

# AFTER THE SOUTH: OPTIONS AHEAD?

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The outcome of the Southern Provincial elections can be considered through many prisms. It is first and foremost a rebuff of both the ruling party, the United National Party and the presidential style of Dingiri Banda Wijetunga. When the people of the South voted for the People's Alliance, they in reality castigated the policy of 'open door' to bribery, corruption and nepotism, the collapse of the rule of law, 'ambalama' politics, the arrogance of pajero-ministers and the increasingly Up-country bias and corporatist attitude of the Executive President. The endless war in the North and East where the poor died 'for the delights, riches and superfluities of others' surely played a part in the disaffection for a regime which while promising military victories only sent back coffins. Minorities too, recently likened to creepers around the bark of a tree, chose quite naturally to creep away. The smaller parties of the Left and the marginal Sinhala Maha Sammata Bhumiputra outfit (the Party of the Sinhalese Sons of the Soil) mustered little support. With the demise of the DUNF as a third force the two party system was once again energized.

The results are telling. The PA won 32 seats out of 55, against the UNP which secured only 23 seats. Significantly out of 21 electorates, only Balapitiya, a Premadasa stronghold was won by the UNP. Clearly it was not only the UNP which was defeated in these elections but D.B. Wijetunga's amnesic attitude towards many of Premadasa's populist policies such as the *gam udawa* and the activist face-to-face approach of the late President exemplified by the Presidential Mobile Secretariat. The current President's refusal to present himself as an heir to R. Premadasa, with whom many underprivileged men and women still empathise, has proven to be a misreading of the political mood.

Inside the corridors of power the ambience should be reflective. The PA captured a large part of the DUNF vote. Today, from all quarters oracles are appearing who predicted defeat. Anura Bandaranaike, Gamini Dissanayake, Ronnie de Mel and other vacillating political lizards and chameleons are planning trips abroad or alternative moves. No one dares to say it, but it is on all lips....will the head of the court jester who became king roll? will the UNP implode?

While factions are solidifying in the ruling party, the SLFP is tasting victory after more than a decade. There is a feeling of euphoria among sympathisers and fellow-travellers who had always believed that the struggle for justice must not be abandoned on the ground that it seemed hopeless. But although the SLFP scored highly — 54.52% of voters in the Southern Province chose the PA as opposed to only 39.93% in last years PC elections—

the vote is undoubtedly a protest vote. It is still unclear in the minds of people what the SLFP stands for. Politics consists of more than standing up for moral principles making speeches and one does not rule a country by unearthing graves. There is a need for transparency, for clarity especially on issues such as the presidential candidates. If Sirimavo Bandaranaike, aged 78 contests D.B. Wijetunga aged 72, the choice will be between tweedledee and tweedledum. One can only hope that unlike Francois Mitterand who at the last French presidential elections, kept until the last moment the entire nation in suspense as to whether he was contesting the presidency and finally came forward, Mrs. Bandaranaike will make a responsible move.

Chandrika Kumaratunge who led the SLFP campaign in the South has emerged as a committed and hard-working leader with definite organizational capabilities. But there is a feeling of anxiety among the business community as to the economic policy of the SLFP, as the sharp drop in the Colombo Share Market index indicates. Too many ambiguities, too many uncertainties exist for a climate of confidence to grow. Common people too, whose aim is after all the pursuit of their own happiness would like to know what will replace the 'beggar's dole'... long queues, rations, restrictions yet again? The SLFP must not forget that people do not vote blindly for the heirs and heiresses of political dynasties, but also relate their voting decision to issues. If no deception of any sort is practiced on the part of the opposition, and if the leaders understand that power concedes nothing without a demand, there is a real possibility of victory.

The high voter turnout is indicative that despite the recent foreboding of a resurgence of the JVP, the youth, surprisingly still have faith in the ballot. The result of the Southern Province Elections can consolidate their choice of organized politics and democratic representation. People feel for the first time in years that it is possible to oust the government through legitimate means. Just as comforting as this renewed faith in the ballot is the relatively low level of violence during the campaign. Thuggery which is present on both sides of the political spectrum did not play a major role in the outcome of the elections.

As we speculate on the date of the presidential and parliamentary elections it is urgent that both parties look within and engage with the people over issues that concern them: for instance the vexed questions of NIC status *a la* Thailand, unemployment, constitutional reforms, human rights, and new social safety nets.

Today more than before the voter has options. Neither the UNP nor the SLFP can afford to be too complacent. ■