



Contents

NOTES AND COMMENTS	03
POLLS IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE <i>K. Loganathan</i>	04
PROVINCIAL POLLS IN THE SOUTH: FOUR VIEWS <i>Jayadeva Uyangoda</i>	06
<i>Sunil Bastian</i>	09
<i>Sasanka Perera</i>	12
<i>Nira Wickramasinghe</i>	16
SLFP'S NEW ECONOMIC POLICY	17
SRI LANKA: HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS	18
NEW THREAT TO HISTORY <i>Eric Hobsbawm</i>	23
A NATION AT WAR WITH ITSELF <i>Gyanendra Pandey</i>	25
TRIUMPH OF FRAMADAR <i>Corpus Delicti</i>	28
RAHULA'S REVOLUTIONARY CLASSICS <i>H.L. Seneviratne</i>	30
IN PRINT <i>C.A.</i>	32

Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

AFTER THE SOUTHERN POLLS

The outcome of the Southern provincial election, which was actually forced on the opposition, has given it a political edge which even its most ardent supporters could not have predicted three months ago. For the ruling UNP, the opposition's gain is more than the mere loss of a province. It is a verdict that has the potential of repeating itself at the more crucial Presidential and Parliamentary polls, due to be held within the next twelve months.

Winners, losers as well as spectators have presented their analyses of the Southern verdict. Meanwhile, the aftermath of the election appears to be characterized by the possibility of a fresh re-alignment of political forces in the country.

As for the UNP, its crisis revolves around the question of damage control after the defeat. Any serious damage control exercise should start with an objective assessment of what went wrong, but it is unlikely that the faction-ridden UNP has the capacity to do that. The buck does not seem to stop on any particular table, although Sirisena Cooray, the powerful General Secretary of the party, has volunteered to accept all responsibility for the defeat.

The factional struggle within the UNP is not a new or sudden development. It has existed since the assassination of the late president Premadasa during whose regime these factions were held together under tight control. The defeat in the South has only created the conditions for its public eruption. Ever since Wijetunga succeeded Premadasa last May, the Premadasa loyalists who continued to maintain a grip over the UNP's organizational machinery, found every reason to believe that Wijetunga

was intent on building up his own base at the UNP leadership level at their cost. Gamini Dissanayake, whose hatred towards the Premadasa wing of the UNP had never been a secret, could re-enter the UNP in January this year, primarily because of the chasm that existed between the UNP faction led by Wijetunga and the heirs to the UNP of the Premadasa era.

The UNP, unlike the SLFP, has historically demonstrated a certain capacity to survive internal crises and patch up leadership differences. Even assuming that the UNP does manage to stay together, it would be a daunting task to convince the Sri Lankan electorate within the few months that remain that it still is a credible ruling party. As we note elsewhere in this issue, a fundamental lesson the Southern voters have taught the UNP is that its government is facing a very severe legitimacy crisis. Judging by the UNP's reactions to the defeat, these men in power do not seem to have any capacity to learn from that lesson. Rather, they refuse to learn that as a regime they no longer command much public respect in the country. Hence all the talk about resurrecting the dead for the next election campaign.

Seventeen years of corrupt and arrogant rule by the UNP has changed the political consciousness of the people to make them want a change of government. They are critical of a group of rulers who have shown no ethical or political qualms in abusing governmental power in the most blatant and exhibitionist fashion; they resent the use of force which assumes that they can be cowed down easily and violates their sense of dignity. The widespread abuses themselves have contributed to a greater human rights consciousness among people from all communities.



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This has been reinforced by the unprecedented interventionist role of the judiciary in censuring government agencies and officials over human rights violations. The UNP's callous and scornful disregard of public concern over issues of human rights, as demonstrated in its cover up of the discovery of mass graves at Suriyakanda, has affected Sri Lankan people in a manner never seen in the past. To cap all this, there is public disdain of the massive corruption which has become the hallmark of a regime which has produced an unholy alliance of greedy politicians, servile bureaucrats and rapacious captains of business.

There appears to be some consensus among the UNP leaders that in order to secure victory at the forthcoming Presidential and parliamentary elections, the UNP needs to revive the so-called Premadasa legacy. Hence the talk of inducting Mrs. Premadasa, the widow of the ex-President, to the campaign bandwagon and of getting Mr. Premadasa's son, a wild-elephant enthusiast, into the UNP's nominations list in the Hambantota district. The UNP's contemptuous underestimation

of the political intelligence of the Sri Lankan voter may result in many such symbolic but empty gestures in the months to come. They will find that neither they or any other political party can take the electorate for granted any more, because the Sri Lankan people are now politicized in a very specific manner.

Gamini Dissanayake's return to the UNP or Anura Bandaranaike's embrace of Wijetunga, Cooray and Choksy cannot repair the damage they themselves had done to the political image of the UNP until a few months ago. Despite the fact that they became, just a few weeks ago, unprincipled political turn-coats, their exposure of the UNP's misdeeds, its undemocratic and corrupt behaviour, was too fresh to be forgotten by the electorate. Ironically, before joining Wijetunga's UNP, they had already contributed the little they could for the progress of Sri Lanka's democracy: they had very ably exposed the UNP for what it is. The PA was there ready to reap the harvest.

The People's Alliance too is faced with a set of contradictions escape from which is not likely to be easy. The PA won the Southern province not because it had a particularly imaginative or innovative programme to which the people were attracted. While it is true that Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga provided a charismatic alternative to a bunch of men who had utilized their positions of power only to soil the public arena, she did not pose a credible policy alternative to the UNP. The Southern voters found in her a symbol of a new politics, and that is precisely what the likely Presidential candidate of the opposition should give concrete expression to in the coming months. One does not necessarily need a comprehensive program of action to win elections in this age of communication, yet the PA cannot afford to win governmental power and go searching for policies which then are likely to be incoherent and ad hoc responses to various pressure groups. The eventual disillusionment that this will entail is very likely to have unforeseen consequences, particularly in a situation where a sizeable share of the politically active electorate is comprised of the youth whose sense of justice and injustice, right and wrong has in the past produced rebellions in the South and the North alike.

The PA must work towards a comprehensive reform program on the economy, politics, constitution, ethnic relations, human and democratic rights and many other key issues. Unless it takes the politico-intellectual leadership in a project of democratic reconstruction of Sri Lanka, its victory, if it happens, would be a hollow one.

Can the PA work towards a desirable and realistic reform agenda? A lot will depend on the political chemistry among the PA allies themselves under changing circumstances. While a section of the SLFP is already moving towards accepting 'capitalism with a human face,' this may not go down well with the Left-oriented sections of the party. Meanwhile, the left constituents of the PA—the LSSP and the CP—will find it extremely difficult to accept any free-marketism. In framing economic policy alone, the PA is very likely to go through a rather turbulent time.

What should be the Left agenda in a context where its main ally, the SLFP, accepts the basic framework of a reformed 'free-market capitalism'? The LSSP and the CP do not seem to have considered this dilemma with any seriousness. While resisting free-marketism, can they still remain a significant policy lobby with in the PA? The answer to this question will largely define the new role of Sri Lanka's Left.

Sections of the SLFP might also feel that the party can now confront the UNP on its own strength, without the support of its traditional Left allies. The consolidation of the DUNF within the PA, as demonstrated in the Southern province elections, is a clear indication of the weakening of the Left's relative strength in the alliance. The Athulathmudali section of the DUNF, an electorally significant anti-UNP constituency which has clearly spurned the possibility of returning to the post-Premadasa UNP, is also likely to emerge as the largest alliance partner.

The election results are also indicative of various other aspects of our politics, some of immediate importance and others with longer term repercussions. Many of these aspects are referred to or covered in the several articles in this issue that deal with the Southern election.

P