

From Associational to Electoral Politics in Sri Lanka: A continuation of the land rights struggle in Paanama

Friday 14 September 2018, by [GUNAWARDANA Samanthi J.](#), [PADMASIRI Buddhima](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2018).

In their paper, the authors explain through interviews with local activists struggling for the right to return to their confiscated land, how and why they chose to shift from associational politics to electoral politics. They argue that the ‘Citizen’s Forum’ promoted by external non-governmental organisations played a useful albeit limited intermediary role between the activists and the previous local council; and was also a platform for women’s leadership.

1. Introduction

The Pradeshiya Sabha (divisional council) elections held on the 10th of February 2018 was notable for a number of reasons as noted by Munasinghe in this issue. In addition to the election being the first held under the new electoral system and the entry of the *Sri LankaPodujana Peramuna* (SLPP), the election also saw the enactment of a quota for women’s representation. In this paper, we argue that the election highlights and helps to understand the engagement of rural communities including women, within the electoral process, both as voters and as candidates.

In Sri Lanka, the widespread participation of rural communities in associationalism¹ is common; and especially among women. *Samurdhi* associations, funeral committees, rural development societies and farmers’ societies are some examples in the 20th century (Uyangoda and de Mel, 2012: 22). In post-war Sri Lanka, rural associationalism is widespread with respect to organised movements to secure access to a vital natural resource: land. These struggles are manifested across ethnic and geographical lines, from Keppapilavu in the northern Mullaitivu district; to the long-standing struggle of *Malayaha* (Hill Country) Tamils in tea and rubber plantation districts; to the communities affected by the Uma

Oya Multipurpose Development in the Uva province. Women have been at the forefront of many such movements, which often mobilise narratives connecting land loss to gender injustice.

Yet, accounts of transition from rural associationalism and grassroots activism to electoral politics are limited. Where this transition is observed, individuals are noted to be mainly “from local elite families who already have resources arising from socio-economic and cultural capital” (Uyangoda and de Mel, 2012: 22). However, in the 2018 local government elections, many individuals who had previously participated in or led grassroots movements stood for election, as a strategy to further their movement aims or seek resolutions to struggles within their communities. This included activists against the Uma Oya project, activists from the *Malayaha* community, and women activists from Batticaloa (Emmanuel, 2018).

This paper examines the transformation of associational politics to electoral politics among local community members and activists involved in a land rights movement in Paanama, a village in the

Eastern province of Sri Lanka. This paper is derived from a long-term project examining women's livelihood and women's economic activities in post-war Sri Lanka. Initial fieldwork in Paanama was conducted in January 2015 immediately after the presidential election and change of regime. The initial interviews in 2015 were designed to gain knowledge of women's livelihoods, and the impact of the loss of land (see Gunawardana *et. al.* 2018). The authors again visited Paanama in January 2017. This visit followed the dissolution of local government bodies in 2015, and the passage of the *Local Authorities Elections [Amendment] Act No. 1 of 2016*. Through this Act, a 25% mandatory quota for women's representation was introduced into the local government system. The third visit was in December 2017, two months prior to the recent elections. Follow-up telephone interviews were conducted after the conclusion of the February 2018 elections.

Villagers have long engaged with the *Paanama Pattuwa Surakeeme Sanvidanaya* (Paanama Pattu² Protection Organisation—PPPO), created by the people of Paanama in the 1980's to address governance and administrative issues in their villages. The community faced several barriers with regard to access to their land and land rights since the 1990s, when agricultural lands were acquired for military use, or became inaccessible owing to the armed conflict in that area. In 2010, under the Rajapaksa government, they were forcibly evicted from their land by the military and police. The PPPO later became a primary platform mobilised by the movement to engage with the land acquisitions. Community members engaged in a long-term campaign to regain their land (referred to as a 'land struggle' from hereon). The 2018 local government election was seen by local activists as a space and an opportunity to extend their land struggle by seeking a voice in the Lahugala divisional council (*Pradeshiya Sabha*)³ to engage at a political level. Entering electoral politics was not a sudden decision made by the activists but rather, a part of their long-term strategy.

1. Political Canvassing in the 2011 Local Election

The details of the Paanama land struggle have been well documented elsewhere (Piyadasa 2016). In brief, the contested lands in Paanama were passed on as an inheritance from parents to the current owners who claim a right to the land according to their customary rights. The primary use of this land was in *chena* cultivation, which is carried out mainly by women. Most of the

From Associational to Electoral Politics: A continuation of the land rights struggle in Paanama income from the cultivation went directly to the women. Since the eviction in 2010, the villagers have faced various difficulties in accessing their land due to the construction of an elephant fence surrounding it; and the land-grab by the state. They also faced difficulties from the local council in implementing favourable decisions for restitution taken by national-level authorities (interview with activist Nimal, January 2017).⁴

Local councils are important for land rights because of the power vested in local councils in relation to land administration under Sri Lankan law. In the words of a leading activist:

"It is the local council which gives the licence to everything relating to land, constructions and so on. If we capture its power, we believe we can solve most of the issues" (interview with activist Nimal, January 2017).

Strategising engagement with the local government election was therefore crucial to their land struggle. In the beginning, Paanama activists engaged in electoral politics

- by viewing local elections as a strategic opportunity; and (b) by taking on the role of party supporters. After their eviction in 2010, one of the initial initiatives taken by the PPPO was to change the balance of power among the political parties represented in the divisional council;

and to form a local administration which was not an extension of the Rajapaksa government at the centre. As with past governments, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led United Peoples Freedom Alliance regime used local government to advance their development agenda using the authority of the central government.

To strengthen their support at the divisional council level, and to engage with the local council authorities more pragmatically, the activists hoped to change the political party holding the majority of seats in the local body. To achieve this, activists supported the main opposition United National Party (UNP)⁵ in the 2011 local government elections; and put forward a woman candidate, in the person of a villager from a politically-connected family, to contest in Paanama South (interview with activist Nimal, January 2017). Most of the members of the PPPO supported the UNP by canvassing for that party and by displaying its campaign posters.

Following the 2011 election, the Lahugala *Pradeshiya Sabha* was established with a UNP majority and four SLFP members in the opposition (Daily News, 2011). The activists viewed this as a victory. Not only had their preferred party won control of the council, but they had also defeated the ruling party at the centre; which had condoned their expulsion and had harassed them in their struggle to return to their land (interview with activist Nimal, January 2017). The woman activist who contested in Paanama South also won a seat in the council. This was significant as she had previously made representations to the local authority on behalf of those evicted from their land. As the next section will show, engagement in electoral politics gradually increased, as did the lobbying of the *Pradeshiya Sabha*, such that the PPPO became a widely recognised pressure group within the Lahugala community and its political landscape.

1. Engagement through the Citizens Forum 2013-2017

The Citizen's Forum was first established in 2013 (interview with activist Maya, December 2017) with the support of the Active Citizenship for Development Network (see Peiris in this issue). The objective was to strengthen people's participation in local governance by facilitating citizen engagement in decision-making in local councils, including through their participation in the public gallery and through petitioning.

Land struggle activists actively engaged with the Citizens Forum (CF). At the time of our field research in January and again December of 2017, the CF had 24 members, of whom 22 were women.⁶ Moreover, nearly all of their office-bearers were women. The members expressed pride in the level and extent of women's participation in the CF; which created space in their view for discussion among them on engagement with the local council.

The Lahugala divisional council was one of the few councils in the country with a UNP majority after the 2011 local elections. This also meant that the council was not representative of the ruling coalition, but rather aligned with the main opposition party at the centre. The activists later saw this as a limitation in achieving their objective as the council was not politically linked to the government nor enjoyed its patronage (interview with activist Sandya, December 2017). Further, there was disappointment in not receiving the anticipated level of support from the UNP councillors they had helped elect (interview with activist Nimal, January 2017).

Those women activists who were interviewed reported their belief that the Citizen's Forum was both a useful platform for more significant people's participation in decision-making and a space for greater women's representation and leadership:

What we do is governance, when we need something, we ask or request it. If we do not get it, we have to have discussions with the right people and work out a way to get the things that we need

(interview with activist Sandya, January 2017).

Through their engagement with the Citizen's Forum, members of the land struggle reported that they have been able to direct the divisional council to look into the welfare of villagers. Some achievements they noted were: addressing the shortage of medicine in the local hospital; provision of electric lamp-posts to light the streets; and getting vaccinations for their animals (interview with activists Sandya and Maya, January 2017). This platform was later used to lobby for their land rights struggle by building awareness among the broader community and other stakeholders, as well as obtaining information on their case through the new Right to Information Act (interview with activist Maya, December 2017).

1. From Citizens Forum to Electoral Politics

By January 2017, members of the Citizen's Forum were discussing the inclusion of their women members in ward nominee lists for the 2018 local council election, using the women's quota. This election had two main entry points for candidates. One, as direct contestants to demarcated wards created under the first-past-the-post voting system; the other, through the proportional representation based party list under which the political parties appoint candidates to bonus seats based on the total number of votes obtained (see *Local Authorities Elections [Amendment] Act No. 16 of 2017*).

Members of the Citizen's Forum felt that existing levels of participation in decision-making in the local council remained limited for the villagers; despite their success in matters of general community welfare. They further believed that there should be a minimum number of members of the Citizen's Forum (CF) and the land struggle in the local council to highlight their concerns. This was especially the case for activist members of the CF involved in the land struggle, which to-date had received no definitive solution, and as such were stuck in fruitless petitions to the council on their plight. They pointed out that ultimate decision-making power to consider or discard their proposals for resolution of the dispute lies with the divisional council. This was a critical reason which led activists to consider electoral politics and to engage in the 2018 election as contestants. Their disappointing experience since the 2011 election – of limited influence on the council as voters and constituents – also confirmed them in this belief. As one activist noted:

“Electoral politics will help us better if we have some power within the *Pradeshiya Sabha* because sometimes [the councillors] do not let us speak about our issues (interview with activist Nimal, December 2017).”

After the change of government in 2015, Cabinet approval was achieved to release most of the land acquired by the state.⁷ However, this has not been implemented by local authorities, including the District Secretary. Activists also reported new obstacles based on commercial interest. According to them, a prominent regional politician in the central government does not permit the release of their land, as he has plans to use it for tourism development (interview with activist Nimal, December 2017).“

As such, as of January 2017 local activists were considering contesting the 2018 local government elections as an independent group, comprising mostly the women members of the Citizen's Forum:

“... now we are having discussions about whether we should introduce a women team into the *Pradeshiya Sabha*. There will be fifteen positions: eleven will be elected directly and [what] we want is for nine of them to be female. We are trying to figure out how to fight in this election. How to fund

it? Who is favoured by the people? How not to be divided by the current parties? How to present ourselves as an independent party? We are trying to raise money for the campaign. If at least two women get into the divisional council, then neither of the main parties will have a majority. So these two people will be the ones holding the balance of power (interview with activist Nimal, January 2017).

However, at time of field-research eleven months later in December 2017 and two months prior to the elections, the activists of the land struggle and the Citizen's Forum were faced with another option: which was to contest in the wards or be appointed on the list, through the UNP.

The activists believed that they had a better chance of being nominated through the UNP ward list, paving the way for representation in the divisional council to seek resolution to the land struggle within a decision-making body. In turn, the major political parties appeared keen to nominate local activists given their wide-spread community reach:

"...we know that at least two or three women will get in from the wards. [The parties] tell us that we can contest [with them] in the election, and they will give us a bonus seat too, but we keep telling them that we have done work for the people and that we do not need a bonus seat to be selected. In Lahugala there are five bonus seats. The council used to have eleven seats, but now that has increased to eighteen. Thirteen will be elected from the wards and five will be appointed from the party list ... There are five wards in our villages, and we have nominated five women to contest. Our aim is to send at least three or four women into the council, because then we will have some chance of facing our challenges" (interview with activist Nimal, December 2017).

Under the new system, and in line with the objectives of the Citizen's Forum (CF), with the introduction of the women's quota, it was certain there would be an increase in women's representation in the divisional council. The CF was of the assumption that having more women in the council is sensible as women are more likely to challenge the corrupt practices of local bodies:

When it is a man, he can be bribed with a bottle. But when there is a woman you cannot do that (interview with Nimal, January 2017).

Ultimately, the activists chose to contest on existing party lines and supported the UNP as it is presently the main parliamentary force in the central government. Their assumption was that this would put them a better position in negotiating the release of their land from state authorities.

Sometime ago some villagers were talking about backing the [*Sri Lanka PodujanaPeramuna*—SLPP] to take control of the council, so I explained to them that the central government is UNP and that they will not allow the SLPP *Pradeshiya Sabha* chairman to do any work in the village. That's how politics works. So I told them that if you want anything done for the village, you must elect a UNP as chairman (interview with activist Sandya, December 2017).

Three members from the land struggle movement were nominated by the UNP, of whom two were women. The activist who contested and won the 2011 election from Paanama South again contested in this election in the same ward and won her seat.

1. Outcome of 2018 Election and Limits to Electoral Politics

In the 2018 local government election, the SLPP headed by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa—under whose administration the eviction of the Paanama villagers had occurred—won the majority in Lahugala divisional council with seven members. The UNP came second with five members and the SLFP faction under the leadership of the incumbent President was placed third, also with five members (Elections Commission, 2018). The activists were initially told that they would be given the

two bonus seats allocated to the UNP. However, this was not done. In March 2018, it was reported that the UNP had given these bonus seats to two candidates in the Lahugala ward – unconnected to the CF and PPPO – who had been unsuccessful in their campaign (telephone interview with activist Sandya, March 2018). However, as noted above, the woman activist who contested from Paanama South won her ward, and is now a member of the *Pradeshiya Sabha* again.

1. Conclusion

Villagers in Paanama engaged with electoral politics as a strategy to regain lost land. The transition from rural associationalism to electoral politics was not a sudden decision made by them; but one that was well thought-out in light of the limitations of associationalism and being mere electoral supporters. Pursuing their primary goal of acquiring access to and use of their cultivation land since 2010, the activists had a long history of engagement with local governance through the PPPO and the Citizen's Forum. Responding to the space introduced by measures in the new local government law such as the women's quota and the mixed electoral system, the activists strategised on their options including deciding whether to contest independently or with the UNP. In a context where widespread barriers to women's participation have been noted during the local elections, the Paanama case is unusual owing to the encouragement and support women received to contest the elections from the PPPO and the Citizen's Forum.

All of these strategies were instrumentally conducted as a means to strengthen their struggle for the right to land. Even though the activists were not able to enter the Lahugala Divisional Council through the UNP party-list, they have not given up the will to engage with the local authority through the Citizen's Forum. The Paanama case study is a good example of how rural associationalism can transform into electoral politics not only as part of the political agendas of local elites and ruling parties but also based on the needs of the people.

Given both the long-standing and ever burgeoning resource-based rights movements emerging in post-war Sri Lanka, further explorations of how rural and non-elite communities engage with, respond to and participate in local governance is warranted. Moreover, a close look at women's political participation in these movements can shed light on gendered everyday politics and their contestation.

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