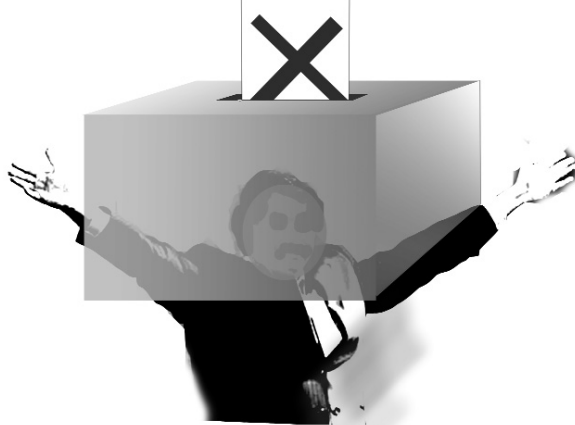


The Australian General Election 07 came and went. Looking at the whole process, Sri Lankans here kept telling to themselves: "what a different world we live in!"

A government with a solid record of achievement over 12 years was turfed out because it eventually failed to tune in with the people. The smoothness of the overnight change to a team with no experience in government cannot conceal the revolution.

Government willingly submitted itself to the will of the people. John Howard congratulated Kevin Rudd and the latter payed tribute to the great service of the outgoing PM. How civil? How decent? The countrywide supporters of the respective parties did not go berserk with revenge- verbal abuse, arson, and assault of opponents. I have been eyewitness to numerous General Elections in Sri Lanka from the years 1962 to 1994 and I have been supervising elections and acting as Chief Counting Officer too. However, not once did I witness our outgoing and incoming leaders act in such fashion toward their opponents. I remember how Sirima Bandaranaike



THEIR ELECTION AND OURS

When can Lanka's people breathe this freedom!



attempted to stay on even after electoral defeat. We all remember how Chandrika Bandaranaike tried to stay on after her period was concluded. JR tried to cover a dastardly act of extending his term with a cloak of legality through a fraudulent referendum. Dudley was a solitary exception but even in his case, his supporters adored street action.

The whole process of electioneering in Australia took place with transparency, openness, civility, and fair play so much so that the loser finds it easy to cushion his frustration. We nearly witnessed some resonance to the Lankan scenario with the racist Lindsay phoney flyer fiasco. John

Howard himself extinguished that immediately. Sri Lankan campaigns, on the other hand, are so replete with dirty tricks and personal abuse.

The media exposure here was fair and balanced. In Sri Lanka, the incumbent government controls a substantial part of the media and twists it in its favour employing SLBC, Lake House papers, Rupavahini and ITN etc in a myriad of false shows to hoodwink the audience. The Opposition has therefore to fight an uphill battle in a hopelessly uneven playing field.

All this means that democracy and freedom to decide is at work in this part of the world. How I hope that the day will arrive when the people of my motherland will breathe this free air!

At street level, the rule of law prevails here and so we had no murders and thuggery. Campaigners moved about quietly, freely, and

confidently without the risk of grenades and assault. The ordinary civil lives of people were unaffected and undisturbed by loudspeakers; by massive mass rallies of sweating people cuddled together to listen to

the lies of their leaders; by traffic stoppages, poster wars, polythene flags, etc.

Campaigners here met people at shopping centres and community gatherings. Voter opinion had been periodically tested by well-conducted opinion polls. These polls have now proved to be true. All this means that democracy and freedom to decide is at work in this part of the world. How I hope that the



day will arrive when the people of my motherland will breathe this free air! They seem to have no qualms about speaking on behalf of lying politicians. On the other hand, Australians are suspicious of religious leaders generally and are loathe seeing them play such a prominent role in political campaigning.

Let's look at the issues involved in Election 07: the need for leadership change, climate control, inflation, interest rates, IR laws, housing affordability, hospitals, education revolution, forests, the Iraq war, human rights and so on. Despite a highly plural electorate with about 160 ethnic groups spread all over, there were no issues relating to the protection of ethnic identities. Furthermore, on all these issues there was a fundamental agreement between the two major contending parties with regard to desired outcomes. In terms of the broad direction that the country should take there was little differentiation. The details will make a visible difference.

What we tragically miss in Lanka is such a consensus. Whether it's the war or the econo-

my it is all the same. The JVP brings out the ghost of a Marxism that is dead all over the world and wants almost everything run by government or taken over by government. The JVP also incites employees against employers not realizing that employees are created by businesses. In Australia, these dead socialist shibboleths are never uttered by anyone except perhaps a few struggling lunatics.

The war for secession, race, caste, and religion play central roles in Sri Lankan elections though economic issues such as cost of living, unemployment, pover-

Just consider how the election itself ran. No manipulation of electoral lists, no stuffing, or stealing of ballot boxes. No impersonation at polling booths and therefore no demeaning of voters by drenching their thumbs in ink.

ty, and corruption can move to the forefront. There is little public sense of urgency about the dire straights to which our infrastructure has fallen- our roads, our power, our water supply, our hospitals, our schools etc. Although Sri Lanka's air pollution percentages particularly in Colombo having gone over the roof, such a "green issue" is not important. Human Rights are also of low impact as the population has taken state violence and media suppression



Shyamon Jayasinghe

for granted. Public corruption does not provoke the electorate anymore; even the President does ignore it. In Australia, the future played a key role. In Lanka, the future takes back seat with patriots glorifying the past.

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What after the election? The winner in Lanka shoots off to see the Asgiri Malwathu Mahanayake theros as though he is a saint in a political garb. Imagine Rudd going to see the Archbishop!

An attempt to graphically draw up the stark contrast as we've done above is not an exercise in self-deprecation. Rather such a picture is useful in order to bring home to us how far behind in civility and decency Sri Lanka is. A friend of mine once remarked that in Africa things are worse. One cannot argue for a doctrine of cultural relativity here as the above concerns relate to universal human values. Besides, how a nation bathed for over 2500 years with supreme Buddhist values such as intellectual freedom, tolerance, compassion, and an existential sense of our mortality can succumb to such growing depths of public moral depravity and violence of human rights is beyond comprehension.

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