

# UNP IN THE SOUTH: WHAT WENT WRONG?

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The results of the Southern Provincial elections, certainly an important landmark in electoral politics in Sri Lanka, have some significance with long term repercussions. The purpose of this article is to examine two such significant aspects: first, the ethnic conflict that has ravaged society for the past decade and second, the social discontent that manifested itself and its impact on electoral bases.

## Ethnic Conflict and Devolution

The elections resulted from the UNP's manoeuvre to undermine a Provincial administration led by the opposition, using a method very familiar to the UNP. The events which led to the defeat of the opposition administration during the budget debate and the dissolution of the Southern Provincial Council, now popularly known as the "Fransiscu affair", raise fundamental issues about the commitment of the UNP to the system of devolution through Provincial Councils.

The intolerance of the UNP to opposition led provincial administrations became evident after the 1993 PC elections. It was only after this election that the UNP had to taste co-existence with Provincial Councils led by the opposition, enjoying the powers given to them through the 13th Amendment. During this short period, there have been several contestations of power between the Centre and the Provinces; this was specially true in the Western Province where the Council has asserted its power in crucial areas such as land and education.

The UNP that went into the Southern PC election was in no mood to tolerate another opposition dominated PC. Speeches made by the President affirmed that Provincial Councils led by the opposition would not receive financial and other support from the centre and therefore would not be able to carry out development work. In order to assert the power of the centre in what is called "development", many openings and inaugurations of such projects were made to coincide with the election campaign.

This whole campaign therefore puts into question the UNP's present attitude towards devolution. The acceptance of a system of devolution means accepting the possibility of provincial administrations governed by other parties and sharing power with them. The events preceding the PC election and the campaign itself do not reflect such an attitude on the part of the UNP.

UNP policy towards devolution seems to be an integral part of its problem with minority representation, a characteristic of the Wijetunge period. Although minority votes

in the Southern province do not have a weightage crucial to electoral results, the campaign line taken by the UNP was extremely significant. Not only did President Wijetunge keep on asking for a mandate to deal with the ethnic issue as a terrorist problem, but also the UNP campaign in certain areas employed blatantly communal tactics. This stand not only failed to sway the electorate, but also demonstrated categorically the degree of alienation between the minorities and the UNP, also shown by the studied silence of Mr. Thondaman during the campaign. This would certainly have repercussions at a national level election.

There are also the changes in the SLFP with regard to PCs and the minority question. After making the serious political blunder of not contesting the first PC elections, a coalition led by the SLFP has now captured power in three provinces, even though its hold on one is rather precarious. In electoral politics in Sri Lanka, the parties that have access to power have an undue advantage in terms of the varieties of resources needed to organize parties and contest elections. This is one of the main reasons for the difficulties faced by parties out of power, as was the case of the SLFP after 1977. The SLFP rectified this situation to some extent in 1989 when sixty seven of its members were elected to the parliament. From this time onwards, the party could enjoy access to and command over the resources that come with membership of parliament. The SLFP could have had a command over such resources and faced the last Presidential election with better organizational strength if they had achieved some power at the provincial level earlier. Provincial Councils have now become a major arena in which the SLFP can challenge the power of the central government.

In addition, the campaign in the South has forced the SLFP leadership to address the ethnic issue. Here, the role of Ms. Chandrika Kumaratunge has been prominent; in one of her interviews, she categorically said that there is an ethnic problem in Sri Lanka linked to the question of power sharing and that there is a need for a substantial degree of devolution to solve it. This position, first publicised during a meeting at Nugegoda sometime last year, is to be welcomed even though it is still not clear whether this will be the official party position in the next elections.

But more important is the realisation by the electorate that Provincial Councils provide them with an arena to counter the power of the central government. The centralised character of our state, which has worsened with the executive presidency, has been a major reason for the



development of anti-democratic tendencies and abuse of power by those at the centre. In other words, although the provincial council system emerged in response to minority struggles, these same institutions could be a major avenue for the democratisation of our political structures as a whole. If the electorate recognises this and the opposition-led councils can demonstrate this, then devolution will play a major role in the overall struggle for democracy. The Southern PC elections could be a turning point in this process.

## UNP and the Southern Province

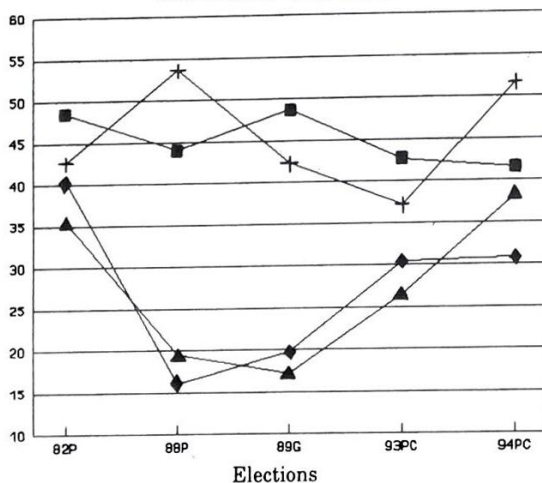
The very fact that UNP could be defeated and also the margin of the defeat is significant in understanding the general mood of the electorate, specially in this election year. However, most analysis tends to concentrate on finding reasons for this defeat. It is as if the UNP defeat in the Southern Province is something out of the ordinary and therefore there is a need to explain it.

The table below and the graph which follows summarise electoral statistics for the Southern Province at the Presidential Elections 1982 and 1988, General Elections 1989 and Provincial Council Elections of 1993 and 1994. The data compares the UNP vote and the combined vote polled by the SLFP/PA including the left parties - LSSP, SLMP and USA; the JVP and NSSP votes have not been added due the independent stand they take in electoral and other politics.

**Electoral Statistics - Southern Province**

	% Total Polled		% Total Vote	
	UNP	SLFP+Left*	UNP	SLFP+Left*
1982 Presidential	48.5	42.7	40.4	35.6
1988 Presidential	44.2	53.7	16.0	19.5
1989 General	48.7	42.4	19.8	17.2
1993 Provincial	42.7	37.3	30.4	26.6
1994 Provincial	41.7	51.7	30.8	38.2

**Southern Province**



■ % Polled-UNP + % Polled-SLFP+L ◆ % Vote-UNP ▲ % Vote-SLFP+L

As shown by this data, the Presidential election of 1982 was the last credible performance of the UNP in the South. This was a victory of the former President Jayewardene. The situation was much more difficult for the UNP during the Presidential election of 1988 and the vote of the combined SLFP/Left was higher. In the general election that followed, the UNP performed better; however, this was in the immediate wake of Premadasa's victory.

Five years later, the UNP again faced the Southern electorate. This time the complicating factor was the DUNF which tried to emerge as a third party, presenting itself as an alternative "democratic force", although its origins and social base lay in personality and perhaps caste-based clashes within the UNP. As is now clear, the DUNF captured votes from the opposition base rather than from the UNP. Fortunately, by the time of the PC election of 1994, the true nature of DUNF and its crude opportunistic politics had been exposed, leading to a formidable opposition victory.

What these figures show is the battle for electoral supremacy in the South, where the UNP has had difficulties in maintaining an electoral base; the tradition of Left politics in the South and the more recent challenge of the JVP has posed these difficulties. In the 1982 Presidential Election for example, when the JVP was last allowed to participate in electoral politics, it polled 7.5% of the vote in the province. The violent campaign of the JVP to prevent people from voting during the 1988 Presidential Elections and 1989 General Elections brought down the polling rate of the province to 36.3% and 40.7% respectively. The killings and disappearances which followed would have had a terrific social impact in the area. This too could not have been beneficial to the UNP.

Therefore in the South we have an area of the country that has not been amenable to UNP politics and its right of centre ideology. Such a tradition of anti-UNP electoral politics extends to the adjoining Kalutara district as well to some extent to the Gampaha District in the north of Colombo.

## Contrasting Trends

These electoral trends on the South-West coast line districts can be contrasted with trends in less urbanised Kandyan areas, or dry zone districts like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. In both these areas, the UNP seems to have built a better electoral base which, as can be shown with electoral statistics, it has been able to maintain. The contribution of these districts to the total island wide UNP vote is usually higher than their weightage in the total registered votes. There have been only two elections during which some of these set patterns were altered: the first was the Bandaranaike victory in 1956 when the UNP electoral base in Kandyan as well



as dry zone areas was affected and second, in the 1977 election victory of Jayewardene when the SLFP/Left base of the South-West coast also went in the direction of the UNP.

At present the Provincial councils of the South-Western coastal districts with a tradition of anti-UNP politics are in the hands of SLFP led Peoples' Alliance. If the SLFP had decided to contest provincial elections with such an alliance in 1987, probably such a trend would have been visible even at that time.

## Two Conclusions

Two important conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis. First, since the opposition has won in an area that has been not been traditionally easy for the UNP, one must be careful not to assume that there is an anti-UNP wave in the country as a whole. In other words, the trends in the South cannot be mechanically extended to the rest of the country.

On the other hand, the electoral results of the South show the presence of a social base that can be mobilised against the right of centre ideology and policies of the UNP. Areas like the South where the UNP has now faced a significant electoral defeat are characterised by features such as a) high population density b) a shift from agriculture as the main means of livelihood since small holder agriculture is not profitable c) a greater dependence on labour for income d) high unemployment of educated youth looking for formal sector jobs e) spread of urban values and f) a greater intensity in political competition.

The post '77 policies would have had a mixed effect in these areas. While they would have benefitted from some of the growth sectors such as tourism, industries in general and export oriented ones (in export processing zones) in particular, these are also areas which pose development problems difficult to resolve. The most important issue appears to be what to do with the population which finds it difficult to make a living from agriculture. The growth rates in other sectors have not been strong enough to absorb the numbers thrown out of

agriculture and there is a large unmet demand for formal sector employment specially from the educated youth.

In addition, dependency on wages means fixed incomes and a situation where such phenomena as the cost of living are acutely felt. Its high population density and the pressures on land generated by development projects are also bound to create very contradictory social processes. The election results do show discontent stemming from the impact of development policies.

## Opposition's Dilemma

The opposition needs to find concrete answers to these socio-economic problems. However, these answers can neither be a return to pre-1977 policies nor a replication of UNP policies. While rushing to allay the fears of the business community, the opposition should remember that some of the reasons for their victory in the South are linked to the social impact of policies followed recently.

The intense political competition in these areas also means the presence of a tradition of resistance to violations of democratic and human rights. This was amply demonstrated at the time of the Southern PC elections whose result is a manifestation of the anger against the series of

anti-democratic measures adopted by the UNP to remain in power at any cost. None of the recent additions to President Wijetunge's "ambalama", could prevent this expression. Democracy and democratic rights are major issues that need the attention of political parties.

Finally, the UNP was defeated by a coalition of forces which has always been necessary for this purpose. Changes within the SLFP and the gravitation of UNP's natural allies into its fold can again polarise parties and bring back policy debates into Sri Lankan politics. This would be a welcome change from the crude opportunism witnessed recently, where politicians change parties not on a principled basis, but merely for power and advancement.

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