

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Provincial Elections

When the year 1993 began, almost all political speculations centered on one theme: elections. Although it was quite certain that the new year was going to be an elections year, no one was quite sure which particular election—Provincial, Parliamentary or Presidential—would come first in the parade. In the third week of March, President Premadasa took the surprise decision to dissolve all functioning Provincial Councils, paving the way for the ruling party and the opposition to test popular support, well in advance of the two major electoral battles which are constitutionally due, next year.

The provincial elections will be held in May against the background of tremendous economic and political changes that have occurred since the present UNP regime took office five years ago. The structural features of the country's economy are not what they were in 1988-89. A major transformation of the nature of property relations in the economy has occurred, with the state divesting its ownership of all economic ventures, except the ownership of plantations. Thus, what Mr. Jayewardene could not do during his Presidential stewardship of eleven years (1977-88) Mr. Premadasa did in five years, due to the combination of at least three factors: severe economic crisis, the pressure of international monetary institutions and the demise of the JVP which ensured the elimination of internal resistance to economic reforms.

The political balance of forces has also changed significantly. While the two elections in December 1988 and February 1989 were marked by bloody violence, unleashed jointly by the JVP and the state, resulting in phenomenally low voter turn out, the absence of the JVP will bring voter participation to its normal, peace-time level, as it was during the local councils elections two years ago. A UNP which had earlier maintained an image of an invincible monolith is now split and its breakaway party has emerged a third electoral force within a brief span of two years.

Vying for the votes of an enthusiastic electorate are three sets of powerful political combinations, indicating the new equilibrium in party politics: (a) the ruling UNP, supported by the CWC and a faction of the once-Left wing Mahajana Party, (b) the People's Alliance of the SLFP, the CP, the LSSP and two other minor Left parties, (c) the recently formed Democratic United National Front (DUNF) which has been making tremendous inroads into both the UNP and SLFP constituencies.

The political significance of this election lies largely in the way in which electoral expectations of these three formations will be materialized at the hand of the elec-

torate. As we comment in the editorial, the provincial councils election this time is not likely to be fought on any particular issue concerning devolution; rather, it would be the preparatory battleground for the UNP, the Alliance and the DUNF to test their respective claims to electoral superiority at the subsequent Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

The participation of the SLFP in this election has a special significance, as far as the PC system in general is concerned. When the PCs were established in 1987-88, the SLFP strongly opposed them, and in fact went to the extent of boycotting the PC elections. The position taken up by the SLFP at that time—a clear instance of the SLFP's capitulation before the JVP's ultra-nationalist patriotism—was that the PCs were institutions imposed on Sri Lanka by India against the will of the people. It is not as yet clear whether the SLFP has a unified stand on the question of devolution and provincial councils. A fairly large section of SLFP MPs in the Hela Urumaya wing of the party are totally opposed to it while Mrs. Bandaranaike appears to accept the Provincial Councils as a political necessity, if not a reality, that can no longer be discounted.

After the forthcoming elections, the provincial councils system is likely to go through a significant transformation, primarily due to one major factor: the political control of a few councils may be wrested by the opposition. If coalition administrations of the SLFP-led Alliance and the DUNF are formed in a few provinces, the political monopoly that the UNP had enjoyed in all the seven functioning councils since 1988 will be broken. If this happens, it will remove one negative feature that existed in the Center-Province relations during the past five years — the control of provincial administration by the same part that controls both the executive and legislative branches of the central government. Then, there will at least be the theoretical possibility for those opposition-led Councils to bargain with the Centre with a position of strength.

Whether this theoretical possibility will become a reality or not will largely depend on the commitment of the SLFP and the DUNF to the strengthening of the devolutionary process. If they, instead, opt to use their control of Councils solely as a bargaining platform in the power struggle with the UNP, the ultimate loser will be not the UNP, but the provincial councils system.

Lessons from the Indian Left

Recent developments in the Left movement in India may hold some lessons for Sri Lanka.



The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), recently emerged from underground and held the concluding sessions of its fifth party congress at Calcutta's Brigade Parade Ground at the end of December 1992. This was the main component of the group that had broken away from the Communist Party of India (M) 24 years ago to launch the revolution in India. They started waging armed struggle, carrying out guerilla operations, liquidating 'class enemies'; the movement began its activities in Naxalbari, a village in Bengal that added a new word to the lexicon of revolution, and quickly spread to many other states in India, chiefly Bihar but also into Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. The movement gathered some strength among the most deprived sections of the Indian peasantry, mainly the harijans and specially in places like Bihar where influential landlords had been totally successful in negating the weak land reform laws.

The Naxalite movement, as it had come to be called by then, met with ruthless repression from state forces as well as the hired guns of the landlords. Its chief ideologue, Charu Mazumdar, was arrested in 1972 (and died later in police custody); the movement broke up into several factions and ceased to be a factor at the national level, even though a few scattered factions like the Peoples War Group continued with their military operations on a reduced scale and in limited areas.

Most of these factions have now come together with Vinod Mishra as the party's general secretary, and decided to come out from the underground. What is of great interest is the basis on which they have decided to do so. Questioned on their new strategy, Mishra has told the Indian newsmagazine *Sunday*: "The old party structure was becoming outdated. It was unable to cope with the changing national scene. So a thorough change was necessary. In the early seventies, the stress was on a big armed revolution. But in reality our operations remained

localised. We were not able to intervene actively in matters of national importance."

The coming out into the open was a gradual process, with the formation of front organisations among various groups and finally the formation of the Indian People's Front.

Mishra now recognises the plurality of interests in India: "It is a vast country and the Marxist Leninists cannot be the only people to lead protest movements. Different forms of movements are building up. You have the environmental groups, feminists, people opposing river valley projects and they are guided by different ideologies... It is our duty to unite all sorts of protests in a single stream." To oppose what he calls the 'communal fascism' of the Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP) and the effects of the Congress government's economic policies, Mishra now calls for 'a broad democratic platform.'

And what of the Left within such a broad democratic coalition? Mishra thinks that the Left can play its role best as a confederation of parties: "For historical reasons, the left in India is of a diverse nature. So we say that instead of trying to have unity of a homogeneous nature... we should have a confederation... and work on the basis of consensus." And what of the stand of his own party within such a confederation? The possibility of not opting for governmental power, but preferring to provide checks and balances.

What is significant here is the recognition of plurality, the need for a united Left with a stance of its own, developed not for the attainment of state power but on the basis of principles and to provide checks on those who wield state power, and, finally the need to place such a program within a broad democratic platform. This is a development fully in consonance with changing national and international circumstances.

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The government will not re-establish respect for law without giving the law some claim to respect. It cannot do that if it neglects one feature that distinguishes law from ordered brutality. If the government does not take rights seriously, then it does not take law seriously either.

Ronald Dworkin