

# PROVINCIAL POLLS IN THE SOUTH: POINTER TO FUTURE

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**T**he victory of the opposition People's Alliance (PA) in the Southern provincial council election on March 24, has drastically changed the political mood in Sri Lanka. The PA, led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) went to the polls as the underdog, but won 32 seats of the 55 member council, as opposed to the 23 seats that the United National Party managed to secure.

While the verdict of the Southern province's electorate has irreparably damaged the UNP's image of being invincible, the results of this election have set the pattern for the outcome of more crucial Presidential and Parliamentary elections, due before the end of the year.

The most notable feature of the Southern provincial election is the voter swing in favor of the opposition. The PA's percentage share of the total votes cast is 54.6 as opposed to the UNP's 43. It is Sri Lanka's system of proportional representation (PR) that gave the UNP 23 seats. Had the results were determined by the first-past-the post system, the ruling party could get just one seat from the entire province. That sole exception is the Galle district's Balapitiya electorate, the original home-town of President Premadasa who was assassinated last year. In the Southern-most Hambantota and Matara districts, the PA made a clean sweep.

This outcome stands in sharp contrast with the results of the Provincial election held last May. The ruling coalition of opposition parties had a precarious majority of just one seat over the UNP in the council. The UNP had also won an overwhelming majority in the Hambantota district sweeping all the electorates. Now the PA has a comfortable majority of 11 seats in the Southern Province.

## Background

**T**he UNP's unexpected defeat in the Southern Province is largely its own making. Actually, the previous Council was elected to office only May last year, and if the normal course of events were allowed to take place, its term would have ended in 1998. But, the post-Premadasa UNP could not wait that long, because in May 1993 Provincial elections they lost the Southern province to the opposition People's Alliance. In that keenly contested election, the PA, led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, gained control of three provinces—Western, North-Western and Southern—which were earlier held by the UNP.

A party which had been used to enjoying a near monopolistic dominance in almost all representative institutions since 1977, the UNP could not come to terms with this loss of power. In an imperious display of its arrogance of power, the UNP leadership toppled the opposition administration in the South, last December.

A brief account of the events leading to the dissolution of the Southern Provincial Council in last December is necessary to put the UNP's defeat in proper perspective. The People's Alliance, a coalition of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Democratic United National Front (DUNF) and three Left parties, won the 55 member Council with a majority of just one seat. The same coalition won the North-Central province too, yet with a slender majority of two seats. In the more crucial Western Province, however, the Alliance comfortable majority, enabling Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the emerging heir apparent to Mrs. Bandaranaike of the SLFP, to become the Chief Minister.

The UNP leadership, politically schooled in the authoritarian and autocratic traditions of the former Presidents Jayewardene and Premadasa, could not tolerate this emergence of rival mini centers of power. Their first tactical move was to manipulate the legal procedures, by swearing in their own ex-Chief Ministers as the new Chief Ministers of the Southern and North-Western Provincial Councils, although they did not have the necessary majority in the newly elected line up. The relevant constitutional provision was for the Governor of the province to appoint as the Chief Minister the leader of the party list who commanded the majority in the Council. Since the PA was a coalition of a number of parties, the two Governors used their discretionary power to interpret this provision in such a way that the UNP, although in the minority, was the party that had obtained the highest number of seats in the two Councils. The UNP's strategy was quite transparent: to form their own administrations with the intention of 'persuading' a couple of PA councilors from each province to support the UNP.

This strategy fell apart, when the PA successfully challenged before the Appeals Court, the actions of the two Governors. The Court held that the Governors had acted illegally by swearing in the new Chief Ministers for the Southern and North-Western councils from the UNP which did not enjoy necessary majorities.

Although the intervention of the judiciary enabled the People's Alliance to form their administrations in these councils, the UNP's determination to wrest control of the



two provinces did not end there. The UNP strategists obviously decided to target the weakest link of the PA-held Provincial Councils, the South, which had just one seat majority over the UNP. Their course of action violated both legal and democratic norms of the country. In December 1993, when the Southern Council's budget for 1994 was being debated, one PA councillor was reported to be missing. As it transpired later, Wimal Fransicu, a Councillor from the Hambantota District, had been abducted, brought to Colombo and kept in private detention. Without the necessary majority to pass the Budget, the PA administration was in crisis. The newly appointed Governor of the Southern Province quickly completed the next act of the pre-scripted drama. In late December, he dissolved the Council. The PA initially considered the option of legally contesting the dissolution move of the Governor; they then decided in favour of the political option of going for fresh polls.

## Balance of Forces during the Campaign

**T**he UNP went to the polls with an unprecedented sense of confidence. On paper, the UNP had every reason to feel strong and invincible. Anura Bandaranaike, Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike's son and the National Organizer of the SLFP, had defected to the UNP just a few weeks before, and he undertook to lead the UNP campaign in Galle—most populous and crucial of the three Southern province districts. Anura Bandaranaike had also predicted the impending disintegration of the party which his father formed in 1952 and his mother has been leading since 1960. Anura's claim that 40 more SLFP MPs were waiting to follow his example of deserting the SLFP at the 'correct moment' was obviously taken quite seriously by the Wijetunga-led UNP.

Some more defections to the UNP were to follow in January and February. Gamini Dissanayake and a few of his close associates left the DUNF and obtained UNP membership in January. Dissanayake had been a prominent opposition politician ever since he and Lalith Athulathmudali led an unsuccessful attempt to impeach President Premadasa in 1991. They formed the DUNF the same year as an alternative to the UNP and worked in alliance with the SLFP, thereby giving some dynamism to anti-UNP forces. Dissanayake became the leader of the DUNF after the assassination of Athulathmudali in April, last year. The fact that the DUNF was a coalition partner of the People's Alliance's provincial administrations appeared to have made Dissanayake's return to the UNP an event with political consequences rather unfavorable to the PA.

The SLFP, the PA's main coalition partner, entered the election campaign still suffering from the shock of Anura Bandaranaike's defection. However, when the campaign assumed some momentum in February, events took a major change of direction. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Anura's sister and the Chief Minister of

the Western Province, led the PA campaign. The severe damage that Anura and the UNP had predicted for the SLFP had not only been absent; it was also becoming increasingly evident that voters in the South were rallying behind the PA. Obviously, Anura's joining the UNP was a bonanza for the SLFP. The leadership rivalry between the two Bandaranaike siblings, which had earlier crippled the SLFP, was no more. Party members who had earlier suffered years of demoralization due to the leadership crisis were again active and campaigned energetically.

The confusion that developed within the DUNF after Gamini Dissanayake's return to the UNP was to the PA's advantage. Five former Provincial Councillors, who had last year been elected on the DUNF ticket, had obtained nominations as PA candidates. The Athulathmudali faction of the DUNF, led by Lalith's widow Srimani, supported the PA while Dissanayake had promised President Wijetunga to bring 10,000 DUNFers to the UNP. The DUNF chief Minister of the North-Western Province Premachandra, a very able campaigner, stood silent throughout the campaign, indicating that Gamini Dissanayake's defection was resented by the rest of the party leadership.

## Campaign Strategies

**T**he UNP's strategy to win back the Southern province had four key elements. Firstly, it presented itself as the strongest political party in the country, having gained tested experience in running a government for seventeen consecutive years. The UNP's 'strong-party' image was constantly contrasted with the 'weak' SLFP the deputy leader of which had come to the UNP only the other day. Secondly, the UNP told the Southern electorate that voting an opposition party into power in a Provincial Council was a sheer waste of their vote since the central government was in the UNP's hands. "The spoon is in our hands. How can the PA deliver the goods?" was the rhetorical question posed before the electorate by President Wijetunga himself. In driving home the same point, Wijetunga urged the voters that he would never allow a parallel government to run any part of the country. Thirdly, the UNP launched a series of new 'development projects', including the development of the Galle harbour, extension of the railway line from Matara further South, and provision of electricity to rural areas. Fourthly, the UNP appealed to the Sinhalese nationalist sentiments, hoping to exploit the 'patriotism' of the Southern Sinhalese people. The UNP went on the Sinhala nationalist line to such an extent that in the final week of the campaign, posters were put up in the south, carrying Wijetunga's picture along with the slogan: "I shall be reborn in Sri Lanka to defeat the Eelam claim and save the motherland." Wijetunga was thus presented to the Southern Sinhalese masses as the sole saviour of the Sinhalese race.



As for the People's Alliance, the implications of this election were to be felt mostly by the SLFP, the PA's main constituent party and the traditional alternative to the UNP. Even a marginal loss to the UNP could have meant a paralyzing blow to the SLFP, creating an island-wide impression that it would not win the forthcoming Presidential and Parliamentary elections, too. Furthermore, an electoral disaster would have sealed the SLFP's future as the alternative ruling party. In fact, a group of extreme Sinhalese nationalist MPs—euphemistically called 'Anura loyalists'—were waiting for the SLFP to lose the election so that they could cross over to the UNP, with the promise of position and power in the government under D. B. Wijetunga. Such a debacle could also have enabled President Wijetunga to amend the Constitution, with the support of dissident SLFP MPs, in order to ensure the continuation of UNP rule for many more years to come.

Reorganization of its electoral machinery with a determination to win was thus the main strategic move made by the SLFP leadership during the three-month long campaign. The defection to the UNP of Anura Bandaranaike had also brought Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and a team of secondary-level leaders to the fore so that re-organization work could be done with no leadership quarrels at the top. Chandrika Kumaratunga also led the election campaign, focusing on building village and grass roots level campaign networks.

The most significant organizational achievement of the PA was the plan to counter election offenses that the UNP might attempt to commit. As it became repeatedly evident at a number of elections held during the recent past, the UNP had mastered the art of electoral malpractices to ensure its own victory. These included mass impersonation of voters, threatening and intimidation of opposition supporters on election day to prevent them from voting, gross abuse of state power by deploying loyal and politically partisan police officers to intimidate voters as well as election officials, stuffing of ballot boxes at polling centers by using violence and even introducing already stuffed ballot boxes, with the help of the police, when the ballot boxes were being transported to counting centers. The PA at this election organized its activists to exercise extreme vigilance and to take necessary counter steps at every stage of the polling on March 24, to prevent the commission of such malpractices.

## After the Election

**T**he defeat of the UNP at the hands of the Southern province voters can be seen as reflective of a national trend. The UNP is losing its grip which the former President Premadasa had restored after the end of the J. R. Jayewardene era. It is an interesting irony that the politically more astute Southern voter was given the opportunity by the UNP itself to articulate that trend in the clearest terms. What came to the surface in the South

was the acute legitimacy crisis that the seventeen-year long UNP government has accumulated. Perhaps, the UNP leadership was not prepared for such a hostile electoral verdict.

The shock apart, the UNP leadership now appears to be re-appraising its entire political strategy under D. B. Wijetunga. The Premadasa loyalists in the UNP—notably Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe and Housing Minister Sirisena Cooray, who is also the party's General Secretary—have been hinting that the defeat is largely due to Wijetunga's policy of deliberately ignoring and erasing the Premadasa legacy. Wijetunga, who came under the influence of extremist Sinhalese elements outside the UNP, totally rejected the multi-ethnic rhetoric of Premadasa and projected his own image as the sole savior of majority Sinhalese community. This no doubt marginalized the UNP from Tamil and Muslim communities in the Southern province. The UNP strategists have now realized that Wijetunga's majoritarian Sinhalese-Buddhist line will further diminish the electoral chances of the UNP at the national hustings in December.

Within a few days after the Southern debacle, the cracks at the UNP's leadership level began to widen further. Apportioning blame for the defeat appears to be a major part time of each faction of the UNP. Those who censure Wijetunga also blame his two new allies Anura Bandaranaike and Gamini Dissanayake, both of whom played a key role in the Southern campaign on behalf of Wijetunga. Bandaranaike and Dissanayake are likely to be the most prominent victims of a UNP purge if Premadasa loyalists manage to isolate Wijetunga whose presidential candidacy in December now seems to be less than assured.

The UNP's problems are at present quite complicated, because any damage control exercise is most likely to further harm the party. If the factional struggle among leaders heightens, some heads might roll; yet, such a move is highly unlikely to restore public confidence in a ruling party that is beset with a crisis of public credibility. After quarrelling for some time, all factions may decide to stay together to face the PA at the forthcoming elections. A serious re-organization of the party is realistically possible only after the outcome of presidential and parliamentary elections.

As for the People's Alliance, it cannot afford to be sitting pretty enjoying the taste of victory in the South. It presently enjoys country-wide goodwill, and the PA's task in the coming months should be to transform it into a winning tide. The Southern election campaign has shot into national prominence the PA's chief public figure, Chandrika Kumaratunga. Her personal popularity and charisma, unmatched by any other living politician in the country, may be the PA's main asset. Yet, the PA has not yet put together any program of action which it intends to implement after coming into power.