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Sri Lanka

Power changes hands - not for the better

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On December 5, 2001 elections to Sri Lanka's 12th Parliament concluded - marred by unprecedented violence that tragically claimed the lives of at least 50. The single worst incident was on the day of the election itself, when ten Muslim youth accompanying ballot boxes to the counting station were pursued and then gunned down by hirelings of a senior Cabinet Minister.

The election campaign itself took the form of a mini civil war with the two major coalitions, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party - led Peoples Alliance (PA) and the United National Party - led United National Front, responsible between them for well over 2,500 acts of violence in under a month and a half.

In the northern Jaffna District, the PA-backed Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) launched a deadly attack on the Tamil National Alliance that groups four anti-PA Tamil parties, killing two people and seriously wounding several others.

This was the second parliamentary election in just 14 months. The earlier election in October 2000 returned the PA to power as a minority Government with the support of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) while PA leader Chandrika Kumaratunga was returned to office in the Presidential election the year before. However rifts soon surfaced between the President and SLMC leader, Rauf Hakeem.

Muslim tensions

Tensions between the SLMC and the Government grew following its inaction over an anti-Muslim riot in the Central Provincial town of Mawanella. The communal violence was blamed on local strongman and Presidential confidante, Maheepala Herath, who was re-appointed to government after the 2000 election.

In July 2001 Rauf Hakeem was summarily sacked from the Cabinet and in return the SLMC withdrew support from the Government. Faced with the loss of power the Peoples Alliance stunned many of its own supporters by forging a controversial alliance with the left wing Sinhala nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front) - now Sri Lanka's "third force" in politics.

However the probationary government that emerged only postponed the inevitable as leading PA parliamentarians crossed over to the opposition and once again the Government lost its majority. By October, Chandrika Kumaratunga had no option but to dissolve parliament or the humiliation of losing a no-confidence motion tabled by the Opposition.

When the Peoples Alliance went before the people it was judged to have failed miserably on two major issues: the economy and the war, and punished accordingly.

The greatest disappointment of the PA's seven years in power was its inability to end the bloody war that has raged in the Tamil-dominated North-East of the island since 1983, killing at least 64,000 people.

The cost to the economy and society has been enormous too - with over Rs. 450 billion (US\$5 billion) pumped into this senseless, non-win war, of which Rs. 83 billion (US\$900 million) was spent in 2000 alone. This year Sri Lanka's

debt service payments will exceed its estimated surplus revenue.

The United National Front, led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, a former Cabinet Minister and Prime Minister in past United National Party administrations has emerged with the single largest bloc of seats, 109 in the 225-member Parliament. This is still short of a majority but the UNF enjoys the support of the SLMC with its 5 seats and (at the moment) that of the Tamil National Alliance that won 15 seats.

Tamil votes

Over 100,000 Tamils living in the eastern Batticaloa and the northern Vanni districts controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were blatantly prevented by the Government from crossing into Government held areas and casting their vote.

The presumption was they would have supported the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and improved its electoral share. The TNA was cobbled together on the eve of the elections and is based on two parliamentary parties (Tamil United Liberation Front and All-Ceylon Tamil Congress) and two former armed organisations (Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation and Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front - Suresh faction).

Their campaign was based on the position that the LTTE is the sole representative of all Tamils and that the incoming Government should negotiate exclusively with the LTTE, after lifting the ban imposed on it.

The Peoples Alliance secured 77 seats, while the JVP obtained 16 seats (296,579 votes and 6 seats more than it did in 2000).

The JVP claimed during the election campaign that they would call the shots whichever party came into power, and that there should be no question of negotiations with the LTTE unless it gave up the demand for a separate state.

LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran, in his annual Heroes Day speech only days before the elections, stated that the time has come for the Sinhala constituency to choose between peace and war, adding that the LTTE would be prepared to negotiate "to co-exist happily in this beautiful island with self-determination and dignity".

While the LTTE did not take a stance on the elections, the Heroes Day message made clear its hostility to the PA, while it was commonly understood that it favoured a strong showing for the TNA so long as it toed the LTTE line.

Taking the cue the Tamil electorate within the North-East overwhelmingly supported the TNA, while Tamils in the rest of the island supported the United National Front, marginalizing the Left both within and outside the Peoples Alliance.

The New Left Front, which includes the Nava Sama Samaja Party (Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International) aimed for 100,000 votes and one seat. However it received only 45,900 votes, beating the Sinhala racist Sihala Urumaya outfit that won one parliamentary seat in the 2000 general elections.

Co-habitation

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Under the present French-style constitution designed in 1978 by the late President J. R. Jayawardena, the president enjoys wide executive powers, being Head of State, Head of Government and Head of the Cabinet.

Since the United National Party-dominated UNF coalition has been elected to power, the scenario is one of cohabitation, as was and is the case in France.

This is only the second such situation in Sri Lanka. In August 1994 when Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected Prime Minister in 1994, the incumbent President UNP leader, D. B. Wijetunga. He was a lame-duck President, helpless as political power slipped from his hands into those of the Peoples Alliance. This period of co-habitation ended three months later when Kumaratunga won the Presidential election of that year.

The four questions that now arise are:

- Will the present co-habitation work harmoniously?
- Will the new Government stop the war, un-ban the LTTE and commence negotiations?
- Will the predominantly Tamil North-East Province, temporarily merged since 1987 remain so as is the aspiration of Tamils?
- Will constitutional arrangements be made for substantive autonomy to the North-East?

The hurdles ahead are too many to generate optimism. Firstly, Prime Minister Wickramasinghe is not disposed to lift the ban on the LTTE as demanded by the LTTE and the TNA and is supported in this by his archrival President Kumaratunga.

Secondly, Wickramasinghe has stuck firmly to the model of a unitary state that has proved to be futile in practice vis-à-vis the national question. When questioned recently as to why his party opposed the draft Constitution presented in parliament in August 2000 by President Chandrika, the UNP/UNF leader said that the regional council model proposed in that Bill would eventually lead to division of the country.

Once having assumed office as Prime Minister, Ranil Wickramasinghe floated the possibility of an all party Government of National Reconciliation (GNR) but has been rebuffed.

The JVP's position is that there is no Tamil National Question only a terrorist problem and that the LTTE should be militarily defeated. In other words it is for the continuation of the war and its present post-election campaign against negotiations with the LTTE confirms it.

JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe who took to the campaign trail after an eleven-year self-exile in Paris and London buttressed this chauvinist position. Addressing public meetings in Colombo, Amarasinghe breathed fire that the LTTE should be destroyed, assuring a supply of 50,000 JVP cadres to the Army. Another gem that escaped his lips was that they would obtain UN permission to carry out a revolution in Sri Lanka. He has since returned to his exile.

During the election campaign both the PA and the JVP carried out openly venomous racist propaganda that the UNP/UNF was working hand in glove with the LTTE and would concede a separate State if elected. However the masses at large refused to be swayed by such a virulent campaign.

The Left has disappeared for the moment. But in the coming period it is quite possible for all left forces to come together to defend the rights of the people. Workers, peasants, minority communities will seek out a centre for refuge:

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a place for the oppressed and displaced. All our resources and efforts should be put together to build a strong united left front that could give hope and inspiration to all those who are prepared to fight.