

# Parliamentary Elections of 1994: Some Comments

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**O**n August 16, 1994, Sri Lanka held a General Election to elect its tenth parliament. After being in power for seventeen years, the UNP lost its parliamentary majority. Significantly enough, the People's Alliance formed a government in coalition with a party representing a minority (in this case Muslim) ethnic group, supported by an independent Tamil MP from the plantation areas. The manner in which the election was conducted and its results have implications that go beyond the event itself. The purpose of this article is to look at the significance of the election, point out some of the important trends evident in the results and discuss several issues related to the electoral outcome and the ethnic conflict.

## Reassertion of Electoral Politics

**P**erhaps, the most important outcome of this election is the very fact that Sri Lanka not only held a relatively peaceful election, but also managed to change the regime in power. It demonstrated that it was possible to effect a regime change through the electoral process even in the era ushered in by the post 77 changes.

The UNP, making use of the 5/6 majority it got in 1977, tampered with the electoral system so as to ensure its continuity in power. The opposition had to face the first election under the UNP government without its principal candidate. This was followed by a fraudulent referendum; and the elections that followed were marred by violence. Violence affected the 1988 Presidential Election significantly; the poll was very low and the President was elected only with 27.4% of the total electorate voting for him. The General Election that followed was also affected by violence.

In addition to tampering with the system, the UNP, with a very large quantum of resources at its command, built a powerful electoral machine; among the resources were those derived from the control of the state machinery. Being the ruling party for 17 years, the UNP enjoyed the support of a sizeable proportion of the electorate. In fact it was the possession of this electoral base which prompted the UNP to adopt a PR system.

It is because of all these changes, weighted for the benefit of the UNP, that it did enjoy power for seventeen long years. But what was more ominous was the possibility that these developments in the electoral process could have signified a more long term trend, a trend characterised by the dominance of a single party and the end of the tradition of changing regimes. In fact, some analysts had argued that, just as certain irreversible changes had been effected in the post-77 era in the sphere of the economy, similar developments had taken place

in politics as well. This suggested an end to the tradition of changing parties in power through the electoral process.

However, this election has proved otherwise. What we have witnessed in this election, in all provinces except the North, is a reassertion of the electoral process. Although there was violence during the campaign, election day itself was peaceful. Still more significant was the fact that campaign violence and even the threat of violence on election day itself did not deter the population from voting. Already this trend had become visible in provincial elections, held in 1993 and 1994. The electorate had been asserting its right to vote, a right which had been denied to them earlier by violence and manipulation of the system. This was even more pronounced during the more recent election to the Southern Provincial Council.

This election also proved that the two party system is alive and effective in the post-1977 era of capitalist development. The election also demonstrated the point that with the right combination of leadership and a set of issues and policies it is possible to defeat the UNP in an electoral contest. This too augurs well for democratic traditions as well as political stability, in a period of dramatic economic change and political uncertainty.

The election results also show the stability and continuity created by the PR system. Under the first past the post system, this election would have resulted in a sweeping victory for the PA and probably sweeping changes in policy as well. The composition of the parliament would have been less representative of the balance of forces in the electorate. The PR system of elections, despite its many shortcomings, has produced a modest margin of victory for the PA which makes it difficult for sweeping changes as in the past.

## Electoral Trends

**T**he People's Alliance obtained a majority in parliament by winning 48.9% of the total valid votes, compared to 44.0% for the UNP. If only the results of the "Southern" provinces are considered, PA received 51.5% of the valid votes compared to UNP's 45.6%. In this discussion of electoral trends we shall concentrate only on these "Southern" districts. The voting pattern, the civil conflict and importance of ethnic politics makes it necessary to make this distinction.

On the basis of the proportion of valid votes received by the PA and the UNP, the "Southern" districts can be grouped as follows:

The PA vote over the UNP vote

- < 5 % - Matale, Kurunegala, Pollonaruwa, Ratnapura
- 5 - 10% - Colombo, Kalutara, Puttalam, Moneragala
- 10 - 15%- Anuradhapura, Hambantota, Gampaha
- 15 - 20%- Galle
- > 20% - Matara

The UNP vote over the PA vote

- < 5 % - Kegalle
- 5 - 10% - Kandy
- 10 - 15% - Badulla
- > 20% - Nuwara Eliya

We will now discuss electoral trends by grouping the districts into four areas and by comparing the 1994 General Election results with voting patterns in the 1982 Presidential Election.

The districts have been grouped as follows: South West (combining Southern and Western Provinces); Central Province; Sabaragamuwa Province; and the six dry zone districts from the North Western, North Central and Uva Provinces. This grouping, which takes into account some socio-economic conditions as well as the ethnic composition, is useful to identify certain significant regional differences in the voting pattern.

The 1982 Presidential Election is chosen to analyse changes over time for several reasons. In the electoral politics of the post-1977 period, this was the last convincing electoral victory for the UNP. It was also the last 'normal' election before the infamous referendum which marked the beginning of the attempts by the UNP to undermine the electoral process.

Mr. J. R. Jayewardene of the UNP won the Presidential Election of 1982 five years after the change-over to an open economic policy. It was indeed the election which confirmed the fact that some of the policy changes effected by the UNP were here to stay and that the electorate was not reacting negatively to policy changes such as the removal of rice rations, reversing the policy of nationalisation, liberalising imports, etc. In this sense, the 1982 Presidential election can be considered as the one in which the electorate approved the UNP's liberalised economic policies. Now, twelve years after

	GE 94 UNP	GE 94 PA	GE 94 PA-UNP	Shift PA	82/94 UNP
Colombo	41.8	50.9	9.2	13.1	-15.9
Gampaha	41.9	56.8	14.9	12.9	-10.6
Kalutara	43.8	53.8	10.0	7.7	-6.4
Galle	41.2	56.4	15.2	11.9	-9.0
Matara	37.4	59.9	22.5	16.1	-11.9
Hambantota	38.7	53.5	14.8	14.3	-7.2
South West	40.8	55.2	14.4	12.7	-10.2
Matale	48.6	49.9	1.2	12.7	-9.5
Kandy	52.3	46.4	-5.9	9.1	-7.5
N'Eliya	58.1	32.3	-25.8	-1.4	-5.0
Central P	53.0	42.9	-10.2	6.8	-7.3
Kurunegala	47.0	51.9	4.9	11.4	-8.8
Puttalam	45.5	53.6	8.2	16.5	-13.6
Pollonnaruwa	47.6	51.2	3.6	15.5	-8.6
Anuradhapura	43.5	55.2	11.7	11.2	-6.4
Moneragala	43.8	50.4	6.6	7.1	-5.6
Badulla	54.0	43.5	-10.6	5.8	-4.6
NWP/NCP/Uva	46.9	51.0	4.1	11.2	-7.9
Ratnapura	48.0	50.8	2.8	6.1	-2.9
Kegalle	51.2	47.9	-3.3	9.2	-5.8
Sabaragamuwa	49.6	49.3	-0.3	7.6	-4.4
SOUTH	45.6	51.5	5.9	10.6	-8.8

that convincing victory, the UNP has lost its majority in Parliament. The question before us now is how did this happen and what the voting trends tell us.

Table 1 gives data on the shift in the percentage of valid votes for the PA and the UNP from the 1982 Presidential Election to the 1994 General Election. The Table has grouped the results into four areas while the figure gives the position of individual districts. In the case of the 1982 elections, the LSSP vote has been added to the SLFP vote.

As shown by data in the Table, from 1982 to 1994 the valid votes received by the UNP have been reduced by 8.8%; the PA has gained by 10.6%. This drop in the UNP's vote is seen in all districts; the PA has gained in all districts except in Nuwara Eliya. Here the PA's share has actually dropped by 1.4%.

The gains recorded by the PA in all districts are higher than the drops recorded by the UNP. This means that the PA has obtained additional votes from new voters as well as some share of the floating vote.

Turning now to the discussion of different geographical areas or zones, the drop in the South West part of the country is the most significant for the UNP. It is also the region that saw the highest gain for the PA.

Compared to 1982, the districts of Colombo, Gampaha and Matara which form a part of this geographical area recorded a 10-16% drop in the UNP vote in 1994. Colombo with a 15.9% drop is the district with the highest reduction for the UNP. In addition, in Colombo, Galle and Matara, the absolute number of votes received by the UNP in 1994 is less than it received in 1982, despite an average 25% increase in the electorate. The South West part of the country, previously called the Maritime Provinces, is an area which has undergone many changes due to urbanisation and modernisation. Since the post '77 policies have affected these areas significantly, an interesting issue is the impact of these policies on voter behaviour. There is also considerable minority concentration in this area in religious and ethnic terms.

With a concentration of around 48% of the population, the "Southern" electorate at present sends in 73 of the 165 elected members representing the seven provinces excluding the Northern and the Eastern. In the present parliament PA has 43 of these members to 29 from the UNP; the only other elected member is from the Sri Lanka Progressive Front. The PA won these seats with 55.2% of the valid votes compared to the UNP's 40.8%. In other words, the PA obtained 3.7 percentage points more than its average for 1994 while the UNP got 4.8 percentage points less than its average.

Not only does the South West part of the country send a large proportion of the elected MPs, it also influences decisively the allocation of National List members as well, because of the large number of votes it has in absolute terms. Therefore, the electoral base that the PA has obtained in this part of the country is extremely important. Therefore, the PA will have to look carefully at the possible impact of its policies in all

fields if it is to secure and strengthen its achievements in this area.

The mainly dry zone area consisting of the North Western, North Central and Uva provinces is where the PA's gains have been the next highest, as compared with its votes in 1982. In all districts of this area except Badulla, the valid votes obtained by the PA are higher than those of the UNP. This group of districts has at present 26.5%, or a little over a quarter, of the votes of the seven "Southern" provinces and elects 48 of 165 elected members. In the present parliament, the PA has 26 of them while the UNP has 22, obtained from 51.0% and 46.9% of the valid vote respectively. The higher proportion that the UNP received in the Badulla district is the main reason for the UNP's better performance in this region.

Some districts stand out in the shift of votes between the 1982 Presidential Elections and the General Elections of 1994. For example, in Kurunegala and Puttlam the absolute numbers of votes which the UNP obtained in 1994 are less than in 1982. This is despite a 22% increase in the votes of the Kurunegala district and a 42% increase in the Puttlam district. The other significant shift is the increase in the absolute vote for the PA in the Polonnaruwa district by 118.7%, relative to 1982.

These districts have seen an increase in the proportion of electors due to the movement of people into settlement schemes. Investment programmes due to the Mahaweli project have also increased resources going into this area. Despite these developments, the UNP has not been able to gain a higher proportion of valid votes except in the Badulla district where UNP performance could be explained by the plantation labour vote delivered by the Ceylon Worker's Congress. However, the other districts which constitute this area have primarily an agricultural population. Thus, this is an area where some of the contradictions of the current economic policies are being felt. While there has been an increasing accumulation process, the small holders and those engaged in non-irrigated agriculture have been adversely affected. These factors certainly would have decided the shift in the voter behaviour in this area.

The Central Province constituting Kandy, Matale and Nuwara Eliya districts is the area where the least drop in the UNP's valid votes has been recorded, compared with its performance in 1982. The figure is 7.3%. The PA has gained by 6.8%. This is the only area in our grouping where the PA's gain is less than the UNP's loss.

In the entire area of the Central province, the comparative picture of the Nuwara Eliya district stands out. The Nuwara Eliya district recorded the highest rate of increase in the electorate between 1982 and 1994 elections - an increase of 91.5%. This is due to the large number of plantation workers becoming eligible for the vote. Despite this expansion of the electorate, the percentage of valid votes received by both the PA and the UNP has dropped compared to 1982 elections. The reduction for the PA is -1.4% and for the UNP -5.0%. This means that despite the higher proportion of valid votes gained by the UNP, there has been a drop in its electoral base, as

compared with 1982. On the other hand, the PA received only 32.3% of the valid vote, indicating that the PA has not been able to attract a significant proportion of the new vote in Nuwara Eliya, as they did in the rest of the country.

It is these factors which facilitated the emergence of a new political force in the plantation areas - the Up Country People's Front and the election of Chandrasekera as an independent candidate.

In the other two districts in the Central Province, the UNP performed poorly, but was successful in holding on to its electoral base in Kandy. The sharp district differences in the performance of the two parties is reflected in the changes in the number of absolute votes between the two elections. This increase is given below. In Matale and Kandy, the PA's increase is much higher than the UNP's, but in Kandy, even with a relatively small increase in absolute numbers, the UNP has managed to get a higher percentage of valid votes.

	UNP	PA
Kandy	12203	86790
Matale	6090	42515
N'Eliya	66461	39364

In the 1994 elections, the Central Province had 14.6% of the total electorate. The UNP obtained 53.0% of the valid votes compared to PA's 42.9%. This gap is largely accounted for by the UNP's better performance in the Nuwara Eliya district due to the link with the CWC and, to a lesser extent, because of the slight advantage the UNP has in the Kandy district. In the present parliament, there are 25 members from this area. Fourteen of them have contested under the UNP ticket and won and 10 from the PA. The other member is from the Up Country People's Front.

Finally, we come to the Sabaragamuwa Province. There has been a shift towards the PA in the districts of this province compared to 1982. Therefore, the comparative picture is much the same as in other parts of the country. While UNP has lost its proportion of valid votes by 4.4% compared to 1982, the PA has gained by 7.6%.

However, despite these changes, the results of 1994 show that the UNP and the PA are evenly balanced in this area. In the entire Province, there is only 0.3% difference in the valid votes received by the two parties, with the difference being in favour of the UNP. But from the 19 members from the province PA has 10, while UNP has 9. The better performance of the PA in the Ratnapura district accounts for this one member margin.

## Election Results and the North/East

**T**he conflict situation prevailing in the Northern and Eastern provinces brings into focus a different set of issues concerning the election results.

Due to instability created by the conflict, electoral politics have been dormant for sometime in this part of the country.

Therefore the principle question that emerges is how significant has been this election in the revival of the electoral process in the area affected by the conflict.

The conditions of conflict created many problems in conducting an election that was seen as having a certain degree of legitimacy, specially in the Northern part of the country. In the first place, there were certainly many problems in the electoral registers being used; for example, the percentage increase in the Jaffna electoral district has been only 0.7% since the last general election of 1989. This was due to non updating of the electoral registers in these districts, leaving the Elections Commissioner with no option but to adopt an outdated register.

Secondly, there was the problem of a large internally displaced population. According to figures released by the Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation and Social Welfare at the end of March 1994, the total number of displaced people amounted to 559,205. The bulk of the displaced were distributed in the following electoral districts, as of March 1994.

Jaffna	319672	- 57 %	of the internally displaced
Vanni	61247	- 10.9 %	"
Batticaloa	52773	- 9.4 %	"
Trincomalee	30662	- 5.4 %	"
Amparai	8722	- 1.6 %	"
Puttalam	35441	- 6.3 %	"
Anuradhapura	16191	- 2.9 %	"
Rest of the country	34497	- 6.5 %	"

These numbers include children who are below 18 years and therefore the number eligible for voting will be less than these figures. However, there was a very large number of internally displaced people who were eligible for voting.

The presence of the internally displaced is not a recent phenomenon and the way things are, this could become a feature of our society for sometime to come. However, the Elections Department seems to have ignored this reality. Indeed it is necessary to call for special measures in order to ensure that the voting rights of this population are safeguarded.

It is not clear what proportion of this population was deprived of their franchise due to the shortcomings of the preparatory work of the Elections Department. The vote of internally displaced could have been crucial in certain areas in determining the outcome of the election. This is specially important for electoral districts of the East where there is an ethnically mixed population. If there was a large presence of any particular ethnic group among the displaced, it could have been decisive for the outcome of elections.

The results of the election show a rather contrasting situation between the Northern and Eastern provinces. In the Northern province, with only a 2.3 % of the electorate voting, it has been a farce rather than a democratic process. The members who sit from the Jaffna district cannot claim to represent anybody.

The voting of the Vanni district was also very low, the turn out being only 25.3% of the electorate. Therefore, there is a big question mark with regard to the electoral process in the entirety of the Northern Province.

In contrast, the Eastern Province has an average turn out of 74.1%. This reflects a revival of the electoral process in this

part of the country, a revival that was earlier seen in the local government elections held early this year.

The revival of the electoral process in the East poses very important questions when looking at prospects for the ethnic conflict in future. Due to the participation of the people of the East in a relatively legitimate election, they are duly represented in the central parliament. This is a part and parcel of the relative normalisation process taken place in these areas. Against this backdrop, there now appears to have emerged a sharp political distinction between the Northern and Eastern provinces, having a bearing on the ethnic politics of the future.

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