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Sri Lanka

After the elections: Chauvinism, a receding force

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV488 - September 2015 -

Publication date: Wednesday 9 September 2015

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Though the campaign is for a national government, the agreement signed by the two bourgeoisie parties is to work together for two years on several selected areas of good governance. They do not include any steps to resolve the national problem, except the fact that there is a tacit agreement to implement the 13 amendment and to implement the LLRC recommendations.

On the other hand it addresses corruption issues, taking the country on a fast track of economic development, safeguarding fundamental freedoms and protection of the rights of women and children. The MOU reflects the bourgeois consensus that exists in society regarding good governance. This can pave the way for constitutional reform that will not be satisfactory from the Left point of view, but which the new government can do without facing opposition.

Unfulfilled promises

There are several unfulfilled pledges in the transitional government's 100 day programme that this government can start to implement. Most important amongst these would be establishing the Constitutional Council with members drawn from both the government and opposition and also from civil society. This will be the first time the Constitutional Council, the body vested with the authority under the 19th Amendment to appoint the members of the various independent commissions, most notably those pertaining to the judiciary, police, public service, bribery and corruption commission, human rights commission and elections commission go into action. These institutions of state are expected to establish a system of checks and balances in limiting the powers of the elected politicians. Thus the officials will be relatively independent to interpret the laws and regulations and carry out state functions. During the Mahinda regime fascistic power penetrated the state machinery where many ruling politicians and their supporters ended up behaving with the impunity associated Italian fascism. They could pillage, rape and even commit murder with no action being taken against them.

President Sirisena's readiness at the beginning of his term of office to reduce his own powers in the national interest was an act within Asian democratic tradition that has few parallels in Lanka, and even internationally. Some liberals believe that his expression of Asiatic democratic tradition of consensus and commitment to good governance will ensure that more structures for checks and balances will be in place soon. Latter expect that these reforms would included making a renewed attempt to pass the 20th Amendment which is about having smaller electorates more accountable to voters, and passing the right to information law which would give the general public access to governmental documents. The lack of transparency in the governmental system was brought to light by many radical speakers during both the presidential and general election campaigns. These revealed massive corruption in government contracts that took place in the past without any transparency at all.

What is not discussed so far, are the changes in the area of governance connected with nationality and religious relations, and the devolution of power. however this was the key theme not only in the election campaign of the Tamil parties in the North and East of the country but also of all minority community leaders that joined various election campaigns. Although the winning party in NE, the TNA, is considered to be a social democratic party as claimed by its leaders Sambanthan and Sumanthiran, and generally accepted as none violent on account of its willingness to engage in dialogue and trust-building with the rulers, it campaigned on a platform of greater autonomy and federalism for the North and East.

Issues of governance

This disturbed even the JVP and it got exposed again, as a chauvinist party. In contrast to other issues of governance, which relate to central government institutions, the issue of devolution of power is one on which there is much less consensus in the country. All say they are for equality, but only a few will accept autonomy for a distinct community. It is to be noted that those who got the largest numbers of votes in the defeated UPFA opposition were those who took stands against the devolution of power. However it came down almost to 25 lacks of votes compared to 58 lacks claimed by Wimal in last January.

Thus the issue of chauvinism continues to be alive in the country even though the inability of the UPFA to make it a winning formula at two successive elections suggests that it is receding as a force. It has been in existence since the 1950s when the SLFP was formed and utilized the power of language-based nationalism to trounce the UNP at the general elections of 1956. However Mahinda rule was primarily based on fascistic use of racism and religious sectarianism with the general population being constantly exposed to a barrage of anti-minority propaganda. Clearly there is a need for the government to make use of this defeat given to the fascistic forces to commence an immediate programme of public education on the issue of national problem. We have to give the options for a political solution based on equality, autonomy and the right of self determination that would address the roots of the conflict. This could be done alongside civil society organizations to prepare the ground for future reforms that are necessary to resolve the conflict in a sustainable and mutually acceptable manner.

August 27

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