

FACES OF ELECTORAL POLITICS

Sharon Bell

Laksiri Jayasuriya: *The Changing Face of Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka (1994-2004)* Marshall Cavendish, Singapore and Sarasavi Publishers, Colombo, 2005.

Anyone interested in democracy, and the resilience of democratic processes should be interested in Sri Lankan electoral politics – this is the senior colony of the British Empire, a state that has, in the past decade, experienced rapid economic growth. It is also a once exemplar democratic third world welfare state – the first Asian country to enjoy universal (including votes for women) suffrage, high literacy rates and good health indicators, but has more recently been described as ‘paradise lost’. For anyone interested in Sri Lankan electoral politics Professor Jayasuriya’s concise analysis of electoral politics over the past turbulent decades is a must.

Professor Jayasuriya’s motivation for producing this informative volume is twofold: firstly, it has grown out of a personal commitment to fostering greater understanding of Sri Lankan politics ‘away from the myths, simplifications and distortions that abound in the overseas media’ (x); and secondly, to balance and inform the pre-occupation of the recent literature with the ethnic conflict and the attendant rise of cultural nationalism. (xvi). In addressing these aims he has been entirely successful. He has systematically translated a complex and dynamic politic into themes and trends that are comprehensible to the student of Sri Lankan politics, to those interested in the transformations of the Westminster system in the post-colonial state, and to members of the general public, particularly the ever growing Sri Lankan Diaspora. Professor Jayasuriya’s achievement is in isolating the critically changing patterns and rhythms that up close and personal seem incomprehensible: political parties that morph from radical to nationalist; constantly shifting individual allegiances and unlikely coalitions; a President whose stance on the ethnic conflict has shifted from idealistic ‘dovish’ to singularly (or as some would interpret the stance obstructionist) ‘hawkish’; and an assertive voting public that has, at every election since Independence, switched its preference from the Centre-Left social democrats (SLFP) to the Centre-Right conservatives (UNP). The author’s achievement is in fact somewhat disguised by this volume’s success – the interweaving of political and constitutional with economic and social transformations and the clarity that emerges appear, with hindsight, glaringly obvious.

The tri-partite structure of *The Changing Face of Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka (1994-2004)* is drawn from three major changes in post-Independence Sri Lanka. The first of these, the 1994 General Election and the introduction of Gaullist constitutionalism, was

governed, Jayasuriya argues, by four key issues: the ethnic conflict and prospects for peace; management of a new liberalized market economy; cessation of violations of human rights and abuses of political power; and the impact of increasing poverty (49). Combined with the ongoing and costly ethnic conflict in the North and East and a concomitant inability to achieve economic policy objectives, this was a period in which, although significant advances were made in restoring democratic principles and processes, the government struggled to retain popular support. Complex party politics and constitutional crises were the hallmarks of the electoral instability following the Presidential Election of 1999 and the general Elections of 2000 and 2001 which resulted in a divided executive government. During this period the principle of ‘combination’ – of an all powerful Presidential Executive (Centre-Left) in tandem with a Legislature and Cabinet drawn from rival and opposing political parties (Centre-Right) was put to the test (89) resulting in a new election in 2004. This most recent election added another complexity to the political landscape: a President simultaneously playing out ‘dynastic’ politics whilst her party, in order to maximize its chances for electoral success negotiated a coalition alliance with the JVP a radical Sinhala nationalist party (91) that is both officially and popularly held responsible for the assassination of the President’s late husband, screen idol and politician Vijaya Kumaratunga. This latest election also saw the entry into the political arena of a new Sinhala nationalist party of Buddhist monks – highly perplexing for those in the West who are disinclined to see Buddhism as a political force (in marked contrast to our reading of Islam).

If there is an omission in Professor Jayasuriya’s analysis it is that this overview of Sri Lankan politics reads, like the professor himself, as essentially highly civilized, albeit a highly civilized journey from a ‘welfare state’ to a ‘warfare state’. The focus on party politics and constitutional change over the past decade results in submerging the harsh realities of crippling poverty, the brutality and culture of fear and intimidation inherited from both the 70s and 80s and, especially for the minority Tamil population, the profound impact of the ongoing ethnic conflict and the human rights abuses of the militarized state. The social forces that have prompted suicide bombings, violence, torture and ‘disappearances’, perpetrated by separatists, insurgents, and the State continue to touch every Sri Lankan and need ‘lest we forget’ to be constantly foregrounded.

The fact that the volume went to press on the eve of the devastating December 2004 tsunami that killed more than 30,000 and left half a million homeless does not negate its import. Indeed, one of the critical obstacles to rebuilding many parts of the south and East has been

the paucity of social data. This volume provides an invaluable set of data, including detailed electoral statistics, and analytical benchmarks. Sri Lanka 'after the tsunami' will continue to be transformed in as yet unpredictable ways by the recent natural disaster, more so as the regions most affected are the war-ravaged districts of the North and East and the heartland of the Sinhala militants, the disaffected youth of the South. One can only hope,

along with Professor Jayasuriya that a real peace, in contrast to the current state of 'no war' and some form of consensual politics may characterize the next, phase of governance (xxi). If so, and indeed even if not, with the insight provided by the volume, we will be better placed to understand the next, and again critical phase of political evolution ■

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READING – *Writing that Conquers*

Anoma Pieris

Sarojini Jayawickrama: *Writing That Conquers: Re-reading Knox's an Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*, Social Scientists' Association, Colombo, pages 350, Price Rs. 600.

Our knowledge of the history of our country is necessarily biased, due to our general lack of self-reflexivity and the selectivity of our national memory. My own understanding of history is gleaned from nationalist text books, which are reproduced in the ideological spirit of the *Mahawamsa* and bent on glorifying Sinhala kingship; or from its polar opposite: colonial travel narratives that cast our people as pagans that needed to be civilized. Textuality, i.e. the written word, predominates and in both cases is given an authority, which in each case is grossly over-rated. Just as the *Mahawamsa* has as its objective the legitimization of dynastic kingship the colonial narrative presents the colonizer as saving the native population from the tyrannical rule of those very kings. Much of the history of resistance to British occupation can be found in historical novels such as *The Last Kingdom of Sinhalay* by Elmo Jayawardene (2004), who narrates the treacheries and resistance to the British surrounding the fall of Kandy. Understandably the bulk of this work concentrates on the Kandyan period, a period charged with political strife and territorial contestation, as European powers competed for space and commercial monopolies over our specific geography. The anthropologist Michael Roberts in *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period* (2004) describes how both Sinhalese and Buddhist sensibilities were being shaped and projected both politically and culturally during the Kandyan period differentiating the Sinhalese from both colonizers and peoples of other races.

Sarojini Jayawickrama's book *Writing that Conquers* adds to this discussion of the Kandyan period as yet another contribution to it history made during this year. Her research re-reads the *Historical Relations of Ceylon* by Robert Knox following the scrutiny of textual histories provoked by postcolonial studies. If we were to analyze the politics of the colonial text, would we draw quite different conclusions about our history? She asks.

Our knowledge of the Kandyan kingdom during the Seventeenth Century at a quotidian level and the details of the rule of Raja Sinha the Second are acquired from what has become a seminal

text: Robert Knox's *Historical Relations of the Island Ceylon*. The book is an anthropological narrative by an English sailor of the East India Company, who was held captive by the king of Kandy for nearly twenty years. During this period Knox observed the habits of the people around him, the villagers, courtiers and what he saw of the king recording it after his escape and return to England. His book, published in 1681 became an immediate success informing the British public about a territory that was available for colonization. Its religious overtones only superficially disguised its true objective of establishing the relative superiority of Britain and suggesting the need to deliver the Ceylonese from their feudal existence.

It is the minute detail in Knox's account that captures the readers imagination allowing him or her to construct a colonialist's version of native life. Knox's encyclopedic account gives intimate knowledge of community structures, marital relationships, cooking and eating habits, social customs, dwelling types and construction methods with special attention to the relations between the king and his subjects. On its publication, accompanied by lithographs it proved to be one of the most popular representations of Ceylon to be produced and disseminated in Europe during that period. Translations were made into French, German and Dutch. Jayawickrama compares this text to that by Daniel Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe* regarded by many of us as a boy's adventure-story but equally replete with Imperialist motives. By placing her analysis within the frame of postcolonial literary critique and employing comparisons with colonial period texts from other colonized cultures Jayawickrama demonstrates how Ceylon too was drawn into the larger *orientalist* project to colonize through the written word.

In this regard, Jayawickrama's re-reading of Knox addresses a familiar destabilization experienced by all 'native' readers on encountering a western version of their history. While the form of the narrative typically asks the reader to identify with the protagonist, Knox, and to imbibe his values and positioning, the necessity to sympathize with his predicament and empathize with his interpretations of the Kandyan kingdom jolts our post-national subjectivity. It places Sri Lankan readers outside the space of the narrative and its reception. It is from this liminal space outside the