

PROVINCIAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS

A Preliminary Analysis

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The most remarkable aspect of the Provincial Council elections of May 1993 is the fact that it was held as originally scheduled and that it went through smoothly. The election campaign was scarred by two assassinations which removed the incumbent President and a possible future President from the political scene. The possibility that Sri Lanka could go through a formal election process even in the midst of all this violence shows some of the contradictions in the current political situation. It demonstrates a degree of admirable stability, but, at the same time, the assassinations show that violence is still inherent in the politics of the "South", though some had tended to view it as a thing of the past because of the relative peace these areas had enjoyed during the last three years.

Although there have been some allegations of malpractice, the conduct of the elections has, by and large, given it legitimacy; its results have been accepted as a reasonably accurate reflection of the strength of various political parties at present. Some of the features which allows us to analyse the elections on this base are set out below.

The elections of May 1993, though ostensibly for Provincial Councils, took on the character of a general election. The fact that Provincial Councils were partly an answer to the vexed question of ethnic relations and that they had come into being through pressure from India to resolve the conflict almost never figured in the campaign. Mr. Premadasa turned it into a plebiscite on the popularity of the government, the political party in power and most of all, on himself. The opposition too turned the election into a test of strength and concentrated its attack on Mr. Premadasa.

Another feature was that the election was held only in what can be called the "Southern" part of the country with a predominant population of Sinhalese. The elections were not held in the North and East where there is an ongoing civil war. It is quite possible that in the future this pattern of division in the politics of the "South" and the "North/East" could become the norm. The politics of these two areas have established their own different logic.

The electoral competition of 93 followed a somewhat similar pattern to earlier elections. On one side was the UNP; on the other were the major opposition parties

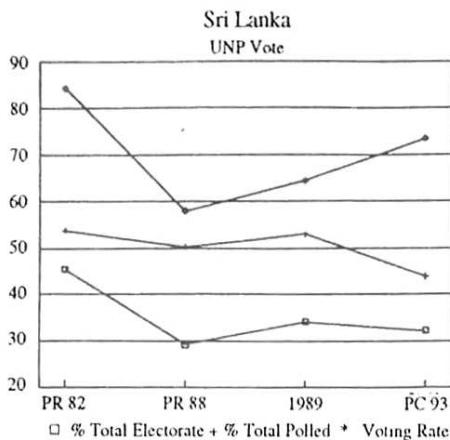
coming together in a coalition called the *Podujana Eksath Peramuna* (PEP), recalling the MEP of 1956. Since it was an anti-UNP coalition that had always defeated the UNP in the past, the election assumed the characteristics of previous competitions.

The new dimension in the electoral process was the emergence of the DUNF formed by a breakaway group from the UNP in 1991. Perhaps the emergence of the DUNF in the political scene could have long term implications. In the politics of the 'South', the UNP has been the party that remained intact without any significant split or breakaway since the resignation of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1951, which led to the formation of the S.L.F.P. In contrast, the SLFP has suffered significant splits — the formation of SLFSP in 1964 and SLMP in 1988. The split in the UNP coincided with its leadership moving to a person who did not have direct links to the group who got together to form the Ceylon National Congress from which the UNP emerged; now that this leadership is no more, it will be interesting to see how the party will resolve its succession problem in preparation for the coming Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

Within the context of an election characterised by such features, the primary objective of this note is to look at the electoral base of the UNP in the context of changes that have taken place in the electorate as a whole.

The first impression derived from the results is that the UNP does have a considerable electoral base. In comparison with past situations, this is unusual, for parties that have been in power for a much shorter time than the 15 years that UNP has held on to power, have generally suffered an erosion of their electoral base. However there is also a popular perception that UNP strength specially in the urban areas has diminished. Does this mean that there is a completely new pattern of political allegiance that has established itself in the post'77 era? Is the persistence of the UNP electoral base something to do with the post'77 changes in development introduced by this party? Or are we seeing a pattern that existed earlier, but was masked in the past by the peculiarities of the first past the poll system and now becoming visible due to the PR system? These appear to be the key questions that have to be answered.





We begin with Fig.1 which gives some basic indicators of the UNP strength nation-wide for four elections in the recent past. In the last PC elections the UNP vote amounted to 32.2% of the total electorate in the seven province where the election was conducted.

Table 1 shows data for the same indicator from 1947-1977.

Table 1

UNP as a % of Total Electorate	
1947	24.7
1952	34.3
1956	21.3
1960-3	24.4
1960-7	30.7
1965	33.8
1970	34.4
1977	47.7
1982	42.4
1988	27.4
1989	30.4

As shown by this data, the UNP has gradually increased its strength after the 1956 defeat when it had only 21.3% of the total electorate supporting it, reaching a peak in 1977. It also shows the importance of a radical change of perspective in analysing election results under a proportional representation system as compared with the earlier system. Unfortunately the latter perspective still lingers on specially because results of the elections are still announced on the basis of old electorates. Looking at the 1970 election results in this new perspective, the picture is different; rather than a drastic loss, this becomes another election in which the UNP continued its long term trend of building its electoral base and increasing its support. The UNP could well have been a contender for office if the PR system had been in force.

The UNP strength at present seems to hover around its position in the 1960 to 1970 period. To get a more accurate picture it will be necessary to compute data for the seven provinces separately.

Coming to more recent times, as shown in Fig 1, the UNP strength has been reduced significantly from its peak in 1977, both in terms of the percentage of the total electorate as well as of the total polled. However it is important to notice that the change from 1989 general election to 1993 PC election is not that significant in terms of the total electorate, being less than two percentage points. When it comes to total polled, the change is 9 percentage points nationally, although the voting rate also increased by 9 percentage points from 1989 to 1993. However it must be remembered that provincial and local elections generally have a lower voting rate compared to rates established for national elections. Therefore it is clear that, although the strength of the UNP has come down from the unusual electoral peak under Mr. Jayawardena's leadership in 1977, it still has a considerable electoral base nationally, probably close to that enjoyed in the mid sixties.

Shifts in the Electorate

There have been significant movements of population during the post'77 period after the introduction of liberalised economic policies which have affected the distribution of the electorate. Table 2 below gives the percentage increases in the electoral strength of districts in the seven provinces between 1982 and 1993.

Table 2

Percentage Shifts in the Electorate 1977-1993	
Colombo	52.39
Gampaha	59.66
Kalutara	47.69
Kandy	51.37
Matale	72.35
N' Eliya	131.05
Galle	40.39
Matara	44.71
Hambantota	72.56
Kurunegala	45.97
Puttalam	73.67
Anuradhapura	99.15
Polonnaruwa	122.34
Badulla	99.70
Moneragala	132.98
Ratnapura	68.03
Kegalle	41.63
Total	60.82



The most significant aspect that emerges from this data is the much higher than average increase in the electorate strength of the dry zone areas during this period. Developments associated with the Mahaweli project and the overall changes that have taken place in irrigated agriculture during the post'77 period appear to be the economic base for these shifts in population.

The other important development is the increase in the number of voters in the Nuwara Eliya District; this is due to more and more people of Indian Tamil origin obtaining citizenship rights and therefore the vote.

These trends are reflected in Table 3 given below which shows shifts in the contribution of each district to the total electorate between 1977 and 1993; the statistics are given for three areas - the wet zone, Nuwara Eliya and the dry zone.

Table 3

District Composition of the Total Electorate					
Area 1	1977	PR'82	PR'88	1989	PC'93
Colombo	14.28	13.85	13.60	13.59	13.53
Gampaha	12.10	11.90	12.11	12.11	12.01
Kalutara	7.48	7.11	7.12	7.12	6.87
Kandy	8.22	8.04	7.85	7.85	7.73
Galle	7.66	7.30	7.13	7.13	6.69
Matara	5.90	5.69	5.64	5.64	5.31
K'gala	10.17	10.22	9.80	9.81	9.23
Ratnpura	5.63	5.73	5.71	5.71	5.88
Kegalle	6.04	5.79	5.46	5.46	5.32
Total	77.49	75.62	74.42	74.43	72.58
Area 2					
N'Eliya	2.75	2.88	2.87	2.87	3.95
Area 3					
Matale	2.56	2.67	2.68	2.68	2.75
Hambantota	3.24	3.45	3.69	3.69	3.48
Puttalam	3.72	3.81	3.98	3.98	4.02
A'pura	3.46	3.97	4.17	4.17	4.29
Pollonnaruwa	1.52	1.82	2.04	2.05	2.11
Badulla	3.76	3.99	4.11	4.11	4.66
Moneragala	1.49	1.80	2.02	2.02	2.16
Total	19.77	21.50	22.71	22.71	23.47

Between 1977 and 1993 the total contribution of the wet zone area to the electorate has diminished by about 5 percentage points, from 77.5% in 1977 to 72.6% in 1993. There has been a relative drop in the contribution of almost every district of this area to the total electorate during this period.

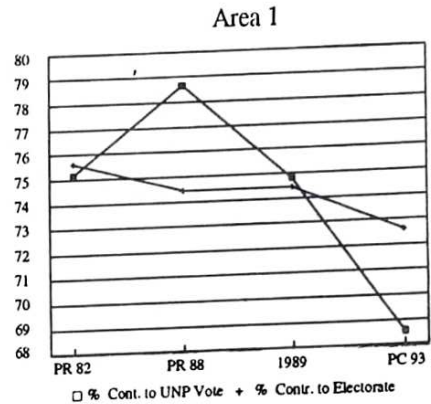
Parallel to this, the contribution of dry zone or districts of Area 2 to the total electorate has increased by 3.7%,

with all districts contributing their share. The reason for the increase in the Nuwara Eliya district is as mentioned earlier.

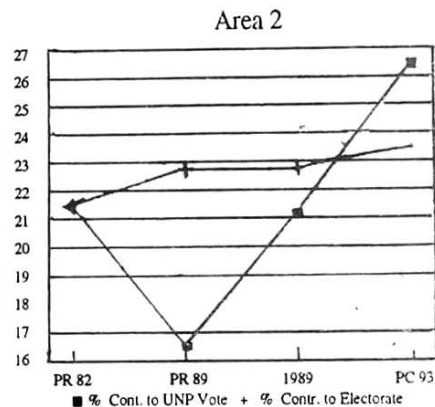
In interpreting these trends, it must be remembered that what is revealed in the statistics for the post'77 period is part of a long term trend begun earlier. Comparative rates for different periods which should be a part of a more detailed study.

Shifts in the UNP Electoral Base?

Given these perceptible changes in the distribution of the total electorate in different areas, what has been their impact on the UNP vote? The data in Fig.2 and Fig.3 compares the contribution of each of these areas to the total electorate with their contribution to the total UNP vote.



As shown in these graphs, votes obtained by the UNP in the Presidential elections of 1982 and General elections of 1989 were very commensurate to the strength of each of these areas in the electorate. In other words it had support from all over the country comparative to the electoral strength of each area. However, in 1993 the picture changes significantly. While the support base in Area 1 diminishes compared to the electoral strength of this area, the reverse is true with regard to Area 2. In other words the UNP has depended to a greater degree on the latter areas to get its support.



There are several interesting issues emerging from this analysis which require further probing. One explanation for this change in pattern in the 1993 PC elections is to see it only as a very specific phenomenon with no long term consequences, to see it as merely an arithmetical problem: since the UNP has got less from Area 1 in this election, it has to increase its share in Area 2. This views the UNP as a party with a continuing and wide national base and the result of PC 1993 as a short term aberration.

The second possibility is that this shift of the electoral base towards Area 2 has a link with the tendencies of the total electorate as discussed above. In other words, the UNP is moving with the relevant changes in the distribution of the electorate; this view would mean that the UNP still remains as a party with a national base but able to adapt itself to the changing distribution of the electorate.

A more popular speculation attaches a greater significance to this shift. It argues that there has been a significant change in the character of the UNP base; from a party that had a great appeal in the urban sector, it is changing into a party with a rural base. However this speculation is probably based on the notion that the UNP has lost its so called "urban - intellectual - middle class" leadership with the formation of DUNF and the defections of some leaders who are from this social background and that the electorate or some part of it has responded likewise. However the UNP was never a party that had an appeal only in the urban areas. It was and remains the largest right wing party able to articulate links with very different social classes in order to rule and to move forward the process of capitalist development. Personality and faction struggles within the ruling group do not affect these structural relationships with the electorate so easily.

LETTERS

I

Venerable Editors,

Hope someone took on Mr. Wijemanne. [*Pravada*, December 1992] I share his heretical views on Sinhala nationalism, but he inflated secessionist successes by lumping secessionist movements with anti-colonial struggles. Even the Turkish Cypriot Republic, after so many years, is recognized only by its creator/patron if I am not mistaken.

Expatriate
England.

II

Dear Sir,

While the expression of heretical news [Letter, Adrian Wijemanne *Pravada*, December 1992] is welcome, such views based on fantasy rather than the interpretation of historical fact will in no way help us to understand the problem of ethno-nationalism presently wracking Sri Lanka.

A.W. identifies widely differing countries located in continents or sub-continents or as is lands in oceans wide apart as having being established by guerilla warfare - "Israel, Indonesia, Zaire, Kenya, Algeria, Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Afghanistan, and Eritrea." Bangladesh and the Turkish Cypriot Republic were helped on by powerful neighbours. He seems to have overlooked the fact that China greatly helped Vietnam as did the Soviet Union, though not a neighbour. Indeed, the role of the big powers in promoting guerilla wars for ideological or other reasons is not even alluded to.

Surprisingly, Pakistan is not included, perhaps because the driving force was not ethno-culturalism, but religion. But Israel is included even though Israel was created as a theocratic state, just as Pakistan. No mention is made of the fact that the state of Israel was created by U.N. resolution, supported both by the USA and the USSR. To say that Afghanistan was created by guerilla warfare is a travesty of the truth.

