

Sri Lanka: Vame Handa election analysis

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In Sri Lanka under its Second Republican Constitution of 1978, executive power is vested in the President; which makes the Presidential Election (most recently on 8 January 2015), most decisive in the distribution of state power. With the introduction of the executive presidency in 1978, enormous power is in the hands of the party leader who is nominated to contest for the post of presidency. Hence, the inner democracy of the political parties are largely curtailed.

Although the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was passed after 2015 presidential election – conceding to decades of opposition to the presidential system and its centralisation of power in one individual – in fact, the president's powers were not reduced substantially. He still can appoint the cabinet. If he defines the government as a 'national government'; he can increase the number of cabinet ministers to accommodate constituent parties (over and above the cap of 30 cabinet ministers in the 19th Amendment).

Invariably, the result of the Presidential Election is reflected in the results of the Parliamentary Election; particularly when the latter is held soon after the former. This trend continued in the 17 August 2015 General Election, which confirmed the swing away from Mahinda Rajapaksa's United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (centred on the bourgeois populist Sri Lanka Freedom Party—SLFP) and towards the United National Front for Good Governance (centred on the right-wing United National Party—UNP).

In the presidential election held on 8 January 2015, Mahinda Rajapaksa was defeated by the former General-Secretary of the SLFP and senior cabinet member, Maithripala Sirisena with the support of the opposition UNP. The leftist Sinhala nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front) also supported Sirisena in that election.

Soon after the presidential election, the victorious Sirisena appointed Ranil Wickramasinghe, long-time leader of the UNP as the Prime Minister of the new government, despite the UNP being a minority party in that Parliament (merely 44 seats). The UPFA, with more than three times that number of parliamentarians was unable to prevent the President from doing so; because of the powers vested in him by the 1978 Constitution. However, the pro-Mahinda Rajapaksa group within the SLFP-UPFA attempted to bring down the minority government through tabling a No-Confidence vote. Parliament was dissolved by the President, before the motion could be taken up for debate, paving the way for the 17 August General Election.

The Parliamentary election that was held six months after the Presidential election was won by the UNP. However, it was not able to get a simple majority of 113 seats in the 225 member legislature. The results of the 17 August election are as follows:

United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) 106
United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) 95
Tamil National Alliance (TNA) 16
Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) 06
Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) 01
Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) 01

The UNFEGG, UPFA and JVP programmes presented at the time of the General Election were basically similar. The first two were full of election promises to increase public and private sector wages; to create jobs; and many other un-costed goodies to the electorate. All three parties had designed their programmes openly or tacitly accepting pro-capitalist socio-economic policies. In the last couple of years, perhaps symbolised by the election of its current paramount leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake, it appears that the JVP has sought to reposition itself; by forsaking its revolutionary past and instead playing the role of a Parliamentary Left, and one sympathetic to national capitalism and the interests of that class to boot.

Partly as a result of this ideological consensus, there was no debate on programmatic issues. Any careful observer might notice, that the campaign instead revolved round the personality and politics of Mahinda Rajapaksa; who sought to reassert himself (and safeguard the future and fortunes of his family and cronies) – after his surprise defeat in the Presidential Election – through leading the parliamentary election campaign of the UPFA.

While the UNFEGG and JVP wanted to stop him coming back, the UPFA including the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, Communist Party, Democratic Left Front and the Sinhala nationalists in that alliance, wanted to bring Rajapaksa back to power. Dissident sections of the ‘Old Left’ parties broke away to pledge their support to Sirisena and therefore his ‘good governance’ alliance with the UNP. Meanwhile, one group in the Nava Sama Samaja Party directly supported the UNFEGG, under the leadership of UNP leader Ranil Wickramasinghe, to defeat the so-called ‘fascist’ Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Although NSSP General Secretary Vickramabahu openly supported Ranil Wickramasinghe and Maithripala Sirisena (in that order), he did not contest on the UNFEGG ticket. Many Leftists and some sections of society expected him to do so. Bahu has been a vociferous supporter of the UNP leader for several years: hailing Wickramasinghe as a ‘Liberal Democrat’ and symbol of secularism and power-sharing with the Tamil-speaking people.

So, the NSSP independently contested in 5 districts including in Colombo where there are many Tamil and Muslim voters. Bahu himself led the Colombo district campaign. As usual most of those fielded by the NSSP in this election cannot be described as Marxists or even socialists; some were sympathisers of the Party; others cult followers of Bahu; and one a maverick Buddhist monk. The NSSP’s total vote in the 2015 General Election was only 644 votes; while the Colombo list led by Bahu received only 303 votes.

There were three other far-left lists in this election. The results of the radical Left are as below.

Frontline Socialist Party (FSP): 7349 votes, 0.07% (all island contested)

United Socialist Party (USP): 1896 votes, 0.02% (4 districts contested)

Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP): 644 votes, 0.01% (5 districts contested)

Socialist Equality Party (SEP): 321 votes (1 district contested)

Hence we can see that the analysis and political programme of NSSP did not galvanise the Left and oppressed people in the country. Only the FSP and USP sharply criticised both main capitalist alliances and raised Left critiques and alternatives. The Vame Handa (‘Left Voice’) external faction of the NSSP critically supported these two radical lists in the General Election.

The main argument of the NSSP was that the first task of the Left and progressive forces is to defeat the ‘fascist’ Mahinda Rajapaksa; as indeed was their line during the Presidential Election campaign. Bahu described the transitional period between the Presidential and General Elections this year, as analogous to the ‘Kerensky period’, with Rajapaksa playing the role of Kornilov. Bahu’s schema is that the NSSP and other left forces can defeat ‘fascism’ by being part of a mass uprising of the

people who are now behind Ranil Wickramasinghe. This is a completely anti-Marxist and vulgar view of history.

According to Bahu, at this moment socialism is not on the agenda for dependent capitalist countries like Sri Lanka. Therefore, Bahu argues that socialists must first fight to complete and entrench the democratic revolution. Unfortunately our one-time comrade has embraced the infamous Stalinist 'two-stage' theory of revolution. His thoughts are echoed by other members of his group, e.g. Thiru in his post to the FI-Asia list on 29 July: "And, the January 8 regime change that preceded, has been generally hailed as a silent, 'democratic revolution which has to be taken forward by mass struggle' which in fact is the slogan of the NSSP contesting the upcoming Parliamentary election in 5 selected Districts, viz., Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara, Ratnapura and Galle".

Bahu has made more than explicit his unconditional support for UNP leader Ranil Wickramasinghe and the UNFGG in an interview in the English-language *Daily Mirror* newspaper on 13 August 2015 [\[1\]](#) which has also been published on the *International Viewpoint* website.

With the support of the titular leader of the UPFA, Maithripala Sirisena, the UNFGG won the single largest number of seats in the 17 August General Election. The UNFGG won primarily urban districts and districts with substantial numbers of national minorities: North-Eastern Tamils; Muslims; and Up-Country Tamils. The only exception was the rural Polonnaruwa district (which is also the home district and former electorate of President Sirisena).

The Tamil National Alliance had a sweeping victory in the ethnic Tamil majority Northern Province and Batticaloa district of the Eastern Province. A more militant Tamil political formation supported by pro-Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) sections of the Tamil diaspora failed to get adequate votes even to secure one seat in the Northern province: which reflects the mood and sentiments of the war-weary population.

Although the TNA has showed its willingness to support the UNFGG to form a government, President Sirisena has stuck to his plan for a 'national' government of the UNFGG and SLFP; including by bringing his defeated loyalists in the SLFP (who were outpolled in their districts by pro-Mahinda Rajapaksa candidates) into Parliament via the National List (whereby 29 members are nominated by political parties based on their share of the national vote).

This attempt to once-again create a 'Pan-Sinhala' administration without Tamil representation, indicates that the unresolved national question will be on the backburner in the coming period. However, the TNA may not be able to go along with this, even if some of its parliamentary fraction are willing to do so. The pressure from the TNA-composed Northern Provincial Council and the Tamil diaspora may be too strong for the moderate and neoliberal TNA leadership to delay pushing for a reasonable solution to the Tamil question.

The SLMC that contested as constituent party of the UNFGG in many districts (securing a couple of seats through the UNFGG) will also raise the demand of regional autonomy and administrative re-demarcation for Muslim areas in the Eastern Province.

The new government will adopt neoliberal economic policies by divesting state enterprises and deepening labour market flexibility. It has already planned privatization of water resources. It wanted to take the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) out of the Central Bank and to set up a trust controlled by so-called independent private persons. This is to free up the billions of workers' savings to bail out the government from the budgetary crisis it is in. Both the UNFGG and UPFA want to bring private capital into education and health. The next budget will be a major attack on the people's living standards as it has to offer tax concessions to corporations: foreign and local.

In this situation, all the imperialist forces including the USA, Britain and Australia, have already come out in support of the new government. Most dramatically, the Obama Administration has announced that it will drop its campaign at the UN Human Rights Council for an international tribunal into the war crimes committed in the last phase of the war in 2009, and support the Government of Sri Lanka's preferred option of a domestic accountability mechanism. This political manoeuvre to shore up support for the Sirisena-Wickramasinghe government against the forces of extreme Sinhala nationalism around Mahinda Rajapaksa has dashed the hopes of the victims and survivors seeking truth and justice for the atrocities that were committed in the name of Sri Lanka's 'war against terror'.

Vame Handa

P.S.

Vame Handa or 'Left Voice' is a public faction of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP). It publishes a monthly newspaper of the same name advocating Left unity in opposition to both capitalist political blocs.

Footnotes

[1] <<http://www.dailymirror.lk/83313/we-...>>