

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Elections and Democratic Politics

Elections in Sri Lanka are occasions for public celebration. In a society where party politics has penetrated deeply into even remote villages in far away districts, electoral participation has consistently been very high. Sixty three years of universal franchise and forty six years of parliamentary politics have created a political culture in which Western style democratic institutions have become thoroughly indigenised - so indigenized that clannish violence and primordial preferences are neatly integrated into the practice of making political choices at the market place of democracy! In any event, mass politics defies any pure theory of representative democracy.

However degenerate our politics of representative democracy may be, the fundamental point still remains that the masses are quite alert and vigilant when they are called upon to make their individual choices from among a variety of agents of governance. It is in this backdrop that we wish to invoke some 'purely theoretical' ideas concerning the political meaning of elections in order to see how 'making political choices' can be made relevant to the more contemporary project of democratic renewal.

Elections in a system of representative government entail something more than the choice of a government by the people using their free will. Even the very principle of 'elected government' is based on the larger concept that the relationship between the people and the government is one of 'trusteeship' or 'contract'. In the contractarian theory of government, then, elections accord society a periodic and regular opportunity to re-negotiate the terms and conditions of the 'trust' or the 'contract' that binds the rulers and the ruled in governance.

It is in this intrinsic value of elections as moments of re-negotiating the terms of the social contract that democratic forces can find a new space. But the problem is that we seldom, rather never, assert our own right to actively negotiate with agents of government when they come to us, presenting us with the conditions and terms that they have drafted for negotiation. Our problem is that we have given an absolutely mundane label for these draft contracts —election manifestoes—; and we have also so routinised our own role in the negotiation of terms that we are hardly aware of what we actually can and should accomplish in the negotiation process, as citizens and as one of the two parties to the contract. In fact, we have allowed the other party—the professional politicians—to neutralise our own contractual obligations to ourselves. In short, we have over the years re-interpreted the

entire theory and practice of representative democracy in a mode of self-negation.

All radical critics of parliamentary democracy, from Vladimir Lenin to Sandero Luminosos and their counterparts in our own country, have missed one fundamental point in bourgeois democracy; the latter, unlike any other political system which humankind has invented since the collapse of direct democracy in ancient Greece, makes the citizen an active agent in the making, un-making and modification of the entity called 'government.' It is true that the ruling classes, well-organized and infinitely more conscious of their own interests and stakes, have almost everywhere made democracy a sham. Yet, that is no good reason for us to abdicate our own rights and our claim to legitimate space in a democratic ambience. Renewal of democracy thus entails the retrieval of our space to constantly and actively participate in public life, including the business of governance.

To concretise the above perspectives in relation to our own experience of the parliamentary election of August 1994, how many bodies of our democratic civil society have made their demands on political parties so that our own concerns—democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, gender issues— are not ignored by those who claim to represent social interests? A few organisations, notably human rights and women's groups, have taken some initiatives in this direction, yet there still exists the need for co-ordinated attempts by democratic civil society to decisively intervene in election-time political debates. Meanwhile, chauvinistic forces appear to be the most assertive in pressing their claims on political parties.

The practice in almost all representative democracies is to let the leadership of political parties formulate policies supposedly for the people and on behalf of the people, while people stay away from that process as if policy matters are not in their realm of expertise or capability. This has given an undue advantage to political and bureaucratic power elites to manipulate democracy, to make false and extravagant promises at elections, or to totally turn their back on the very promises they had made in order to come into power. In a way, one paradox of representative democracy is that democratic forces either ignore, or take for granted, or even react passively to, democratic opportunities available within the framework of liberal democracy.

It is indeed true that the election process has been captured by corrupt political elements, criminals and gangsters, who have realised the utility of transforming a means of democratic choice and governance into a



mechanism in power politics. But, to dismiss the intrinsic democratic efficacy of elections, as many radical rejectionists did in the past, merely because of its narrow politicisation and criminalisation is not prudent. The fault is not with the electoral principle *per se*, but with the way in which it has been put to use and misuse.

Democratic renewal would then mean more than the citizens merely exercising their franchise when they are called upon to make their choice of government. It entails continuous political activity in civil society in the form of intervening, or ideally taking leadership in, policy debates, campaigning for policy choices that are best suited for social progress, and maintaining constant vigilance concerning governments which are by nature notorious for making societies less and less tolerable and liveable.

Gender in the Campaign

In Sri Lanka's electoral politics, the UNP has always had an edge over the opposition in actual campaigning. A well-organised party, the UNP can boast of a host of campaign wizards who had produced results in the past. Under the leadership of the JR-Premadasa combination, ex-media man Ananda Tissa de Alwis produced one of the most effective election campaigns in 1977. And the UNP won handsomely in that year, grabbing five-sixth of the total number of parliamentary seats.

This year, the UNP's election campaign is directed by Wickrama Weerasuriya, a top bureaucrat during the Jayewardene dispensation. Weerasuriya's name, for good or bad, has mainly been associated with not so clean campaign tactics of the UNP in the past. Weerasuriya heads a well-oiled and well-resourced campaign machinery for the UNP.

A set of posters put up by the UNP during the first round of the campaign, caricatured both Mrs. Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumaratunga in a manner that can be described as singularly vulgar. Ever since Mrs. Bandaranaike entered politics in the early sixties, the UNP's election campaigns have resorted to gendered vulgarity of the most distasteful kind.

It is remarkable that men in politics appear to feel it so natural to vulgarize the female body, whenever a woman is the target of their political polemics. At the presidential elections of 1988, Mrs. Hema Premadasa, the wife of the UNP's Presidential candidate, was the victim of a particularly lewd campaign, assiduously carried out by men in the opposition. Similarly, during the Southern Provincial election campaign in March, Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunga was particularly targeted by her opponents, including her own brother, not only because of her politics, but also because she was a woman. Only a few weeks ago Kumaratunga disclosed at a press briefing that the UNP's 'dirty tricks department' had printed a poster with

a nude picture of a woman and her (Kumaratunga's) head super-imposed on it.

Ethnic Question: the Fringe at the Center

The ethnic question has taken a rather intriguing turn in the election campaign: other than vague and general proclamations about a solution, the two major camps have adopted an evasive attitude by merely saying that they would solve the problem. Meanwhile, some extreme nationalists in the Sinhala and Tamil communities who have entered the electoral contest, have brought the problem to the center of their political and propaganda agenda. Messrs. Kumar Ponnambalam of the ACTC and Dinesh Gunawardena of the MEP are out to catch Tamil and Sinhalese votes respectively, purely on communalist grounds.

The manifesto that is most likely to disappoint hopes is that of the People's Alliance. Now effectively led by moderate and accommodative Chandrika Kumaratunga, the PA does not promise the minorities at this election any thing other than a commitment to a political solution, and 'real devolution' through new 'administrative units.' Even this vague stand is prefaced by the formulation, "safeguarding the rights of the majority Sinhalese community." In some interviews, Ms. Chandrika Kumaratunga has spoken of redrawing the boundaries of the Northern province so that it includes most areas inhabited by Tamils and of giving enhanced powers to such a unit. But we have yet to see this adopted as a specific element of SLFP or PA policy in resolving the ethnic conflict.

This is in contrast to the Alliances Manifesto in 1988 which had a definite set of proposals geared towards a political solution.

The fear of propounding and advocating a concrete proposals has beset both parties. The fear probably arises from an exaggerated notion of the strength of the Sinhala nationalist lobby; this lobby is no doubt well publicised - it has its very articulate spokespersons and ample space in many Sinhala newspapers and magazines - but its actual strength is likely to be small. It is to be hoped that this will be revealed by what happens to the MEP, joined now by many of the rabid Sinhala intelligentsia, in the coming elections.

It was and remains the major tragedy of our political life that the two main parties have, time and time again, shirked their responsibility to evolve a lasting solution to the ethnic problem. Fear of each other, fear of ethnic chauvinism, concern with electoral advantage, have all contributed to this tragedy.

Meanwhile, the PA's capacity to take a bold initiative to solve the ethnic question will depend almost entirely on Chandrika Kumaratunga. In a campaign advertisement, she has stated what no other SLFPer—including her own mother—would dare say: "It is still possible to free our-

selves from backward and narrow attitudes and to end the present fratricidal war by means of a political framework where the Sinhalese, the Tamils, the Muslims and all other communities are allowed to maintain their identities and where all communities can live as equals." One hopes that these views will inform and constitute SLFP policy.

Policy Coalescence

One of the most amusing episodes in the run up to August elections is the debate between the UNP and the SLFP about "Manifesto Plagiarism". The *Sunday Observer*, now turned even more blatantly UNP's propaganda organ, carried as its main news item a few Sunday's ago, that the UNP was offering the country a new constitutional package. The "package", which raised many a political eye brow, promised abolition of the Executive Presidential system, return to parliamentary democracy, setting up of a permanent Commission on Bribery and Corruption, a Nepalese style Constitutional Council to make important public service appointments, judicial review of legislation and many more. Those who knew the UNP's thinking on all these issues were totally taken aback by this sudden and drastic change of political heart in the UNP.

There was, however, a catch. Among those who were familiar with the ideas as well as the English literary style of one prominent SLFPer, Professor. G. L. Pieris, the original authorship of this "constitutional package" document was not in doubt. But, the still more baffling question was why was the UNP claiming credit for a package designed by a political opponent. The puzzle was not to remain a puzzle for too long. The next day's

papers carried a statement issued by Professor Pieris to the effect that the UNP had stolen the SLFP's policy document. At a press conference, Professor Pieris re-iterated the charge that the UNP's act of announcing the constitutional package was sheer plagiarism and an act of deception.

In the ensuing debate, the UNP took up the position that someone in the SLFP "Think Tank", headed by Professor Pieris and entrusted with the task of formulating the SLFP's policy papers, had passed it on to the UNP.

As some independent political observers in Colombo believe, the fact that the UNP had obtained, or been given, a copy of the SLFP's policy document is undisputable. It may be the case, they argue, that the Dirty Tricks Department—or to put it in the sanitized language, the media campaign unit—of the UNP had decided to publish an excerpted version of it as their own policy statement on Constitutional reforms.

Notwithstanding these rumblings about manifestoes, a remarkable common factor in the policy positions of the UNP and the PA is their commitment to free market economic reforms. The move towards economic policy coalescence has actually emanated from the PA which until a few months ago stood for statist economic policies. What the PA now offers is a 'genuinely free' open economy — a level playing ground for everyone — without corruption, cronyism and victimisation. Corruption under the UNP's 'open economy' has reached such gigantic proportions that Chandrika Kumaratunga's promise of a 'corruption free, free economy' stands out as a major reform proposal. **P**

Voice

Voice in my head,
Chanting, "Kisses. Bread.
Prove yourself. Fight.Shove.
Learn. Earn.Look for love."

Drown a lesser voice.
Silent now of choice:
"Breathe in peace, and be
Still, for once, like me."

VIKRAM SETH