

ELECTION VIOLENCE

The parliamentary election campaign, officially extending from July 11th, the last date on which nominations were received upto August 14th, was conducted amidst much violence.

A report from the Elections Secretariat that was set up by the Police to handle all election related violence summarizes the complaints of violence from the 11th of July, the last day of nominations, to 6 a.m. on 16th August, the polling day, as indicated below:

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| 2092 cases | of intimidation |
| 725 | of minor mischief |
| 39 | of major mischief |
| 1003 | of simple assault |
| 47 | of serious violence |
| 12 | of murder |

A report compiled by INFORM, based on newspaper reports and information from regional correspondents, appears to indicate that the police figures underestimate the extent of violence. An analysis of one category - murder - confirms this. While the police figures record 12 violent deaths, the INFORM report describes 20 such deaths. Some incidents of violence which ultimately led to deaths and in which prominent politicians were involved are missing in the police report.

Recurring incidents of violence during this and earlier election campaigns derive from a number of sources. It might be useful to set them out here.

Pre- and post-election violence, even though at a low level, has been a part of Sri Lanka's electoral political culture for many decades. Whenever sharp partisan loyalties resulted in deep divisions along political party lines, electoral competition has led to sporadic violence which was generally personal and unorganized; there were many such incidents in election campaigns prior to 1970.

However, election-related violence entered a qualitatively new phase in that year; in the immediate aftermath of the election victory of the opposition United Front, members and supporters of the United National Party (UNP), which had lost the election, were harassed, intimidated and attacked on a widespread scale; the attacks showed signs of prior organization and the targets were a matter of deliberate choice.

Post-election violence occurred on a much wider scale in 1977 when the ruling United Front government lost and the United National Party came into power in 1977. The logic of this type of violence is that the winners, who had been at the receiving end previously, would utilize the election victory as the first opportunity to engage in retaliatory action; and the losers who

are subject to violence will in turn wait for their opportunity to take revenge on the adversary after the next election.

The prime context of electoral violence is the generalized political violence which has characterized Sri Lankan politics in the entire decade of the 1980s. Anti-Tamil riots in 1983, the war between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil guerilla groups, and the armed conflict between the state and the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) in 89 to 91 were the main episodes that saw unprecedented political violence covering the entire political spectrum. As militarized political conflicts, they represented a specific phase in the country's politics in which many political actors, state as well as non-state, accepted terror and brutality as 'legitimate' mechanisms of political bargaining.

One specific aspect of the generalized political violence in the past decade was the violent opposition mounted against elections by armed militant groups in 1988 and 1989. When campaigns started for Provincial Councils elections (1988), Presidential elections (December 1988) and Parliamentary elections (February 1989), the LTTE in the North-east and the JVP in the South declared these elections 'illegal' and invalid. Their objective was to disrupt the election process, before the actual date of election, by unleashing terror and violence against individuals and parties that contested the elections as well as voters and party supporters. Political murders and disruption of election campaigns by means of armed attacks were intended to paralyze the election process altogether. On the days of election, voters who went to polling stations were intimidated, threatened and in some cases killed in order to generate a state of fear so that the actual polling would be severely disrupted.

The way in which political parties, both ruling and oppositional, handled the crisis during the elections of 1988 and 1989 has contributed to the subsequent process of electoral violence. Candidates were provided with fire arms and armed body guards for their protection. In many instances politicians were reported to have used these facilities not only for their protection, but also to intimidate political opponents and voters. Attempts to recall these weapons later were ineffective and the armed groups that thus came into existence still linger in the shadowy background.

The current spate of electoral violence may also be placed in the context where the state has become particularly violent and a ruling party has utilized the repressive agencies of the state for its own regime interests. The use of police for individual political objectives of politicians in power as well as of the ruling party has been a major aspect of the phenomenon of 'abuse of state power' in Sri Lanka. Thus the resort to violence and infractions of election laws have become a habit among certain sections of ruling party politicians. Opposition activists, meanwhile, appear to react to this situation in a spirit of tit-for-tat. As a result there is a general breakdown of law and order and a severe erosion of the law enforcement capacity of the police.

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.