

NOTES AND COMMENTS

More on Elections and Violence

The widespread violence which occurred on January 25, the day of the North-western provincial polls, has generated a great deal of outrage in the country.

The degree of malpractice reported on the election day itself was so high that there were calls, even before the results were announced, for the invalidation of the entire election. These calls were made on the grounds that the voters did not get an opportunity to exercise their franchise in a free and fair atmosphere. Independent election monitors, CMEV, PAFFAREL and MFFE, issued statements in the evening of January 25 to this effect. Catholic Bishops of Puttlam and Kurunegala were reported to have joined the call for declaring the election null and void. Understandably, the UNP, which lost the election, also wanted the election cancelled.

In the engaged public discussion on why so many election offences were committed on the Election Day, a number of explanations seem to emerge. One point that has been confirmed by many reports is the fact that the PA candidates, their supporters and their election workers were involved in these acts of serious malpractice. The question then is why did the politicians and their supporters of the PA regime so openly, so blatantly and on such a large scale violated the laws and principles of free and fair elections.

The explanation coming from President Kumaratunga suggests that there has been sort of a conspiracy within the PA to tarnish her image. The conspirators, according to this theory, may have deployed their own men on the elections day to commit election offences ostensibly on behalf of the PA so that the legitimacy of PAs victory could be placed in doubt. An angry President Kumaratunga vowed in her Independence Day speech on February 4th to punish those of the PA who would be found responsible for violence. To place President Kumaratunga's position in some perspective, one may recall the fact that she personally led the North-western election campaign. However, there is hardly anybody who would enthusiastically welcome her explanation.

Another theory that attempts to explain why the PA activists resorted to election offences relates to a mood of panic among the PA strategists. This theory, put forward by some who are knowledgeable of the ground situation in the North-western province during the election, goes on the following lines. The PA, to begin with, had a chance of winning the election with a slim majority. However, there was some apprehension about the UNPs game plan on election day. The PA campaigners thought, according to this theory, that the UNP, with its well-organized network of the political underworld, might try to stuff the ballot boxes in the evening, particularly after about three in the afternoon. Or else, the UNP might have tried to organize impersonation of voters at every

polling booth throughout the day in a clinically systematic manner. The PA campaigners thus thought that the UNP had a well-organized, subtle plan to rig the election in its favor. Then, as this theory goes, the PA activists decided to execute their own game plan no sooner than the polling started in the morning. Reports received by the election monitors lend some credence to this explanation. At some polling centers, PA activists had come as early as nine in the morning to stuff the ballot boxes. If this theory is correct, the PA activists proved that they were not professional experts in vote rigging as were their counterparts in the UNP in the past. The UNP, according to some observers, had in the past put into operation subtler methods to rig elections than the singularly amateurish game plan of the PA.

This theory further goes on to say that during elections conducted when the UNP was in power, 'booth capturing' was done with some cynical finesse, that is, only when the voting was about to close. There was also a system of well-planned multiple-voting whereby one voter would register himself/herself in more than one electoral division and cast the multiple votes in an extremely mobile fashion. Similarly, the UNP campaign strategists would have carefully identified voters who were dead or had migrated abroad and then deployed their own men and women to simply go to the polling booths to perform the party duty. The ardent PA campaigners in the North-western provincial election did not seem to have acquired this sophistication in electoral cynicism. They were open, blatant, simply transparent and just obvious.

The theory of the UNP's sophistication in rigging elections is not a credible one. It de-emphasizes the way in which the UNP used open violence to intimidate opposition voters and to terrorize voters, election officials, opposition candidates and their polling agents. The UNP's strategy when, it was in power, was a deadly synthesis of subtle methods of rigging and open violence.

A third explanation is centered on the phenomenon of preferential votes. In Sri Lanka's system of proportional representation, voters can mark their preferences for three candidates and the final list of winners is chosen according to the order of preferential votes which each candidate in the party list would poll. Now, how might this system of preferential voting have contributed to polls rigging in the North-western province? As this particular theory goes, there has been an intense competition among PA candidates to get high preferential votes. The objective for high preferential votes for individual candidates was a fairly simple one. Once the PA won the provincial council, those with greater number of votes could not only get themselves elected to the Council, but also vie for ministerial positions in the provincial administration.

The more plausible explanation of what happened in the north-western province could be a combination of all these theories and

their variations described above. But the point still remains that in Sri Lanka's electoral malpractices, the ruling party has always been the main culprit. The PA has no excuse whatsoever to justify what its men did in Kurunegala and Puttalam during the election campaign and on the elections day. Moreover, the extent to which the PA misused public resources during this election campaign was staggering. Any visitor to the North-Western province in the peak of the campaign would have noticed with dismay that hundreds of government vehicles as well as government employees had been mobilized there for weeks. Millions were just spent on the so-called development projects to entice the voter. Democracy rests on the principle of free choice not on coercion. If coercion worked during the 1994 elections, the PA would have remained in the opposition for another term.

Retrieving the Moral High Ground?

The reverberations of the PA's electoral misdeeds in Wayamba on January 25 were felt on February 4th, when the government celebrated the 51st anniversary of Sri Lanka's independence. President Kumaratunga devoted most of her speech to an attempt to reclaim some degree of moral legitimacy for her administration. Directly referring to the allegations of electoral violence against her own party men and women she said: If some persons from our camp, have indulged in any actions that are contrary to the pledges we have given our people-even if it has occurred only once in four and a half years, I pledge here and now, that my Government and our political party will take the strictest action against all such persons".

The PA has a real problem concerning its claims to political morality, as clearly demonstrated during the election campaign of the North-western province. No PA leader has so far regretted what has happened. Instead, the PA leaders, particularly Ministers S. B. Dissanayake, Mangala Samaraweera and D.M. Jayaratne have tried to justify PA's own misdeeds by recalling what they perceive as greater misdeeds committed by the UNP when it was in power. And indeed, PA spokesmen have repeatedly tried to link the exercise of condemning election violence to a hidden agenda of the UNP, even suggesting that the election monitoring had been funded by the UNP. As the statement released by the Catholic Bishop of Anuradhapura in connection with Independence Day stated it cogently, the question today is not who initiated or perpetuated election violence. "No one has a right to commit evil on the flimsy excuse that others have done so before", said the Bishop.

It is quite clear that the PA, which was voted into power in 1994 on a platform of political morality has irretrievably lost its ethical credentials for political leadership. The North-western provincial election now appears to be a real turning point in the PA's politics of democratic governance.

UNP's as the Wronged Party?

When the PA got its own image tarnished in Wayamba, the UNP probably thought that it could transform its electoral defeat into political gain. It initially demanded the invalidation of the election. Then the UNP also tried to organize protest campaigns. The strange thing about the UNP is that it has not managed to get much public sympathy for its claim to be the wronged party in the North-western provincial election.

Indeed, it would be extremely difficult for the UNP to claim the privilege of being a victim of election violence. Among many contributions made by the UNP to the decline of Sri Lanka's democratic political culture is the inauguration and institutionalization of electoral violence. While the UNP in the 1980's perfected the art of rigging elections, it also used violence with impunity during election campaigns. The ugly phenomenon of post-election violence came to a culmination during the UNP rule after 1977. The UNP also used state power to win elections. Moreover, the extreme polarization of regime-opposition relations, which even today leads to much of electoral violence, is largely the making of the UNP when it was in power. Although it may sound cynical, one should still say that the UNP in the opposition today is reaping the bitter harvest of the seeds of a particularly undesirable kind of politics which it sowed in the recent past.

But the UNP under Ranil Wickramasinghe has not disowned that past of the UNP. And the Sri Lankan electorate does not seem to have erased its political memories of the eighties either. The UNP's front line leaders, both at national and provincial levels, are the same crop of politicians who had practiced, with great conviction, the same electoral crimes, which are now practiced by the PA politicians. This, in a way, has enabled some PA politicians to make the rather ridiculous argument that if the UNP did it, why can't the PA do it. A very dangerous and sinister attitude, we think.

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