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

SRI LANKA AFTER THE ELECTIONS: MANAGING UNCERTAINTY

Marking a decisive political setback to President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Sri Lanka's electorate on December 5 has voted her opposition into a position of a majority in parliament. The United National Front (UNF), led by the United National Party and its ally Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, now commands a clear majority – 114 seats – in the 225-member legislature. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of Tamil parties led by the Tamil United Liberation Front, has won 15 seats in the Northern and Eastern provinces. The TNA, bitterly opposed to Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA), is likely to support the UNF in regime formation, although it may not become a formal partner of the new government.

As for the PA, the verdict of the electorate is truly devastating, although it gained 77 seats, only 19 less than what it had in the last parliament. These numbers do not indicate the real proportions of the PA's predicament. People of 21 electoral districts, out of a total of 22, have rejected the PA. Only in rural Moneragala has the ruling party managed to get a district majority. The PA's loss is island-wide, cutting across urban, rural as well as multi-ethnic electorates. The JVP has obviously made its electoral gains at the expense of the PA, eating into the latter's voter base. In a majority of districts, the JVP, in alliance with which the PA fought the election, has increased its votes, obtaining altogether 16 seats, six more than the number it held in the last parliament. The PA's ally in the North, EPDP, has managed just two seats.

In the North and East, of course, the EPDP could not gain much from its alliance with the PA.

In terms of Sri Lanka's constitution, President Kumaratunga will have no option but to invite her parliamentary opponents to form the new government. But, the emerging scenario is obviously complicated. The new situation demands from the two bitter rivals – Chandrika Kumaratunga and her PA on one side and Ranil Wickramasinghe and his UNP on the other – to work together and to practice what the French call 'political cohabitation.' President Kumaratunga has nearly five more years in this second term of her office. According to the Constitution, she is the head of the state, head of the government, head of the cabinet and the commander-in-chief of armed forces. Constitutionally, she is responsible for defence and security. But, Ranil Wickramasinghe, the new Prime Minister, would certainly like to hold two key portfolios which are at present held by Kumaratunga, Defence and Finance. Unless a modality of cooperation is found between the constitutionally powerful President and the new Prime Minister enjoying a clear popular mandate, Sri Lanka might plunge into a serious power struggle between the President and Parliament. Signs at the moment are that a framework of cooperation is not impossible.

The way in which President Kumaratunga ran the parliamentary election campaign gave the impression that she was the sole

Pravāda

Vol. 7 No. 7, 2001

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Pravada is published monthly by:

Pravada Publications
425/15, Thimbirigasyaya Road,
Colombo 5. Sri Lanka.
Telephone. 501339, Fax. 595563
E-mail: ssa@eureka.lk
web:www.skyberlink.com/ssa

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs.	300
By Air mail:		
South Asia/Middle East	US \$	28
S.E. Asia/Far East	US \$	28
Europe/Africa	US \$	30
Americas/Pacific countries	US\$	40

candidate of the PA. In fact, the PA campaign was so highly personalized by her that she willy nilly turned the parliamentary election into something like a referendum, a confidence vote, on her own personal political credibility. Now, of course, the outcome of the elections is a clear no-confidence vote on President Kumaratunga. This has obviously weakened her constitutionally powerful position as the President vis-à-vis the Prime Minister, whose formal position and powers remain rather obscure in the constitution.

What does the election outcome indicate? Why did the PA suffer such a setback? A combination of several factors appears to have eroded the PA's electoral base island-wide. The UNP, after ten successive electoral defeats since 1993, perhaps won despite its own lack of a vision or a reform agenda strong enough to energize or

repoliticize an electorate. The UNP-led UNF perhaps won because of the incumbent PA. The question then is not why the UNF won, but how the PA managed to lose. Among issues that contributed to the PA's downfall are ones connected with the economy, the ethnic conflict and political reforms.

Caught up in world recession and a civil war that devours nearly one-third of the annual government expenditure, the Sri Lankan economy has been in a bad shape for the past couple of years. Yet, economic difficulties which people have been experiencing provide too simple an explanation of why there is so much disenchantment with a regime that had commanded widespread public support and political legitimacy. The PA leadership's political blindness to its own incapacity to manage the economy obviously led to the erosion of the public confidence which President Kumaratunga and her government had enjoyed for many years.

The mistake of the PA government has been its insensitivity to social consequences of economic mismanagement that has resulted in high inflation, rising cost of living, withdrawal of subsidies and dwindling employment opportunities for the young. As the election outcome clearly indicates, almost all social classes—from urban entrepreneurial groups to the rural peasantry, from young stock-brokers in Colombo to plantation workers in the hill country – felt that the PA government offered no vision for economic recovery and well-being. True to the style of governance under globalization, the PA government did not show any real concern for the victims of its own public policy mismanagement either until after the parliament was dissolved. Actually, in terms of economic performance, Sri Lanka's past two years under the Kumaratunga administration have been a period of stagnation and decay. Meanwhile, the Kumaratunga regime had also degenerated into an uncaring outfit run by a coterie of self-styled meritocrats, who were totally insulated from the institutions of parliamentary governance as well as the public pressure.

On the ethnic conflict, the Kumaratunga administration's policy during the past two to three years has been quite erratic and inconsistent. Interspersed with the rhetoric of peace and a policy of war, Kumaratunga's contradictory strategy could not fully utilize the assistance offered by the international community to resume negotiation with the LTTE. Kumaratunga allowed the Norwegian mediation effort to go to waste while moving towards a Sinhalese hardline position on the ethnic question. When the election time rhetoric of insecure Sinhalese nationalism was allowed to define the state policy towards the minorities, Kumaratunga could only ensure the breaking up of the multi-ethnic coalition that she herself forged in 1993-94 with vision and foresight. Her rhetorical shift to the Sinhalese electorate at the expense of the minorities began during the last parliamentary election campaign of October 2000. But in the election campaign just concluded, the Kumaratunga regime's betrayal of its own agenda of pluralism, political reform and peace has been so blatant that only the party faithfuls in Sinhalese society, numbering a little over three million, appear to have voted for the PA. Chandrika Kumaratunga's loss of political credibility among ethnic and religious minorities in so drastic a fashion is indeed one of the modern political tragedies in Sri Lanka.

On the question of political reforms, PA's record has been one of dismal failure. The UNP is also largely responsible for the PA's predicament in this regard. The UNP, sitting in the opposition, deliberately undermined Kumaratunga's constitutional reform initiative, by denying her the necessary parliamentary majority. But Kumaratunga's inability to forge an understanding with the opposition and her reluctance to fully utilize the massive mandate she got in 1994 for peace and constitutional reform are major dimensions of the failure of her presidency.

After seven years in power with no significant political reform initiative succeeding, the Kumaratunga administration gradually lost its political credibility in the country. The regime itself became more

interested in staying in power rather than reworking a vision, agenda or programme. Seven years in office and politically exhausted, the PA regime allowed its key players to freely indulge in corruption, abuse of power and self-deception. The Sinhalese racist electoral platform on which President Kumaratunga and her Prime Minister fought the parliamentary election this time is just symbolic of the ultimate degeneration of a political formation that has had so much promise and potential for democratic reform. The PA's main election theme paradoxically went against the findings of all the pre-election public opinion polls that indicated an overwhelming support in Sinhalese society for peace and a negotiated settlement with the LTTE. To make the irony worse, the polls also came out with the startling finding that the people had greater trust in President Kumaratunga and her PA than others in bringing peace through negotiations. The fate of the Kumaratunga administration is not a theme unique to Sri Lanka. The two Benazir Bhutto regimes in Pakistan, the Sheik Hasina regime in Bangladesh and the first Koirala administration in Nepal suffered the same fate of coming into power with great hope and leaving office under popular disenchantment.

For the new UNF government led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, the first and immediate challenge would be working out a framework of cohabitation with President Kumaratunga. In case a framework of working together by the two adversaries fails to emerge, a power struggle between the executive and legislative branches of the state would be inevitable. It will also generate a constitutional crisis of severe magnitude. Perhaps, the wish of the electorate as expressed in the parliamentary election just concluded is for the two branches of the state, two opposing parties and two political adversaries to work together in some form of a 'national government.' But the key issue would be: a national government under whose terms? Fresh from a massive electoral victory, the UNF may not be in a mood to let go its first opportunity to define the terms of political collaboration with the adversary.

For the UNP, other, longterm challenges are quite daunting. Sri Lanka's economy, in a context of world economic downturn, is not in good shape. The rising defence expenditure as well as the generous economic relief packages which the PA initiated during the election campaign, are likely to further distort the macro-

economic fundamentals. However, the UNP has the advantage of the fact that the business class is a close ally. With rising business confidence, the Colombo stock market may flourish, at least for a while. Foreign direct investments are also likely to increase. Effective macro-economic management with greater liberalization of the economy will be the UNP's strength. But, the present UNP is not committed to a vision of social justice or redistributory programmes. With its clinical, managerial and purely entrepreneurial approach to economic as well as political aspects of governance, the new UNF administration, led by the UNP, is less likely to tolerate political resistance and social dissent.

The other key area to watch under a new UNF regime is how it would handle the ethnic conflict and the LTTE. In the election campaign, the UNP adopted an accommodationist stand towards the LTTE. It also came out with the idea of an interim administration for the North-East while committing itself to negotiations with Tigers. The fact that the Tiger-backed TNA has fifteen seats in the new parliament constitutes an entirely new dimension in the political equation concerning the ethnic conflict and the LTTE. The TNA is likely to play the role of a parliamentary arm, or at least the voice, of the LTTE, while pushing for a cease-fire, international mediation and negotiation. This will indeed constitute a very complex and intractable scenario in which the political maturity and sagacity of Ranil Wickramasinghe and his advisors would really be tested. If the UNF regime really wants to pursue talks with the Tigers, a prior understanding with the PA would be absolutely essential. Otherwise, space may be left wide open for a PA-JVP 'patriotic' alliance to take shape in opposition to the materialization of what has already been described as "Elephant-Tiger secret pact" to "divide the motherland."

A new government under a sitting President from the Opposition. A new government with no clear agenda for reforms. A new opposition with the potential to radicalize Sinhalese nationalism. A scenario of political uncertainty that can generate a constitutional crisis. Many Sri Lankans voters may not have reflected on these issues on December 5 when the majority of them decided to bring the opposition back to power. Now of course the time has come for Sri Lanka's divided ruling elite to engage in sober reflection and careful action.

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The accursed power which stands on Privilege
(and goes with Women, and Champagne and Bridge)
Broke—and Democracy resumed her reign:
(Which goes with Bridge and Women and Champagne).

Hilaire Belloc

(Written during an early 20th Century British election)