

Implications of the Provincial Council Elections Results

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The big winners in the Central Provincial Council (CPC) elections and the North Western Provincial Council (NWP) elections just concluded were President Mahinda Rajapakse and UPFA. The big losers were Ranil Wickremasinghe and the UNP and the JVP. But the election results tell us few more things than meets the eye about Sri Lanka's political trends and prospects for the next several years.

First, the results exposed the utter electoral weakness of the JVP. While the JVPs's electoral fortunes rise when the "capitalist" UNP is in power they greatly diminish when the "socialist" UPFA is in power. In any event the Weerawansa faction of the JVP would have taken some of the JVP supporters to the UPFA camp. In particular for many rank and file JVPers jobs and other fruits of political patronage would be of more practical importance than ideological purity in oppositional politics. The JVP parliamentarians must be dreading the fate that awaits them at the next parliamentary elections if they contest as a separate party.

Second, the results auger well for the (southern) two party system that Sri Lanka's electoral democracy has got accustomed to. This arrangement can be criticized for many reasons. But the fact is that it generally ensures a reasonably stable government for the country.

Third, the results also signaled the significant weakening of the political base of the CWC in the plantation Tamil community. The results suggest that the UPFA did very well among the Sinhalese voters in the Nuwara Eliya District. The party comfortably won three of the four electorates in the district where the Sinhalese are in a majority. But In the "electoral district" of Nuwara Eliya where the Tamil vote is about 60% of the electorate the UNP won 52% to 45%. This suggests that the CWC that together with Chandrasekeran's UPAF supported the UPFA is losing its grip on the plantation Tamil vote. Moreover, the military victories of the Rajapakse

administration in the north may not be as appealing to the plantation Tamil voters as they are to the Sinhalese voters.

Fourth, in this election in some of the predominantly Sinhalese and rural electorates the UPFA trounced the UNP by a margin of about 70% or more. Wariyapola in the NWP is one example. This demonstrated two important things. First, the enormous popularity of the war policy of the Rajapakse regime among the Sinhalese voters. Second, rural people are less affected than their urban counterparts by the high cost of living and related economic difficulties. Moreover, a significant number of village families earn an income from supplying soldiers to the Sri Lankan military. Thus they have economically benefitted from war expenditure.

Fifth, Ranil Wickremasinghe and the UNP appear to be the big losers in these two PC elections. But there is something more to it. The UPFA polled 60% in the central province (CP) and 70% in the Kurunegala District (The complete results of the Puttalam District are not available at the time of this writing but the percentage should be similar to that of Kurunegala). The UNP polled 39% in the CP and 27% in the Kurunegala District. These numbers confirm yet again that the UPFA heavily relies on the Sinhalese electorate for its support and that in these elections Sinhalese support has been further augmented by the military success in the north.

But the results also demonstrate the basic electoral strength of the UNP. First, that it can rely on about 25% to 30% of the Sinhalese electorate for hardcore support. Second, these numbers confirm yet again what we have seen in recent elections. The minorities generally favour the UNP rather than the SLFP or a coalition led by the SLFP. For example, in the last presidential election had the LTTE allowed the Tamils in the north to vote freely the result probably would have been very different. The implication of this for future elections is significant. The Rajapakse administration will have to make a genuine effort to deliver for the Tamils and Muslims in the north and east and elsewhere after the war ends. If not the UNP is certain to mount a formidable challenge to the UPFA in the next "post-conflict" presidential election.

Sixth, S B Dissanayaka has emerged as a credible political leader with national potential. The relatively good showing of the UNP in the Central Province compared to the NWP is largely attributable to Dissanayaka's candidacy. The victory in the Nuwara Eliya electoral district has a lot to do

with the willingness of some breakaway leaders from the CWC to join with Dissanayaka. Also he is a person who started his political career in the Communist Party and has not been associated with narrow ethnic politics and racism. Almost certainly he will be seen as a credible leader of the UNP capable of replacing Ranil Wickremasinghe.