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978-0-521-15311-9 - Electoral Politics in an Emergent State: The Ceylon General Election of May 1970

A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1. Introduction

Electoral systems

For the student of elections and party politics, the emergent states of Ceylon, India and Malaysia show an interesting process of democratic evolution.¹ Parties have developed as electoral behaviour has changed, and it is difficult to disentangle the two phenomena. The political groupings that their societies have nurtured and continue to nurture are parts of ongoing movements which can be traced back to the colonial period and the Anglicised elites that gave leadership to them.

The three emergent states in question have wrestled with complex problems—national integration and economic development – and, despite many obstacles, they have to date attempted solutions to these successfully within the democratic framework. Whereas other societies with their Westernised elites following similar steps in constitutional government, such as those of Pakistan and Burma in Asia and others in a number of African states, have opted for one-party systems or dictatorships of various forms.

All three states inherited at independence considerable goodwill and an exploitable votebank because of their (Indian National) congress-style nationalist movements and the charismatic leaders that emerged therefrom. The Indian National Congress (1885) with Gandhi and Nehru, the Ceylon National Congress (1919) which later became the UNP (1946) of Don Stephen Senanayake and the United Malay National Organisation (1948), transformed by 1954 by Tunku Abdul Rahman into the Alliance Party, not only brought independence but made constitutional government viable. Further, for many years they remained the single dominant party while continuing to operate within the parliamentary system of government.

The ability of these parties to survive in office for so long can be attributed to a number of factors. They all had Anglicised elites firmly committed to the belief that Parliament was the safest instrument of legitimacy and consensus. These elites were farsighted enough to accommodate for some time their indigenous counterparts – the vernacular school teachers, native medicine men, priestly sects, small traders and persons engaged in the indigenous arts and crafts. By this ongoing process of extended recruitment to the ruling class, the system was kept in balance.

All of them opted for the first-past-the-post electoral system with a minimum of multi-member constituencies. Such electorates encouraged the emergence and growth of governing and oppositional coalitions rather than a fragmented and fractured party system under proportional representation, the second ballot and other related systems.²

Their ruling coalitions were essentially establishment-oriented, tradition-bound, conservative in political attitudes with no defined ideology but tending to be pragmatic. They exercised a hold because the politically backward

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A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

electors, especially in the rural areas, could be manipulated by paid brokers, wealthy patrons, party bosses, village headmen, as well as landlords and rich peasants. In course of time, however, with political education, radicalisation of politics and growing political awareness, the need to submit to pressures from factions within and outside became urgent and a matter of practical political expediency. At a later stage there occurred a break-up of the coalition and its displacement by another more radical group within, or by a rival group which had earlier departed from the parent organisation. An example of the former is the Congress-Revolutionary (R) of Mrs Gandhi and that of the latter is the SLFP of the late S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike who left the UNP in 1951 and established his own political organisation.

Ruralism and conservatism are entrenched in the electoral systems of these states, ensuring resistance to radical change. In both Ceylon and Malaysia,³ the rural areas have been given weightage at the expense of the supposedly progressive urban areas on the pretext that the former need weightage for their interests to be articulated adequately in the legislature. The greater part of India is in the rural areas (82 per cent rural population). Besides, the single-member constituency has a voting strength of 500,000 to 750,000 and this makes it impossible for any national party without the backing of wealth and organisational resources, such as Congress has, to make a serious bid for power other than to seek to undermine the strength of the dominant ruling party in those regions where it is markedly weak. The Alliance has been in a similar situation, with the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party making inroads into its position primarily in two states (Kelantan and Trengganu).⁴

Party systems

The test of successful one-party dominance however, is, firstly, not its skill to survive endlessly, but its willingness to spawn a legitimate oppositional group or coalition capable of not only replacing it but also working the system in the established way. In a sense, all three states accomplished this task with reasonable and varying degrees of success. It is true that Malaysia suspended parliamentary government for a period after the inter-ethnic clashes between Malays and Chinese following the general election of May 1969 but the normal processes have now been restored.⁵

Secondly, a transfer of power to the opposing coalition must be effected in a peaceful and constitutional manner. Only Ceylon to date has successfully contrived this, not once but on five different occasions – in 1956, March 1960, July 1960, 1965 and 1970.

Thirdly, the ruling party or coalition, when displaced, must be able to sustain the continuing loyalty of its members and work towards the objective of returning to office. Its conduct in opposition must be responsible. Again, taking all factors into consideration, Ceylon is the only one of the emergent states whose political coalitions have effected this operation successfully. Neither the SLFP in opposition from 1951 to 1956 and again from 1965 to 1970 nor the UNP

Cambridge University Press

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A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Electoral behaviour 3**

from 1956 to 1965 resorted to reckless and extra-constitutional tactics to achieve their goals. They maintained their cohesion and waited patiently for the ballot box in order to return to power.

However, it is argued that Congress in India since 1947 and the Alliance in Malaysia from 1955 have continued uninterruptedly in office, providing evidence of their success as umbrella parties and of the ability of their leadership over a long period of time to share power with other social groups striving for recognition and upward mobility. Ceylon, on the other hand, is criticised because the UNP squandered the goodwill and legacy it obtained at independence within the short period of nine years (1947-56).

The UNP and its pre-independence progenitor, the Ceylon National Congress, the latter a loosely knit and fragile political organisation, nevertheless held office continuously in the context of universal suffrage from 1931, under the Donoughmore constitution (with its liberal institutional framework of internal self-government) through to 1956. Looked at in this way, the UNP's term in office – 25 years before it lost to its rival – can be compared with the record of the old Congress – 24 years (1947–71) – and the Alliance's run of 18 years (1955–73) to date. On the average, it seems 25 years is about the limit that congress-style parties can hope to remain in power.

Electoral behaviour

Ceylon's unique experience lies in that its electors have had a process of political education longer than any of the emergent countries, from 1931 onwards. Education has been reinforced by the exercise of the franchise at two general elections before independence and even after. Added to this is the fact that the literacy rate in Ceylon is the highest among the new states – 89 per cent compared with pre-Bangladesh Pakistan's 18.8, India's 23.7, Malaya's 47.0 (the figures for Sabah and Sarawak were 23.5 and 21.5, respectively, in 1960) and Singapore's 49.8, with the African countries way down below.

This situation makes Ceylon the ideal laboratory for the study of electoral behaviour. The conditions prevalent – societal and political – are reproduced in the neighbouring states with varying modifications. The pattern in all three countries, however, is broadly the same, with Ceylon having a richer experience and with the likelihood of this experience being repeated in the other states concerned.

Against this background, a close examination of the 1970 Ceylon general election is of particular interest. It came at an important phase in the development of the party system. The contest was between two rather equally balanced coalitions led by influential rival leaders, each endowed with about as much charismatic power as the other. More importantly, the election marked a stage in the evolution towards the near-complete socialisation of Ceylon's traditional Marxist parties (the LSSP and CP) into the parliamentary process. The measure of Mrs Bandaranaike's success will depend on her skills in continuing to keep these Marxist parties within the framework of parliamentary

Cambridge University Press

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A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

politics. At the same time, the Marxists for their part have been able to introduce modernising elements into the rural-based, culturally chauvinistic and Sinhalese Buddhist-oriented but radicalised SLFP. Would the other emergent states be as successful in synthesising rural radicalism and urban Marxism? The indications are that Congress-R may very well follow the same path, with Congress-Old(O) and other Indian Right-wing organisations adopting UNP-style politics.

Further, the 1970 general election marked a break from the consensus politics that the two rival coalitions had been committed to up to then. There had been broad agreement between them to differ on details but to be fundamentally at one in regard to the foundations of the political order. But since the 1970 general election, the UF has sought to manipulate Parliament for their immediate purposes. It will only confine Parliament to providing leadership of the social forces that are clamouring for rapid change. Parliament has become more an instrument for ratifying the decisions of the supreme policy-framing body, the Cabinet, than the forum where Government and Opposition would normally seek to accommodate each other. In effect, there is now the possibility that what one Parliament ordains, the other, if it is of a different political complexion, will undo deliberately or alternatively indirectly by the Cabinet refraining from implementing legislation enacted.

For all these reasons, the study of electoral behaviour in Ceylon is profitable and has its lessons for other emerging countries. Further, the study of the 1970 election epitomises Ceylon's political evolution through the years since 1931.

Methodology

This study is basically designed on the lines of the investigations of British general elections so admirably undertaken by Nuffield College, Oxford. It is both a description and an analysis of what we consider was Ceylon's most important general election to date. As well, we have endeavoured to present a record of the events leading to the election, the course it took, the issues that were pertinent to the determination of the result, an assessment of the result and a critical account of the consequences to Ceylon that flowed therefrom. We have further sought to examine the gamut of electoral events in the wider context of Ceylonese politics and the country's election procedures and legislation.

The Nuffield approach is more appropriate, under the circumstances, to a study of Ceylonese electoral behaviour than, say, the methods used by American sociologists or social psychologists. For example, the counting of votes in Ceylon is organised by constituencies not by polling stations. The voting behaviour of important social groups in particular areas could not therefore be quantified.

We hope that our material will benefit psephologists who seek to make comparative studies of elections in emergent states as well as students of politics and recent history in the developing areas.⁶

We depended on two types of evidence for our investigations – written and oral. Newspapers in Ceylon provided a useful coverage of the entire campaign in

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A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Methodology 5**

all its details from start to finish. The data were overwhelming but were very often determined by the political slants of the newspaper combines and therefore loaded in favour of some contenders as against others, sometimes misleading, and at other times heavily embroidered. It was our responsibility to sift the evidence and double-check it before using it for our purposes. Only when we were satisfied that what was said was absolutely correct did we utilise the evidence. In all instances where we were in doubt, we verified the facts from the speakers themselves. We, and those who helped us, were also present at all of the important rallies to record the evidence at first hand. Party literature, which we obtained in an over-abundance through our own efforts, provided a second source of written evidence. We have spent many hours going through the mass of data, the polemics and the propaganda to arrive at our conclusions. A third source was a fair quantity of party records in the form of confidential documents, private memoranda and correspondence made generously available by party functionaries and politicians. This was of added help in enabling us to look at the events in as objective a way as possible and to interpret them in the best possible light.

Our second type of evidence was the spoken word in interviews. Many of the important leaders and officeholders in the different parties spoke to us, or to those whom we directly deputed to speak to them. We prepared our questions in keeping with what we thought should be the relevant information that should be elucidated. We also interviewed many of the candidates or their agents and principal supporters. Our questions were in the 'open-ended' form, not straightforward ones which required a 'yes' or 'no'. In this way, our respondents talked to us at length but at the same time we did not lose track of the immediate information we were seeking. With the best will in the world, the interviewed person could not be as exact as we would have liked him to be. Apart from the fact that in the majority of cases he was directly involved, we were also aware that time always tends to take toll of the memory. Besides, truth is many-sided and facts are sometimes disputable. We took note of all these circumstances when analysing our material.

The wealth of evidence we collected helped us to understand better the course of the campaign as it developed from day to day. We were also able in this way to comprehend what was taking place not merely at the national level but in the constituencies as well. We did not, however, for the reasons already stated, depend entirely on the spoken word. Whenever doubts arose, we had recourse to other sources to verify our findings.

Some of the material collected has been digested into statistical tables. Other material has been worked into the body of this book. Our respondents could feel satisfied that they have contributed in no small way to the completion of this study.

Finally, in our efforts to get a complete picture of the campaign and of the performances of the leading rival politicians in order to reinforce our findings, we were assisted by some of the cleverest and most able journalists in the Ceylon press at the time.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-15311-9 - Electoral Politics in an Emergent State: The Ceylon General Election of May 1970

A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

The author is fortunate in that he served a period as a journalist in the leading newspaper combine in Ceylon, Lake House, before entering the academic field. Some of his students and friends now occupy key positions in the important newspapers. Both these factors gave him access to well-placed journalists who kindly made available to him their own impressions of the campaign, some extremely useful documents in the form of the diaries they kept while covering election meetings of the important political leaders, as well as other confidential literature and notes of discussions they had with the men or women at the top in the different parties.

Aims

This study is intended to serve two purposes. It details the way in which a keenly fought election campaign went through its various paces in Asia's oldest and most successful democracy. In another sense, we have undertaken this task in order to provide a record of what really happened. In a country where memories tend to be short, we hope that the written word will, especially after the passage of time, throw light on what actually took place. We trust that it will also help to interpret the sweeping changes that are at the present time taking place in Ceylon's political and economic set-up. From this point of view and for many other reasons as well, the general election of May 1970 is, as we have already stressed, of immense significance in Ceylon's post-independence development.

Our design was restricted from the outset. But within the confines we set ourselves, we have tried as best as we may to produce a dispassionate record of the campaign and its result. We hope our efforts will set the pace for future studies covering a wider framework than the present.

Cambridge University Press

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A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2. Politics and society

The background

Societal divisions in Ceylon are deeply complex.¹ Ethnic rivalries bedevil politics and interfere with economic progress; the principal rivalry is between Sinhalese and Tamils (both Ceylon and Indian). Religious conflicts are just as pervasive; the Sinhalese Buddhists grieve the neglect of centuries of foreign rule and fear for their religion because of the overzealous proselytising activities of Christian missionary organisations. Caste differences exist beneath the political surface but politicians and parties in pursuit of power and/or office know when to do what is expedient on this sensitive issue.

The Sinhalese Buddhist ethos of compassion, tolerance and the middle way, however, operates as a moderating factor. At the same time, a responsible political leadership at the higher levels, deriving its concepts and values from Western democratic thought and/or Marxism, restrains extremism at levels where communal conflict can otherwise become intense. Firmly countering manifestations of Sinhalese majority extremism are strong and powerful minority political organisations. These too serve towards a build-up of a centrist position in the political stances of major political groupings. Out of these dialectics there has emerged a Ceylonese version of parliamentary government which has survived the test of time since the introduction of an adapted form of the Westminster model in 1947.

The Westernised intelligentsia

The process of deracination and Westernisation had started from the time of the Portuguese and Dutch but was accomplished with greater thoroughness during the one and a half centuries of British rule, mainly through secondary schools organised by Christian missionary societies administering instruction largely in the English medium. The alumni of these schools in course of time became a class in themselves, privilege-ridden by virtue of their easy access to white-collar jobs and the success they achieved in the professions, in commerce and to some extent in the planting industry – coconut, rubber and tea, respectively.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the elitists among this intelligentsia organised themselves into various associations and societies mainly for the purpose of agitating for further reform of the constitution. They were moderate in their demands and preferred to gain their objectives right up to the grant of independence by using peaceful devices such as memorials, petitions, prayers, negotiations and, on occasion, protests.

There was the element of mild protest against colonial rule among these elitists which savoured of nationalism, but it lacked the fervour and agitational content that characterised the parallel populist Buddhist revivalist movement gathering force at about the same time. In their anxiety to bring all sections of the

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A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Politics and society

island's multi-group society under a broad-based Ceylonese leadership, they refrained from emphasising the past history of wars between Sinhalese and Tamils and the achievements of Sinhalese heroes, for this would have stimulated mutual antagonisms.

However, the inevitable split occurred when the Ceylon Tamils among this elite saw the gradual erosion of their political strength with increasing instalments of reform. They pressed the imperial power for safeguards in any proposed constitutional framework, demands which their Sinhalese counterparts construed as being obstructionist.

In the 1920s the Ceylon Tamil leadership asked for communal ratios in representation; in the 1930s and 1940s the more articulate among them demanded a system of 'balanced representation' under which 50 per cent of the seats in the legislature should be reserved for the minority communities; since the 1950s they have been agitating for the preservation of 'the traditional homelands of the Tamil-speaking peoples' either within the framework of a federal constitution or by other guarantees, parity of status between the Sinhalese and Tamil languages, and citizenship and voting rights for the vast majority of the 'stateless' Indian Tamil population mainly resident in the plantation districts. These Indian Tamils had lost their citizenship and had been disfranchised under legislation enacted in 1948 and 1949.

The problem for the Sinhalese leadership was how best to accommodate these claims consistently with the due rights of the majority Sinhalese. There were various groups among the latter – the impoverished Kandyan Sinhalese, along with the Low Country Sinhalese, resentful of the 'Indian presence', the antagonism of the Sinhalese Buddhists to the Christian 'monopoly' over education (the best schools were theirs), the powerful non-*giogama* (cultivator) Sinhalese caste groups striving for upward political and social mobility – but the most pressing question was the Tamil one.

The Sinhalese leadership was willing to accommodate the Ceylon Tamil claims up to a point but, with economic contraction, the rivalries between the two communities, or at any rate their middle classes, grew sharper until Sinhalese Buddhist reaction reached peak levels in the mid-1950s. At this point the Sinhalese political elite itself split, one section, the United National Party (UNP), with little success seeking to placate both Sinhalese and Ceylon Tamils, the other, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), willing to go along, but only to a certain extent, with the militant forces of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

The UNP of D. S. Senanayake (founded in 1946) and his successors endeavoured to maintain the unity of most sections of the English-educated in Ceylon's plural society while being authoritarian and paternal *vis-à-vis* the non-English-educated and the underprivileged. But it did not make any serious attempt to integrate the latter elements into the political processes. The unity it maintained at the higher levels was only surface deep. The party eventually succumbed to the pressures of the Sinhalese Buddhists in the mid-1950s but returned shortly after to its earlier theme of national unity.

The pro-Sinhalese Buddhist forces and the aggrieved Sinhalese rural middle

Cambridge University Press

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A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)**The Sinhalese Buddhist-oriented intelligentsia 9**

classes received leadership from S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and his successor, his wife, Sirima Bandaranaike. At first it was the Sinhala Maha Sabha (founded in 1937) of the 1930s and 1940s which politicised these neglected layers of society. Thereafter the SLFP (formed in 1951) in alliance with other political groupings gave them direction while also restraining them from extremes. The Bandaranaiques provided a moderate and responsible leadership, especially at crisis points when Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinism threatened to engulf society.

Certain facts emerge from the way in which the Ceylonese Westernised intelligentsia evolved and established itself.

Firstly, their value orientation – language, clothes, manners, ostentation, etc. – resulted in their cutting themselves off from 95 per cent of the mass of Ceylonese society who, to begin with, looked on them as successful but later saw them as a class gorged with privileges which must be destroyed. The latter feeling became intensified when the ‘have-nots’ were made aware by political catalysts that their success was no more than the result of preferential treatment deliberately made available to children of Christian parents (Sinhalese and Ceylon Tamils) as well as to those who belonged to the better-off sections in society. Movements directed against Christians, Ceylon Tamils and the English-educated were the inevitable result.

Secondly, Westernisation of the future power elites as a result of English education in local schools and/or a university or professional education in Britain (the ‘England returneds’) inculcated Western ideals of democracy and parliamentary government in them. Added to this were the invaluable insights into the administrative processes and training in ministerial government afforded them under the Donoughmore constitution from 1931 to 1947. Consequently the future Ceylonese power elites, conservatives, centrists and Marxists, were socialised into a political order which was resolutely committed to constitutional government.

A final aspect of this process was the creation of a yawning gap between the English-educated and the rest of Ceylonese society. The former manned the public and private sectors and the professions and looked down contemptuously at the vernacular or *swabasha* layers in Ceylonese society. This alienation was more evident among the administrators and even among those who occupied the lower rungs of bureaucracy. Government therefore came to be looked on by the masses as a distant object, awesome, and its members as persons to be approached with fear and reverence. It was not ‘their Government’ but a process turned over by their British ‘masters’ to the local versions of this masterdom. Only after 1956 with the advent to power of Bandaranaike was the bureaucracy gradually democratised.

The Sinhalese Buddhist-oriented intelligentsia

Within a few years of Britain gaining control over the whole island, Sinhalese Buddhist opposition to the Christianising process began to make itself evident. In 1826 parodies of Christian tracts were published by dissenting Buddhists. In

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A. Jeyaratnam Wilson

Excerpt

[More information](#)**10 Politics and society**

1839 a *bhikku*, the Venerable Valave Sri Siddhartha, founded the Paramadhammacetiya Pirivena which became a centre of Buddhist learning and the nursery of Buddhist revivalism.

However, Christian endeavour by the 1850s had been so thorough that in 1852 a Christian, James D'Alwis, a distinguished orientalist and politician of the time and an ancestor of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, remarked that 'the day may yet come when the Trio of the one Great God will become a substitute for the Triad of Buddhism'.²

But Buddhism was not to be submerged. In the succeeding decades it threw up leaders who sought to revitalise Buddhism by providing it with an intellectual and agitational content.³ Among the more prominent of them was the Reverend Migettuwatte Gunananda, the skilled debater of Panadura fame, and the zealot Anagarika Dharmapala, the greatest of them all. From 1883 until his death in 1933, he dedicated his life to fighting for the rights of the Sinhalese Buddhists and inspiring a nationalism among them which railed at the Westerners, Christians and the non-Sinhalese groups.⁴ The journalist and publicist Piyadasa Sirisena (1875–1946) followed the Anagarika in condemning the 'evils' of Westernisation and voicing the ideas of the Sinhalese-educated through the newspaper he edited, the *Sinhala Jatiya* (Sinhalese Nation), which commenced publication in 1910.

A few Westerners themselves made noteworthy contributions towards the Buddhist revival. The American, Colonel H. S. Olcott, arriving in Ceylon in 1880 with a Russian friend, Helena Petrova Blavatsky, embraced Buddhism at a time when it was in need of prestige and respectability. Olcott pioneered the Buddhist educational movement. In 1886 his British associate, C. W. Leadbeater, founded Ananda College, which soon became the island's leading Buddhist secondary school and helped to produce public servants, professional men and political agitators with a Buddhist background. In the field of Sinhalese arts and crafts, the nationalist movement received encouragement and scientific guidance from the scholarship of Dr Ananda Coomaraswamy, more a Westerner despite his Ceylon Tamil–American parentage.⁵

At various points there were links between the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalists and the Westernised intelligentsia. Quite a few among the latter joined in the temperance movement launched against the excise policy of the colonial Government from 1904 onwards by the Anagarika and his associates. There was liaison between the two groups during the Sinhalese Buddhist–Muslim riots of 1915.

The Anagarika's nationalistic religio-economic message of the 1920s became the political manifesto of the Buddhist movement in the 1950s and 1960s. He urged the Sinhalese Buddhists to imitate the industrious Muslim traders. He attacked the Ceylon Tamils, Indian Tamils and Muslims, who he said 'are employed in large numbers to the prejudice of the people of the island', meaning the Sinhalese Buddhists.⁶ He condemned the 'economic exploitation' of the island by Britishers and Indians.⁷ In June 1922 he objected to the use of the word 'Ceylonese' for Sinhalese and in the same month he said he wanted 'the whole of the present government to be a Buddhist government . . . the Governor