



NATIONAL ELECTIONS

The statistical analysis of election results in this issue is a straightforward matter. Yet the statistical trends, that emerge and have been analysed, depend on actual human actions and motivations. These actions of voters have been influenced to a large extent by the social perceptions of the groups from which they come. It is these groups whose votes are canvassed in the electioneering process and are consciously or unconsciously wooed by political parties. In our two issues on the election of 1977 (May 1977 and July 1977) we sketched what the groups were. We outline here some of these groupings together with the new social elements that have been introduced into the country since 1977 and which we believe have played a significant part in the 1982 elections.

The Sri Lankan social structure has been influenced in turn by its pre-colonial "feudal" past, a colonial economy and the post

colonial situation. Some remnants of the social strata corresponding to these stages still survive. Thus, from the feudal past, there are still pockets of a classical peasantry with life styles reminiscent of the feudal past. The colonial incursion brought with it a plantation economy and a new ruling strata together with a disruption of the local peasantry in the hill country and the introduction from South India of a large estate proletariat. The 19th century also saw the emergence of local entrepreneurs providing functions ancillary to the main colonial presence. Further, the introduction of a commercial economy made deep inroads into areas in the social structure untouched by the plantations and transformed their entire character.

In the post independence era with the initial emphasis on import substitution there were new groups arising associated with the im-

ELECTORAL PREFERENCES

A major part of the country's electorate has always been with one of the two leading political parties, as seen in this diagram. With the exception of 1956, the ruling UNP appears to have enjoyed considerable popularity throughout and its upward swing is most marked in the recent elections of 1977 and 1982.

port substitution process. This new class rapidly rose to challenge the dominance of the old plantation class and began to compete with it, particularly around the 1970's in the economic sphere.

A significant aspect of the socio-economic changes in Sri Lanka from independence in 1948 upto the 1977 changes and after was the gradual erosion of the predominant position of the plantation elite. The latter were successfully challenged through the medium of the electoral process and associated patronage politics) by the rural lower middle classes, some of whose members had risen to occupy as a group a predominant position. This new class reached market and other limits within the country and was actively engaged in a process of forming new linkages economically with countries in the "centre". It also began to forge strong links with the remnants of the earlier plantation elite (the plantations themselves were largely nationalised in the mid 70's, with compensation) which had now diversified into new activities.

A national election symptomatic of the new changes in the country was that of 1977. Here the United National Party, the old plantation allied party at Independence, with a new refurbished image, won a resounding victory which was in many ways as significant an event as that of the 1956 election. As a watershed it signified in a sense the completion over a twenty-year period-1956 to 1977-of significant changes, and the partial amelioration of the strong cultural and social contradictions between the rural lower middle class and the Colombo based upper strata that existed at Independence. Taking these

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changes to a "logical" conclusion the Government since 1977 has attempted a determined relinking of the economy with the world economy. It has invited transnational investment and liberalised imports, provided strong incentives to private entrepreneurs, combined with a curtailment of subsidies, and economic management of the country has been carried on under IMF and World Bank advice.

Since 1977 new social groups have emerged corresponding to the dramatic new changes in the economy. The economy has experienced an import led growth in the trade sector, based on liberalised imports (with at present a resulting massive trade gap). Apart from the trading, the other main sector of expansion was construction. A significant area of economic activity was the Mahaveli Development Programme, with its massive construction efforts, together with the housing construction programme. Further, the Free Trade Zone (though on some key criteria the FTZ has yet to prove itself) has had an impact on the country.

These new economic activities occurred without a related increase in export earnings or any dramatic increase in the sphere of local industrial production. The new dynamic sectors of the economy, however, gave rise to new powerful strata such as contractors and agents for foreign firms (who earned very high incomes), and those large commercial houses involved in imports. The corresponding spread of these activities which centred around these strata gave rise in the trading sector, for example, to a proliferation of shops throughout the country, as well as of sub-contractors throughout large sections of the country. The spread effects of these has resulted in a certain amelioration of unemployment, as well as a partial trickle down effect on incomes.

These then were among the social groups that were the hidden actors in the electoral drama. These social strata are largely the horizontal strata, but in addition there are also vertical strata that play a part in the consciousness of the people. These include "racial" groups such as Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims, religious ones such as Buddhist, Hindu or Christian, caste groupings etc.

It is on this tapestry of vertical and horizontal divisions of society that the electorate articulates its will. It is in the manner that these groups perceive political reality that produces a particular election result. However, perceptions of reality are not autonomous willed acts of groups. The groups themselves are subject to pressures

and conditioning for example through the media, so that their consciousness may not represent their "true" objective situations. False consciousness could make groups perceive quite different perspectives from their objective needs.

A significant trend of social change over the last 25 years was the removal of the large social and cultural disparity between town and country and between the Colombo based English speaking upper stratum and the Sinhala and Tamil speaking countryside. The predominant process was the commercial penetration of the rural sectors which resulted in this amelioration. In short, the sharp dichotomies of a cultural nature which were the prime motive factors of the election of 1956 vanished by the late 1970's. The country was still being "culturally colonised", but the conduits now led to all corners of the country. Consequently there was no sharp cultural cleavage between those in Colombo upper circles and those outside, particularly with regard to their aspirations, hero figures and even perhaps core values. A writer from the Bank's Research Department commenting on the role of culture in the mechanics of social changes in Sri Lanka, in 1980, pointed out (at a Ceylon Studies Seminar on Post-War Economic Development).

"If we were to examine in retrospect the movement of cultural protest and its aftermath in post-Independence Sri Lanka: the cultural protest occurred in the late 50's when the rural lower middle class gained partial state power and acted against the anglicised Colombo groups. The ideology and culture of the lower middle class itself included pockets of colonial culture transmitted in the 19th century and since then internalised. The overt demand of the representatives of the rural lower class in obtaining state power was to emphasise a return to what it imagined was a traditional culture. Twenty years later with a deeper integration of the urban and rural sectors of the economy of Sri Lanka and the amelioration of the gross social and cultural cleavage between the town and countryside, exemplified by some elements of the rural middle class reaching upper class status, the overt cultural conflicts were minimised. In its place a new social formation, with the contemporary upper classes forging new links with the world economy, provides today a direct entry of cultural influences into the whole country. The country is now re-linked not only to the world economic system but also the social and cultural one."

"Although the cultural aspirations between town and countryside have got lessened over the last few decades, yet with the recent rising cost of living and widening income gaps, a new social strata having very high purchasing power has emerged. The ability to consume the new cultural symbols are today however, not necessarily uniform. Cultural aspirations across the nation may be largely uniform but the ability to acquire the cultural symbols are limited to only a few. Whether this widening social and economic scheme would lead to a new stratum using culture as a tool of protest is at this stage too premature to predict".

Clearly the election results indicate strongly that the schisms or their perceptions had not been sufficiently wide to create a different consciousness. Wide access to aspects of the import led boom — although with different strata having different access — meant that a strong subjectively felt differentiation had not emerged. This was true even though some studies have indicated that access to some basic items, such as food, among certain sections of the population, had very probably decreased (See for example Economic Review, March 1982, special issue on Food and Society).

Economic Background to the Election

The policy reforms since late 1977 were designed to move the economy away from the existing government intervention and controls. In keeping with this policy the exchange rate was unified and allowed to float, most import payment restrictions were relaxed and price controls dismantled. This resulted in a liberalization of the economy and marked changes in relative prices which were expected to boost production and stimulate exports. A significant result, however, was the import led trade boom which in turn led to a soaring import bill and a comparatively slower growth in export earnings and has resulted in a widening trade gap. While imports expanded by over 150 per cent exports have expanded by less than 40 per cent during this period. It is an unfortunate fact that this growth strategy had to be tried and tested in an entirely hostile international economic environment.

Further, the attention of the Government had to be engaged in cushioning the public from the effects of global and domestic inflation. There was a high rate of inflation, which was serious in the 1980/81 period. And when the exchange depreciation occurred against the background of this inflationary situation the entire position was

aggravated. In the Economic Review of February 1982 we drew attention to this situation when we stated that "the high inflation in the country (caused by factors other than exchange depreciation) leads to exchange depreciation which in turn becomes a further contributory factor to the inflation. The exchange depreciation is at once an adjustment to the already existing inflation in the country as well as a contributory factor to the inflation. Inflation and exchange rate depreciation has begun to operate in a cycle, one leading to the other".

After 1980 inflation accelerated sharply, the budgetary position began to grow unmanageable, and the increase in the current account deficit quickly outpaced the growth in available concessional aid and investment flows. The result was that for the first time since 1975 net foreign exchange reserves began to decline and Sri Lanka was forced to undertake short-term and commercial borrowings on a significant scale to finance the payments deficit.

Furthermore, government revenues did not come upto expectations while the import costs of essential commodities and inflationary pressures upset government's expenditure programme. The weakening in the government expenditure mechanisms also resulted in heavy bank borrowings in order to finance persistent budget deficits. All these factors posed a threat to the government's development strategy and its liberalised economy policy. In order to bring the situation under control major cuts were introduced in the public investment programme and attempts were made to redesign this programme in line with the new resource realities. A concerted effort was therefore made to stabilize domestic prices, reduce the external resource imbalance and switch composition of investment towards quick-gestation and less capital-intensive and energy-intensive projects.

The increase in the cost of living was also reaching dangerous levels. The government was left helpless to do anything except create employment opportunities to permit the people to earn adequate wages to meet these costs.

There were significant growth areas over the 1977/81 period, despite the problems of the economy. The period from 1982, however, appeared to be one of greater stability particularly for the price level. The deflationary measures adopted by the Government, aided by the world recession, helped to hold back the inflationary process which had caused considerable concern to the people and the government. Moreover, the paddy farming sector had

District	No. of seats	B*	U.N.P.	B*	S.L.F.P.	B*	S.L.T.C.P.	B*	J.V.P
Colombo ...	21	1	13		7				
Gampaha ...	18	1	9		8				
Kalutara ...	11	1	5		5				
Kandy ...	12	1	7		4				
Matale ...	5	1	2		2				
Nuwara Eliya	6	1	3		2				
Galle ...	11	1	5		5				
Matara ...	9	1	4		4				
Hambantota	7	1	3		2				1
Jaffna ...	11	0	2		4	1	4		
Wanni ...	5	1	2		1		1		
Batticaloa ...	4	1	1		1		1		
Digamadulla	6	1	3		2				
Trincomalee	4	1	2		1				
Kurunegala ...	16	1	9		6				
Puttalam	7	1	4		2				
Anuradhapura ...	7	1	3		3				
Polonnaruwa	4	1	2		1				
Badulla ...	8	1	4		3				
Moneragala	4	1	2		1				
Ratnapura	10	1	5		4				
Kegalle ...	10	1	5		4				
	196	21	95		72	1	6		1
B* Bonus Seats		<u>116</u>				<u>7</u>			

contributed to sizeable increases in production during the five years from 1977 and this sector in turn, though having to pay more for its inputs, had reaped the benefits of the increasing price level. The farmers earned more and handled far more money than they ever did before. In the meantime the liberalised economy made available goods in plenty for those who now had more money in their hands. The tendency towards consumerism by large sections of the people, generated by the 'open economy' policies and the desire to maintain this situation, was a significant psychological factor for the electorate. It was in such an environment that the economic issues were faced in the election; although the economic issues did not come to the fore since the personality factor was evidently more significant.

Extrapolating the Presidential Results to a General Election

The issues, personalities and the parties present at the Presidential Election were not identical to those in a general election. In the Presidential election it became quite often a clash ultimately between two personalities. And, as this election showed, the major economic factors were not discussed very much in detail, neither were local issues at the electoral level discussed. It is therefore, not correct to extrapolate the results of a Presidential election to a general election and then make predictions about what the results of a general election would have been were it held during the time of the Presidential election. Furthermore, parties such as the Communist Party which supported the SLFP, and the TULF which boycotted the election, would also probably

contest a general election so that the end result would be different.

However, taking into account these reservations, we have attempted in the table above to see what the major parties would have scored if a general election followed the pattern of the Presidential election. We have applied the provisions in the Constitution which define the process of elections according to Proportional Representation and have arrived at the figures. The figures indicate that on a popular vote the UNP would have won 95 seats and the SLFP 72 seats, the Tamil Congress 6 seats and JVP 1 seat. However, the constitution allows also for an extra seat for the party that has a majority in each particular district. The UNP won 21 of the districts and the Tamil Congress the remainder. On this basis, the UNP gets 21 bonus seats and the Tamil Congress one. This gives a final tally of UNP 116 seats, SLFP 72, TC 7 and JVP 1.

The October Presidential Election was held two years before it was finally due. There were many reasons given for the advancement of this date. It was accepted that the ruling party had a positive advantage in its well-knit organisation and astute leadership; though the President himself listed (in a post-election interview with foreign correspondents) the search for political advantage when the opposition was in disarray as one of the main reasons for the advancement of the date. The significance of the ultimate result of the election can now be seen in a more clear perspective. President J. R. Jayewardene was given a fresh mandate to carry on till 1989, thus indicating the direction of the political situation till the end of the decade.