

Another fact that lay behind the violence of the campaign needs to be mentioned. The main contenders at these elections were a party which had been in power for seventeen consecutive years and an alliance which had been out of power for the same long period; the fact that this ruling party had used its power with arrogance and intolerance during this long period added to the increasing tension in the campaign. It appears that in many areas, UNP activists had exercised violence as a campaign tactic, in order to re-establish their weakened authority and control. Most of the political murders during this campaign have been allegedly committed by UNP activists, suggesting that violence, resulting in manslaughter, has certainly become a campaign tactic.

Finally, the peculiarity of party politics in Sri Lanka tends to exacerbate conflicts, leading to widespread violence. Sri Lanka

has a well-developed political party system. Ironically, however, the penetration of party politics and party loyalties into all areas of social life has produced negative consequences as well. Apart from existing ethnic, caste and other social divisions, communities are also sharply divided and polarized according to party identities and affiliations. These divisions tend to become more acute at times of parliamentary or presidential elections when political competition centers on either retaining or winning anew governmental power.

It is also a significant fact that election violence this year was generally heaviest and murderous in certain electoral districts - Puttalam, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Matale, Ratnapura - where leading UNP politicians had been associated with acts of political violence over the past years.

C.A.

SRI LANKA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Jayadeva Uyangoda

The promise made by the Opposition People's Alliance to end the United National Party's seventeen-year rule became a reality on August 19 when Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the Deputy Leader of the PA, took her oaths as Prime Minister before President D. B. Wijetunga at the auspicious time of 10. 10 in the morning. When Mrs. Kumaratunga and her twenty two member Cabinet were being sworn in, the atmosphere at the President's office was informal and calm, while the jubilant supporters of the PA, watching at home the long-awaited moment of triumph on television, were busy lighting fire crackers.

When the elections for the tenth parliament of Sri Lanka were held on August 16, 1994, predictions about the outcome were varied and contradictory. While some observers anticipated a comfortable victory for the PA, an alliance of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and four smaller Left-wing parties, others foresaw a hung-parliament in which neither the PA nor the UNP would secure enough seats to get a simple majority to form a government. Enthusiastic PA supporters were, however, expecting a two-thirds majority, an impossible target to achieve under Sri Lanka's complicated system of proportional representation.

The ruling UNP had fought an extremely determined battle to retain control of Sri Lanka's parliament for a fourth consecutive term. Almost all the mainstream English press, the collective voice of the new business class in Colombo, had predicted a return of the UNP, despite the fact that Chandrika Kumaratunga, the PA's youthful rising star and the campaign leader, had been attracting truly massive crowds to her campaign rallies. Even a public opinion survey conducted by an American company, in collaboration with Colombo's Times Group of Newspapers, had forecast a last-minute voter swing in favour of the ruling UNP.

When the results of the election began to come in the early hours of August 17, the PA appeared to be heading for a landslide victory over the UNP. First to come were the results of electoral divisions of the Matara district from the Southern province, an opposition stronghold where the UNP had badly lost in the provincial council elections held in March this year. However, the optimism of PA supporters began slowly to erode when the results from the central hill-country districts indicated a trend in favour of the UNP too. "It was like one day cricket", commented an exasperated PA supporter.

At the end of the day, the only prediction that was to prove correct was the emergence of the PA as the party with the highest number of parliamentary seats, yet falling short of an absolute majority in the 225 member Parliament. It won 105 seats, 91 from electoral districts and the remaining 14 from the national list. The UNP totalled 94 seats, of which 81 came from electoral districts and 13 from the national list. The remaining 26 seats were divided among six smaller parties and independent groups. Thus neither of the main contenders could win on its own an absolute majority.

The PA however had a decisive cutting edge over the UNP in the fact that it had entered into an electoral pact with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, which was to collect seven seats in the new parliament. At a crucial time when even a single parliamentary seat mattered in making or un-making a government, the PA also had the good fortune that an ally, P. Chandrasekaran, had been elected from the Nuwara Eliya district as an independent candidate. Armed with a letter of support from M.H.M. Ashroff, the SLMC leader, Chandrika Kumaratunga, the PA's nominee for the post of Prime Minister, made a call on President D.B. Wijetunga on the night of August 17. With a bare working majority of 113 seats, the PA and its allies were thus able to deny the UNP six more years of rule.

The final tally of seats in the new Parliament is as follows:

Party	District seats	National List	Total
People's Alian	91	14	105
United National Party	81	13	94
Independent (Jaffna)	9	-	9
Muslim Congress	6	1	7
Tamil United Liberation Front	4	1	5
Democratic People's Liberation Front	3	-	3
Sri Lanka Progressive Front	1	-	1
Independent (Nuwara Eliya)	1	-	1

These results indicate some important trends as well as paradoxes in Sri Lanka's politics, particularly in the area of ethnic relations. More than any other occasion, this election has brought home the point that the voters of all ethnic communities are for moderation and that conditions are most favourable for re-building Sri Lanka's ethnic relations in an atmosphere of democratic renewal.

Of lasting political importance is the total rejection by the Sinhalese electorate of narrow Sinhalese chauvinism, which the UNP in desperation deployed in the last two weeks of the election campaign. When the UNP leaders realized the ineffectiveness of their critique of PA policies and particularly of the vicious personal attacks on Chandrika Kumaratunga, they began to use the Sinhala-Buddhist communalist weapon, by accusing the PA of conspiring with minority parties in order to help the LTTE to establish Eelam. This absurdly distorted version of the PA's stand for a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic war was in fact the last campaign weapon of the UNP. The maturity of the Sinhalese electorate on the ethnic question is now amply demonstrated by the fact that all 17 districts where the PA enjoyed sweeping support are Sinhalese-majority areas.

Paradoxically, the districts where the UNP managed to win—Kegalle, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Trincomalee and Digamadulla—have multi-ethnic electorates. A UNP victory in either Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla or Kegalle districts is inconceivable without the support of the plantation Tamils whose votes were delivered *en masse* to the UNP by S. Thondaman's Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC). Meanwhile, in Trincomalee and Digamadulla districts, the UNP appears to have received considerable electoral support from Muslim voters, despite its exceedingly racist campaign against the PA-SLMC electoral agreement. The point then is that the UNP's desperately opportunistic campaign strategy of communalism is so grotesquely backward that no ethnic community in Sri Lanka appears to have taken it seriously.

The setback suffered at this election by extremist communalist forces is further indicated by the inability of two such parties to qualify for even a single parliamentary seat from the Colombo district. The *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna* (MEP),

led by Dinesh Gunawardena—Bal Thackeray's potential counterpart in Sri Lanka—, suffered a humiliating defeat in Colombo as well as in all other electoral districts it contested. This stands in sharp contrast to the MEP's creditable performance at the 1989 parliamentary elections when it managed to win three seats from the Colombo district. Meanwhile, Kumar Ponnambalam, Dinesh Gunawardena's alter ego in the upper-class Colombo Tamil community, led an independent Tamil list in Colombo district only to manage a total of 9251 votes, just 1% of the total votes cast.

The new political balance of forces generated by this election has once again demonstrated the crucial importance of majority-minority co-operation in Sri Lanka's politics. If the PA wants to continue till the end of its six year term, it will have to continually secure the support of Muslim and Tamil minority parties. Similarly, if the UNP's future strategy is to come back to power by toppling the PA administration, it will have no other option but to align itself with minority parties. As it stands today, the PA government, led by Chandrika Kumaratunga, appears to enjoy a credibility among the minority communities which the UNP, with its discredited communalist election campaign, cannot match. Since Chandrika Kumaratunga's PA has introduced some reason and sanity to the politics of Sri Lanka's ethnic relations, it is now the responsibility of the political forces of all ethnic communities not to drag Sri Lanka back to barbarism.

Voter behaviour is also indicative of urban middle class misgivings about the PA. While the PA has gained considerably in the Dry Zone agrarian belt (comprising Kurunegala, Puttalam, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and Moneragala districts) where the UNP had held sway in all previous elections since 1977, in the middle class urban areas in Colombo and Kandy, voters appeared to have preferred the UNP. The urban middle class, enjoying economic and consumerist benefits under the UNP's open economic policy, was from the very beginning suspicious of the economic policies of the PA. A recent convert to the doctrine of 'open economy with a human face', Chandrika Kumaratunga strongly argued during her campaign for a corruption-free market economy. However, Kumaratunga's message, as it appears now, has not been strong enough to convince the urban middle class and business groups who were repeatedly warned by the UNP that the PA would re-introduce state control of the economy.

Economic policy remained the most vulnerable plank of the PA's campaign, only in relation to urban social groups of affluence. In the suburban and rural areas, even though the benefits of the UNP's free market policies had been visibly felt, people had realized that they had come to the end of the road of dreams of economic prosperity, as promised by the UNP. The crisis in rural agriculture, accentuated by the withdrawal of farm subsidies and agricultural loan facilities, had reached such scandalous proportions that just a few months before the election 15 farmers had committed suicide in the Polonnaruwa district, unable to survive after just one crop failure. This explains why, except in some parts of the Badulla district where the first generation of agricultural settlers have not yet felt the crunch, rural peasantry in all other Dry Zone districts voted overwhelmingly for the PA.

Although the UNP lost, it remains a strong opposition in parliament with 94 seats. In terms of the total number of votes received by each party, the UNP's loss of governmental power does not appear to reflect any serious erosion of its support base. While the PA polled a total of 38,87,823 votes (48.94%), the UNP's share is an impressive total of 34,98,370 (44.03%). This may perhaps add some strength to the UNP's claim that the PA government may not last for more than two years and that the UNP is the only party with experience and proven capacity for stable governance. However, that claim will be put to severe test in November this year, when the Presidential elections are held.

The forthcoming Presidential polls will be exceedingly crucial for the future of the PA administration. With the slender majority which the PA has gained with its allies in the current parliament, it may not be so easy to deliver most of its electoral promises. The most difficult promise to fulfill in the current circumstances is that concerning constitutional reforms. PA has pledged itself to abolish the executive Presidential system in favour of a return to a modified parliamentary system. However, PA's precarious majority in parliament would not be adequate at all to change Sri Lanka's relatively rigid Constitution. In the absence of any short-cuts to constitu-

tional reform, the best strategy available to the PA is to win the Presidential election and then call for a Referendum, a course of action permitted by the existing constitution. In the wake of a positive and favourable change in the public mood, the PA will stand a good chance of winning the Presidency as well. If by any chance the UNP bounces back in the Presidential elections, the PA will have no one but itself to blame.

An alliance which has been in the Opposition since 1977 has now formed a government promising change at a time when the electorate had perhaps decided on its own that a change was necessary. Quite apart from all the mistakes and misdeeds of the past UNP regimes, the Sri Lankan electorate has been weary of a regime which had ruled the country for seventeen consecutive years. The fulfillment of the promise of change made by the PA is no easy task, since it involves constitutional reforms, ending the North-East war, economic reforms to take Sri Lanka to the next phase of industrial development while ensuring economic justice to vulnerable social groups, ending bribery and corruption, and improving human rights. Given the expectations of a highly politicized electorate, a tall order, indeed!

PRUDENTLY NEGOTIATING A MORAL PEACE

By

Ram Manikkalingam

An important new essay on the current issue of peace in our time in Sri Lanka.

Rs. 60/=

Available at Lake House Bookshop & Vijitha Yapa Bookshop

or

Social Scientists' Association
129/6A, Nawala Road,
Narahenpita
Colombo 5.
Tel: 501339.