

# SRI LANKA'S PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

The Provincial Council elections held on May 17 have produced mixed results. Having gained absolute majorities in only four of seven provinces, the ruling UNP cannot interpret the results as a clear vote of confidence on the post-Premadasa administration. Nor can the Opposition claim an electoral swing in its favour.

The UNP expected to regain control of all seven provincial councils. In the elections held under the proportional representation (PR) system, it obtained clear majorities in Uva, Sabaragamuwa, Central and North-Central provinces. In the Southern and North-Western provinces, the UNP has emerged as the party with the highest number of seats, yet without an absolute majority vis a vis the Opposition's total. In these two Councils, the combined opposition seats secured by the People's Alliance (the main opposition grouping led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party) and the Democratic United National Front (DUNF) exceed the UNP's total.

The UNP's main worry is perhaps the loss of the Western provincial Council to the opposition People's Alliance. In this key province, where economic and political power centers are located, the Alliance has 45 seats as opposed to UNP's 41. Seventeen seats have been won by the PA's ally, the DUNF.

Although the capture of the Western province by the SLFP-led Alliance is a major victory for the Opposition, the overall results fall short of their expectations. The PA hoped to win in five provinces while the DUNF thought it could easily win in the Central and North Western provinces.

The results indicate a number of significant trends in Sri Lanka's electoral politics. The urban electorate, particularly in the Colombo and Gampaha districts in the Western Province, has voted overwhelmingly against the government. The UNP, meanwhile, has swept almost all rural electorates. The Opposition's strong showing in the Western Province shows the discontent among the urban middle class populace with the administration of the ex-President Premadasa. Meanwhile, Premadasa's rural-biased development programmes (poverty alleviation, employment generation, infra-structural development and housing) have clearly enabled the UNP to establish a firm rural electoral base.

The poor performance by the People's Alliance in the rural provinces also indicates the erosion of the SLFP's traditional support base in the countryside. The electorate's unexpected shift from the SLFP (which heads the PA) to the UNP in Hambantota, Matara, Ratnapura, Kegalle and Anuradhapura districts is somewhat surprising.

This urban-rural dichotomy in the election results points to the weakness of the Opposition's campaign strategy. Instead of presenting alternative economic or social policies to those of the UNP, the two opposition groupings concentrated their attack on the style of governance under Premadasa. They did not present a programme aimed at the rural populace. The Opposition's campaign issues like corruption, media freedom, human rights and democracy perhaps appealed mainly to the urban and middle class voters.

The minorities clearly voted overwhelmingly with the UNP. The plantation Tamil vote has largely contributed to the UNP victories in Central and Uva provinces. In the metropolitan Colombo too, the ethnic minority voters, both Tamils and Muslims, have preferred the UNP. The Muslim community appears to have abandoned the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in favour of the UNP.

The UNP's setback in urban districts runs parallel to the unexpectedly poor performance of the DUNF in the Central Province where its leader, Gamini Dissanayake, vied for the Chief Minister's position. In Nuwara Eliya and Kotmale electorates, where Dissanayake thought he had built a personal power base, the DUNF could collect only a little over thirty-four thousand votes, as opposed to UNP's 173,000.

Dissanayake's personal setback is amply compensated by a similar electoral predicament suffered by the new Prime Minister, Ranil Wickramasinghe. Wickramasinghe's two electorates, Biyagama and Kelaniya in the Gampaha district near Colombo, were won by the People's Alliance.

Interestingly, the voters in Ratmalana have overwhelmingly endorsed the candidacy of the slain DUNF leader, Lalith Athulathmudali, sending the UNP to a poor third place. The DUNF's share in Ratmalana is 45 % as opposed to UNP's 20 %.

The overall results of this election do not allow any party to be over-enthusiastic about the outcome. The UNP cannot make claims to a mandate. If the election was a mini-referendum on the government's policies, the public verdict is that of cautious support. The rejection of the UNP by a sizeable section of the urban populace is a pointer to the urgency of policy reforms aimed at easing the economic difficulties of middle-class and fixed-income earning groups.

The results also indicate an uncertain future for the DUNF. The outcome is disappointing for the young party which lost its leader just three weeks prior to the election. The DUNF certainly has emerged as a third force in electoral politics. Yet, in an increasingly bi-polarized



electoral competition in Sri Lanka, the future of a 'third force' may not be too optimistic. For future electoral purposes, the DUNF will have to find an ally either in the UNP or the SLFP. Both options are not easy ones for Gamini Dissanayake, whose ambitions for the highest political position in the country are only too well known. For the moment, the DUNF has decided to continue its informal alliance with the PA.

Although this violent-free election has won plaudits from international polls observers and local monitoring groups, the post-election manoeuvres by the UNP have already created much consternation among opposition circles. In the South and the North-West, where the combined PA-DUNF strength has an edge over the UNP—a majority of one seat in the South and two in the North-West—the Governors have appointed UNP Chief Ministers. The Opposition has challenged the validity of these two appointments before the Appeals Court.

The haste with which the Governors in these two provinces acted in making Chief Ministerial appointments suggests that the UNP is not prepared to concede three of seven Provincial Councils to the Opposition. In the strategically important Western Province, however, the UNP could not prevent the formation of a PA-DUNF coalition administration commanding a sizeable majority. In the Southern and North-Western provinces, in contrast, the UNP still stands as the single party with the highest number of seats. The Constitutional provision that governs the appointment of Chief Ministers is silent about coalition administrations. The UNP strategists appear to have used this legal loophole, combining it with the discretionary powers of the Governors.

This development has, meanwhile, produced a backlash against the new Wijetunga-Wickramasinghe administration which many in Colombo expected to be more conciliatory towards the opposition. In fact, President Wijetunga, on assuming office, gave the impression that his style of governance vis a vis the opposition would be non-confrontationist. The respect and goodwill which even his opponents extended to Wijetunga in the first week of his Presidency is now receding. At a time when normalization of relations between the ruling party and the opposition has become crucially important for Sri

Lanka's political stability, the UNP under Wijetunga too appears to be preoccupied with its own short-term agendas of power.

The question of who should control the two provinces will ultimately be decided by the Supreme Court. However, the UNP seems to be having other plans as well. The speculation in Colombo is that the government is fast moving towards amending the constitutional provision which debar MP's and PC members from crossing the floor. To secure the necessary two-thirds majority, the UNP is rumoured to have made overtures to some disgruntled MP's of the opposition SLFP. If the law is amended enabling defection, the UNP is likely to target the key Western Provincial Council as well.

If the UNP fails in its present bid to control the two controversial provinces, there is yet another option available: dissolution of the two councils to have fresh elections. It will however be a politically inappropriate measure, because arbitrary manipulation of the constitutional process for short-term political gains can damage the democratic process, bringing disastrous consequences to the entire polity. The Wijetunga administration should not repeat the mistakes of the J. R. Jayewardene regime, despite the fact that some of the elder-statesman's men are back in the new officialdom.

If the UNP succeeds in getting the support of a section of the SLFP to amend the election law, that will be the beginning of a new alignment of political forces as well. The SLFP is likely to split, and the rebel SLFP MP's will either join the UNP or will sit in Parliament as an independent group. The massive electoral victory of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga in the Western Province has certainly weakened the Anura Bandaranaike faction of the party. The UNP in the past has repeatedly capitalized the SLFP's internal dissensions. To prevent disaster, Mrs. Bandaranaike will have no option but to purge the party's parliamentary group, before the UNP presents draft Constitutional amendments in Parliament.

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Courtesy, *Frontline*

Kings, priests and statesmen blast the human flower  
Even in its tender bud; their influence darts  
Like subtle poison through the bloodless veins  
of desolate society.

- Subramania Bharathi