

If the UNP had a far-seeing leadership they would have participated in the Batticaloa local election



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Adaptation of an interview given by Prof Rajiva Wijesinha *Secretary General*
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The Batticaloa local government election is over, but some people still complain about it and say they cannot accept the results. Why is this?

These are the same people who were opposed to the election even before it was announced, who then boycotted the election, who said that the prevailing situation was not suitable for an election. All these were proved to be false. Vociferous campaigns were carried out nationally and internationally by some NGOs asserting that armed groups would be in evidence and election violations were a certainty. Their reports on the ground made it clear that they found little evidence of this, but they said there would be violence afterwards. Now the time has come for them to accept that their reports were false.

The issue is whether the election can be accepted or not.

Nearly 60% of the people of the Batticaloa district have voted. There were almost no incidents reported as to election violations or forced voting. This is a great example of a free and fair election in the Sri Lankan context. The election was accepted by the people of Batticaloa who used their votes, so there is no reason for outsiders to challenge this. We can't say that everything was 100% perfect. But it is the best election in the Eastern province up to now, after a very long time. It was after 14 years that Batticaloa local elections were held. This is a great step. After this the opportunity for the provincial council election of the East as well as local government elections for some areas in the North will arise.

The Tamil National Alliance which is a major political party in both North & East boycotted this election. So, there is a possibility of challenging the final result.

That logic is false. The people voted against that boycotting. It is noteworthy that 60% have used their votes. The majority has forgotten the election result of 2004. In that election the TNA obtained only about 35%. Some of these votes were due to what was called the Karuna faction of the LTTE, which now forms the TMVP. A candidate called Kingsley Rajanayagam came top in that election. Later the LTTE forced him to resign.

Then he was assassinated. But the people of the East have shown that, when a chance is given to take a decision through fairness and democracy, they are not in Prabakaran's side. The TMVP did well, which is not surprising because it is based in the Eastern province. The LTTE and it seems the Tamil Alliance too have been rejected by the East.

Of course the TMVP has not received training regarding democratic practice. They should be given an opportunity to learn better to follow the democratic path. They once requested us to provide training on political issues. Some of them were among those who were forced to join the LTTE as child soldiers. Others have engaged in armed activities for 15-20 years. Under difficulties they entered the democratic stream. They have proved that they are able to achieve public preference through fairness, and we should all help to assist them in their journey.

But the opposition party not only boycotted this election, they also strongly protested against it being held. The world receives a very negative message through this, isn't it?

For six months UNP was protesting against this election. But I won't blame the party as a whole because still there are members there who believe in democracy. But the behavior of the opposition leader is a threat to democracy. He attained and continues in the leadership without allowing any democracy at all. In fact he declared while he was Prime Minister that he did not think democracy was essential for the development of a country. Once he stopped Prof G.L. Pieris from holding local elections in the East. Prof Pieris had announced these in 2003, and suddenly they were forgotten. The then Secretary of Defence, Mr Austin Fernando, told me that it was not that Prof Pieris changed his mind, Mr Wickremesinghe had stopped him. So his attempt this time to disrupt the election is not something new, and I suspect that as before he does this because it is what the LTTE wants. But we are glad the TMVP did not get caught in this conspiracy. They didn't engage in election violations. There were only two people killed in such violence, and both of them were TMVP members. They were killed by an LTTE suicide bomber. Still the TMVP went ahead without violence, which is a great victory for democracy.

Still there are armed groups in East. Without any solution for this problem, how can we establish a fully democratic climate?

The disarming process can't be done within seconds. And this needs good alternatives, job training and creation. The head of the International Labor Organization in Geneva understood this at once, when we discussed this, that we should not be satisfied with handouts for those who have suffered, we must empower them to stand on their own. We are now encouraging the UN to work more with agencies that aim at empowerment rather than dependency, ie ILO and IOM. But of course such work is less fashionable, it is less easy to get money. But we will do our best, recognizing that, until we empower these people in other ways, it will be a difficult task to disarm them by force, especially amidst still continuing severe threats from the LTTE. But the government can directly tell them to stop the usage of their weapons. That will definitely happen. Meanwhile we must show them the ability of democracy to solve problems.

It is said that the TMVP is having weaponry. Even though they were not used in the Batticaloa local government election there is a possibility they may be used at the provincial council election.

Not only the people of Batticaloa but also outsiders who went there said that there were no such threats. But a few NGOs will go on and on about this, having never bothered about the LTTE carrying weapons all over the place after 2002, in total violation of the CFA. I should add that most of the NGOs try their best to serve the people. They do their best to implement development programs. They do not create any problem to the country. But there are some NGOs which target the government all the time. But we must admire those NGO actors who work with responsibility, who do not live off problems, who put forward sensible suggestions when things need improvement. They too point out that there are problems to be solved, but they confirmed that the people wanted to vote and it did not seem that votes were going to be extracted by force by armed groups.

Your opinion is that this election was a fair & free election?

We can clearly state that. As pointed out by Mr. Neville Fernando, the worst instances of fraudulent election were in the decade between 1980 and 1990, in the practices instituted by President Jayewardene, though President Premadasa improved things because he knew that he was able to win the trust of the general community. But every body is aware of how elections were held during the Jayawardene era. Underworld thugs were involved, and some police too, and they would go into polling stations and mark ballot papers and fill up the boxes. Such things did not take place in Batticaloa.

It is said that the government is trying to establish a democratic situation not only in Batticaloa but also in other cleared areas. But the government has failed to make the opposition party participate in this process. What does this say about the national situation?

This is the problem of our country. I don't blame the opposition party. The fact is that they are on a journey guided by an unsuitable leadership. They only set their eyes on the topmost position of the power ladder. In other countries the opposition parties assist the government to solve national problems, whilst criticizing particular actions so as to ensure improvements on behalf of the people. This is not understood by our opposition party. They engage in conspiracies instead to topple the government, as they did in 1964 and 2001. This time also they are targeting the same aim.

What is the response of the government when international organizations such as Human Rights & Amnesty International produce various reports about Sri Lanka and distribute them all over the world?

We need to respond more actively, However we know that there are just a few NGOs, local and international, that create problems for this country. It would help if we could identify their sources of funds, because transparency is important to help people to understand what their aims are. In Sri Lanka for instance, the most critical NGOs receive funds from similar sources, often from the few countries that cite those NGOs to support the criticisms they make. Conversely, when we participated in the Geneva sessions, we realized that the vast majority of countries in the world supported our position. It is sad then to find just a few NGOs producing reports as it seems just to ensure they continue to get funds from countries that want to criticize Sri Lanka. So one NGO once complained about the disappearance of nearly a

thousand Sri Lankans, but in one case they included a Philippine national who had gone away for medical treatment, in another they mentioned 6 security personnel who had been killed by the LTTE. Sinhalese names were changed so that they sounded Tamil. Another report on the Muttur incident is full of mistakes. It claims that a claymore attack, in which five soldiers died along with two civilians, could have been perpetrated by the army. Do they really think the forces kill their own troops? The trouble is that people just look at the headlines, and do not read through the full reports.

Your opinion is that the funding provided by foreign countries is used to create a nuisance?

We have to ask about that from those countries. They are supposed to provide funds for alleviating poverty. But much money goes to the wrong hands, to those whose main aim is to bring down the Government. We have to question those countries whether they are providing funds for false reports. At the very least, they should be open about their funding, and explain the purpose, and whether what they do achieves that purpose.

Recently you claimed that the money provided to NGOs from foreign sources is used for doubtful purposes. What is the evidence you have for this statement?

I make the same statement again. Recently one foreign funding organization provided Rs 200 million to a network of interlinked NGOs. 120 million of that went to a particular TV station. One of the main people there is on the board of the NGO that received the next largest amount. The Board deciding on allocations includes those connected with other NGOs that are part of the same network. In short, they obtain funds meant to help our people, and distribute these amongst themselves. What is the meaning of this?

That's what I also ask. What is the meaning of this?

These people can't live without NGOs. NGOs are a trade for them. If peace is achieved they will lose their income. During 2000-2003 a huge amount of foreign funds flowed in to these NGOs. Their monthly salaries were massive, and they also got funds to travel. How do so many of them manage to turn up to Geneva to the human rights session to attack their country?

Do you mean that the prevailing laws and regulations of the country are not sufficient to control the benefits they receive?

The government needs to do more, not to control things but to ensure that what happens is clear to everyone, that we know who pays whom to do what. They should also make sure that the people of this country benefit from what is termed aid, not just a few very sophisticated people. We should certainly ask all embassies to provide schedules of the money they give, and what is done with it.

But if the government interferes in this matter, isn't there a possibility of creating a negative image to the international community about the country?

The international community is not just a couple of countries in the world. It was clear in Geneva that every country in Asia is ready to assist us. The same seems to be largely true of the Americas, and we don't have problems from Africa either. Just a few countries raise criticisms, but these are not taken up. Even the United States has been more restrained,

raising issues certainly, but generally not in order to attack us publicly. Perhaps they understand better the difficulties of combating terrorism.

When thinking about the attitude of Britain, we were able to have some influence. A British Minister met the British Tamil Forum which claimed that he had said the results of the last election were unfortunate. He said very clearly that that was not what he had said, and we could make this clear, and he would try to make this clear himself. This shows that if we deal with problems direct, sometimes we find they are not as serious as some people make out. I have now suggested that the British Foreign Secretary be asked to meet Mr Douglas Devananda, which is only fair if his deputy met the British Tamil Forum, which promptly abused his hospitality. But he was not as naïve as they thought. He told them it was entirely their own fault that the LTTE forced Tamils in the north to boycott the 2005 presidential election, which shows he really understands the connection between such organizations and the LTTE.

Why are just a few counties creating problems for SL?

One reason is that many Tamils who left the country live in those countries. And we must understand that they apply a lot of pressure, because they feel bad about the huge destruction done to the Tamils during the UNP government in 1983 and before. They still remember the suppression, depression and oppression that they were forced to undergo. But they are not in a position to appreciate that the situation has changed. I should note that it was just a few UNP politicians who engaged in these mean acts but ultimately the blame came upon the whole country. But now the situation has completely changed. We must try to make them realize the prevailing situation