

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## Free and Fair Elections

**M**r. Chandrananda de Silva, the indefatigable Commissioner of Elections, must be a happy man after the elections to the Southern Provincial Council. At last, the people themselves organized means and mechanisms to prevent electoral malpractices, most often committed by government politicians and pliable policemen at the behest of their political masters.

In a number of official reports and public statements, the Commissioner has recently emphasized the need to ensure clean elections at which the will of the people can be really ascertained. Although opposition parties had cried foul after election defeats, they did not take the issue of preventing malpractices seriously until the Southern provincial elections. They blamed everyone else but did not realise that they too had a significant role to play in preventing malpractices. The remedy lay in organising the people themselves.

The local polls in the Eastern Province, held in early March and interpreted by the UNP as a victory, were marked by serious infringements of the election law. It is no secret that some UNP politicians had actively participated in rigging, impersonation and intimidation of voters. At several polling stations in the Eravur and Kattankudi Pradeshiya Sabha areas, stuffing of ballot boxes had taken place; the modus operandi has been for armed persons in police uniform (i.e. so far unidentified policemen) to invade the polling booths, frighten away the voters, seize ballot papers, mark them and stuff the boxes. That policemen were involved is indicated by the fact that a senior police officer is later said to have intimidated polling officials to give statements that such events did not take place. The Commissioner, after ordering that ballot papers from these stations be not counted, launched a full investigation into these incidents. He issued a courageous statement a few days before the election in the Southern province, detailing some of the sordid actions of government politicians and their allies in the police; he specifically asked his officials and the police to prevent violations as had occurred at Eravur and Kattankudi.

In recent months, Mr. Chandrananda de Silva has been privately expressing his utter frustration over the lack of co-operation by politicians to ensure free and fair elections. He felt that he was fighting a losing battle, and fighting it alone.

The encouraging news that reached Colombo on March 24 was that the opposition PA had at last organized its workers to resist malpractices attempted by powerful UNP

politicians. In a number of instances, politicians who attempted to invade polling centres were turned away by vigilant crowds jeering at them. Criminal elements transported to the province from Colombo, to intimidate rural voters, had also met with a similar reception. The opposition workers had also taken steps to ensure that no ballot boxes were tampered with, lost or introduced anew when they were being transported to counting centres.

These facts emphasise one thing: no amount of legal provisions can ensure free and fair elections unless the voters themselves are not vigilant and adequately organized to resist wrong-doers.

## Chauvinism?

**A**mong the most amusing responses to the UNP's defeat in the South is the attempt made by *The Island* newspaper to salvage the political credibility of D. B. Wijetunga, the leader of the UNP and the President of the country. In an editorial and a weekly column, *The Island* proclaimed that it was wrong to suggest that the Southern voters had rejected Sinhalese chauvinism. The Southern voter had so many other issues, mainly economic, for voting against the UNP, pronounces the oracle at Bloemendhal.

In a way, *The Island's* prognosis is not incorrect. The Southern electorate gave primacy to political (i.e. democratic) and economic considerations in deciding who should be voted to power in the Province. Why on earth then, did the Great Savior of the Sinhalese-Buddhists go on a campaign of communalism, projecting himself as the only true anti-Eelamist? Did not he put up posters in the South as well as in Colombo, proclaiming his Karmic desire to be re-born in Sri Lanka to protect the 'motherland' from the Tigers? Did not Wijetunga try to camouflage the UNP neglect of the South by appealing to racial sentiments? Was not this crass communal line rejected outright by the Southerners, the most Sinhalese of the Sinhalese? The Southern people obviously considered economic and political issues more urgent than the patriotism which some cynic has called the last refuge of scoundrels.

Reports from Hambantota are that the UNP's campaign against the PA candidate, Mrs. Nirupama Rajapakse, revolved around her husband's Tamil ethnicity. And Hambantota voters have given their verdict unequivocally: Mrs. Rajapakse received the highest number of preferential votes in the district.





Meanwhile, the readers of Colombo's two English dailies, the *Daily News* and *The Island*, have been witnessing a fascinating reversal of roles. Reflecting the UNP's internal squabbles after the Southern defeat, the government-controlled *Daily News* has been giving prominence to prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe and Housing Minister Sirisena Cooray, at the expense of President Wijetunga. For an entire week after the election, Wijetunga's place was in the inside pages of the *Daily News* while Wickremasinghe and Cooray were repeatedly featured on the front page. Not to be outdone by the

"Anti-Wijetunga Clique", *The Island* gave generous space to Wijetunga on its front page, with reports worded in an openly pro-Wijetunga idiom.

*The Island* in a way needs to be genuinely concerned with Wijetunga's political fortunes. Wijetunga's oft-quoted dictum, 'the majority Sinhalese are a massive shady tree entangled around which are the creepers of the minorities', is borrowed word to word from the Upali Group's newspapers and their preferred columnists.

P

## POLLS IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE: THE BIG LIE

Ketheeswaran Loganathan

**T**he *London Economist*, speaking of the local government elections in the Eastern province states that "to many people's surprise, the elections on March 1st, 1994 went off fairly peacefully and the results are reckoned to be a triumph for President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga. For the first time in a decade, the Government can claim that there is some kind of civil administration in an area that has been controlled by the army."

Similarly *The Island* of the 13th of March carried the considered and expert opinion of Dr. de Costa with the caption, "Polls in Vavuniya and East — a victory for democracy."

I would imagine that all sections of the Sinhala media, irrespective of political affiliations, would have expressed glee at the fact that the Eastern Province (EP) polls symbolised the demise of Eelam!

On the whole, the Government appears to have scored a propaganda point over the international community, with the "Fifth Estate" consciously or unwittingly playing its part in this campaign.

On the other hand, the TULF and the EPRLF which boycotted the polls on the ground that this was the first step towards the de-linking of the presently merged North-East and that conditions did not exist for the holding of free and fair polls, have indicated in no uncertain terms the fraudulent nature of the polls. The so-called high turn-out of voters was, they claim, due to impersonations, the stuffing of ballot boxes and political interference by the

security forces in directly influencing the outcome of the polls. The role of the security forces was characterized by the EPRLF as a case of "militarization of the electoral process."

Even if one were to dismiss the claims of the EPRLF and the TULF as being "politically motivated," it is somewhat difficult to treat lightly the charges made by the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) which contested the polls with much enthusiasm. As M.H.M. Ashraff, the leader of the SLMC, commented in a recent interview, "it was a nightmare. In addition to the other parties contesting us we had to contend with the Sri Lanka Police Party which took a very personal interest in the election." (*The Island*, 13 March)

And certainly, the Election Commissioner's resolve never to permit a repetition of what transpired in Eravur and Kaththankuddy in the Southern Province cannot be taken lightly. To quote, "What had happened in Eravur and Kattanaduddy, at the March 1 local government polls must not take place in the south." (*The Island*, 15 March).

### Vague Interpretations

**I**t is, however, a moot point as to whether the official admission of widespread fraud and irregularities in Eravur and Kattanaduddy means a denial of misconduct and irregularities in other areas. It is my contention that it is not. On the contrary, by revealing only a **part**, one is also concealing the **rest**, hence, subjecting the **whole** to varying and vague interpretations.

So how does one interpret these contradictory claims? Are the claims of the Government a conspiracy to mislead public opinion? Or, are the claims of fraud by the Tamil

Ketheeswaran Loganathan is a politbureau member of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF).

