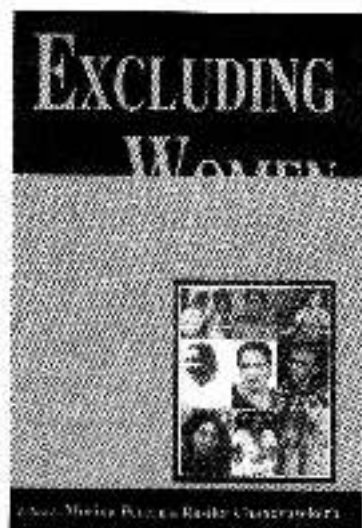
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