

**CHRONOLOGY OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE
IN
SRI LANKA
DURING ELECTION TIMES**

People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL)
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VIOLENCE IN THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IN SRI LANKA.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet, published by the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, contains a brief description of violence in the political affairs of our country, especially in the electoral system.

The process by which we choose our rulers and elect governments to power is one major part of the foundation of good governance. If there is violence in this process and if politicians and political parties use violence in dealing with their opponents and in seeking and exercising power, it is a sure sign that the democratic system and its capacity for good governance are corrupt at the very root.

Under such conditions the rule of law is undermined; fundamental rights of citizens are not guaranteed; social harmony and security are at stake. Therefore, as citizens, we have a special responsibility to campaign for the elimination of this menace from our political life.

A group of civil society organizations and concerned citizens held a series of seminars and discussions to identify the elements of a citizens' programme of action and the initiatives in which the citizens should get involved. These elements and initiatives are found in this booklet.

Several conventions have been held thus far at provincial level to motivate citizens to campaign towards politics free of violence. PAFFREL and many other civil society organizations, media communicators, religious sects, legal and research groups and other concerned citizens are committed to carry forward this campaign to the grass-root level. This booklet is published as a part of this exercise.



The Historical Background

The violence that finds expression in the political system in Sri Lanka is the product of many events and developments in the post-independence period and is an amalgam of many types of violence. These include

- * Ethnic violence.
- * Violence of the JVP insurrections, particularly in the 1987-89 uprising.
- * Election violence and the violence of party rivalries.

The Ideological Roots of Violence

The ideological roots of violence are both local and foreign. The "local" includes the folk ideology of dealing with personal enemies and illnesses: the *chandiya* role (you would have noticed that one of the PA candidates in the southern province election proudly flaunted the title of "Chandiya" by which he was popularly known), the feudal notions of punitive justice for wrongdoing, the seven tortures and so on. The "foreign" is contained in the advocacy of violent revolutionary change in an oppressive system that came out of the Marxist tradition and the use of methods adopted by terrorist movements. Although one of the successes of democracy is the incorporation of the traditional left into the democratic mainstream, the ideology and language (class hatred, the violent overturn of the capitalist system, "sun karau", "banga wewa") remained to provide the trappings of a theory of violence to some of the militant movements that came later - the JVP and some of the Tamil militant groups.

The JVP movement was an effort to indoctrinate youth with an ideology which advocated and justified armed struggle



against the state including the use of terror as the only means of correcting the prevailing social injustices. This ideology and its application have had a far-reaching impact on the country's political culture. Violence has become one of the most common means of resolving political conflict.

The English - Swabasha language "divide" has had some part to play in the indigenous variant of the JVP; it grew "wild" as it were, losing any connections with the liberal tradition. While the English educated Marxists gave a political education in Marxism, the so called democratic parties made little effort to provide the counterpart education in liberal democracy to develop a critical political consciousness. The Sinhala and Tamil educated youth had little access to the literature of liberal democracy.

THE CONDUCT OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS 1936 - 1956

The conduct of democratic politics by political parties including election to state assemblies and local government parties has been relatively free of violence until the late 1950s. It is in the post independence period that the political competition got fully mobilised on party lines. Until then political rivalry was localised and limited to the contests between individual candidates. This does not mean that the structural violence that existed in society did not find expression in political behaviour. These elements of structural violence included the caste structure and the exclusion and suppression of certain social groups by the traditional elites; the "chandiya methods" of village life and politics; the illicit economy - kasippu, drugs, smuggling, theft; the power structure of the urban underworld and the way it was recruited by the political parties.

The types of political violence witnessed, during the first period upto 1956, were intimidation and coercion in electorates



which were “strongholds” of powerful individuals. In Dedigama, when Keerthiratna from the Bathgama caste contested Dudley Senanayake, voters for Keerthiratna were inveigled into buses on the pretext that they were being transported to the polling station, and transported a great distance away from the polling station thus preventing them from voting. In one area, Ruwanwella, voters for Dr. N. M. Perera were intimidated; attempts to prevent them from coming to the polling station were thwarted by the party having recourse to supporters from Colombo, who helped the voters. In Central Colombo, Goonesinghe had the support of the urban “thugs” who blocked off certain areas (eg. in Maradana) preventing middle class residents, who were unlikely to vote for Goonesinghe, from coming out to vote. Similarly, Avissawella, the stronghold of Philip Gunawardene reported some degree of coercion from the supporters of Philip Gunawardene. There were post election demonstrations but these seldom broke out in violence to persons or damage to property. The single incident that received wide publicity was the attempted assassination of Bernard Aluvihare who was elected to the Matale seat in 1936, by the driver of Karaliadde, the defeated candidate. Although Aluvihare escaped, two others who were close to Aluvihare were killed. The driver was charged with murder and convicted. Although it was a politically motivated crime, there were no organised political parties at the time to use the crime against an opposition party, and inscribe it in history, for the benefit of future political campaigns.

During the period 1936 - 56 several of the elected candidates were unseated for various election offences and irregularities. There were however no instances of outright attempts of systematic vote rigging by a political party or flagrant breaches of the law such as the forceful entry into polling booths. There were also no serious incidents of post-election violence reported at the time. Probably there was no accumulated stock of political memories of systematic discrimination against an



opposition party and its supporters to fuel such violence. The pattern in which power alternated between two major parties was yet to emerge.

THE TRENDS DURING THE PERIOD 1956 - 1970

Collective violence begins in the post 1956 phase. Although a major political transition took place in 1956 it was ushered in peacefully. The election itself was peaceful and orderly and there was no post election violence. This was in many ways a triumph for the democratic system as the 1956 election was a defeat for the powerful coalition of the proprietary landed interests, traditional elite in the Kandyan areas, and a business elite typified by the bus mudalalis. Even so the political campaign with its focus on reinstating the power of the Sinhala majority revived memories of Sinhala Buddhist deprivation, provoked antipathy and hostility against those who had benefited from that deprivation - the minorities ethnic and religious - and unleashed forces which tapped into the latent violence in Sri Lankan society. To what extent did the ethnic violence of 1957/58 introduce a new dimension of naked violence and lawlessness into the political life of the country? It can be argued that 1957/58 marks a watershed. The experience of lawlessness, the way it was absorbed without any wide social protest or moral outrage by the major political parties, the absence of any national level initiative on the part of the law to bring the offenders to book in a convincing manner, all contributed to the culture of violence that steadily took hold of the democratic political life.

One of the striking examples of this legitimization of violence was the way in which the mob was allowed to deal with the democratic protest by the FP on the Galle Face Green. Another example was the use of force to stop the UNP march



to Kandy. These sent a signal that democratic methods will not work in the face of the brute force used by a majority.

Although the violence of the ethnic conflict itself does not come within the ambit of the political violence that is addressed, the violence unleashed by the ethnic conflict has been one major element in shaping the political culture of the country. The ethnic violence demonstrated on the one hand the impunity with which "majorities" tend to act and consider themselves above the law, and on the other the incapacity of the forces of law and order to enforce punitive justice against the offenders.

In the phases that followed, the ethnic violence and the war have had a pervasive impact on the political life. The heightening of security has provided politicians with arms and armed personnel for their protection. Army deserters combined with an illicit trade in arms have resulted in an increase in organised crime and most of these criminal elements have been mobilised for unlawful political activities.

POST - ELECTION VIOLENCE 1965 , 1970, AND THE YOUTH INSURGENCY

The third phase is marked by the entry of widespread post - election violence. The first major outbreak was in Matale after the 1965 elections. It planted the seeds of the long persistent election-related violence in this district. It is possible that its roots go even further back to the rivalry which led to the killings after the 1936 election. But the post election violence in 1965 was not a nationwide phenomenon. It was the post-election violence in 1970 which was nationwide, leading to considerable violence against persons and property including public servants and university professionals.



Immediately following the election came the youth insurgency.

- * For the first time the threat to the democratic system and status quo which had been only the rhetoric of the traditional left became a reality.
- * The youth insurrection provoked a strong and violent response from the state. This “violence” of the state and its perceived role in the defence of law and order became a part of governance in the face of non-democratic movements and the escalation of the ethnic conflict.

It is worth inquiring how much of this violence had already been a part of the police function in its efforts to deal with the criminal section of society and to what extent this had been transferred to the effort to deal with youth rebelliousness thereby exacerbating the anger against the system.

THE ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE AFTER 1977

The fourth phase begins after 1977. In 1977, post-election violence had escalated to a much higher level of ferocity, with arson, and killings. Certain UNP leaders were quoted as having said that the police would be given a holiday and the people would be given the licence to vent their anger against the defeated party and its supporters for a few days. What was most reprehensible in post-election violence was that the party elected to power condoned the lawlessness and violent conduct of their supporters. There was no serious attempt made to bring the offenders to justice either in 1970 or 1977. Post election violence created “its own memory banks” which hardened the supporters who were victims on either side, who nursed their grievances and waited for the opportunity they would have to take revenge. A nationwide network of



violent post election deeds and victims waiting for revenge became part of the political culture.

Post-election violence and the outcomes of defeat at elections also gave another message which changed the character of the contest at the elections themselves - the contest became a more ruthless struggle in which all means lawful and unlawful might be used to defeat the rival and retain or regain power. This approach to the democratic system is seen in many of the initiatives taken by the UNP directed at rendering the opposition powerless - the disenfranchisement of the Leader of the Opposition Party, the constitutional changes such as proportional representation, which they calculated would keep the UNP in power indefinitely, the referendum, the proscription of political parties. The referendum and by-elections themselves were marred by violence and intimidation of an unprecedented kind. Polling agents of the opposition party were prevented from performing their functions. Systematic impersonation and intimidation of voters were widespread and have been commented upon by the Commissioner of Elections.

In the post 1977 phase along with the manipulation of the democratic system by the parties operating within the system, other forces combined to destabilize the system. The escalation of the ethnic conflict and the resurgence of youth unrest led to the convergence of the different strands of violence - the violence generated by the ethnic conflict, the violence of the youth insurgency and the state violence responding to these. Caught between all three, the democratic system was one of the principal victims. The atrocities committed by the JVP, the state agencies suppressing the insurgency and other counter-insurgent groups have left behind enmities which have intensified the conflicts within local communities and the rivalries of political parties. The SLFP and the UNP continue to trade allegations relating to the political killings that took place



in the period 1987 - 1990. The UNP accuses the SLFP of having had links with the JVP and points to the fact that the JVP had not targeted the SLFP politicians in their terrorist acts. The SLFP accuses the UNP of using the opportunity provided by the counter-terrorist operations to use the state police and armed forces and other armed groups against SLFP politicians and supporters. The events during the JVP terror and the state counter terror contributed to the continuing distrust and the high propensity to violence.

In the meantime the instruments of violence became more freely available. Security measures were heightened; guns were issued to parliamentarians for their protection. Ministers were provided with armed guards. An illegal market in arms began to emerge. The number of army deserters increased and many of them took to careers of violence. Leaders of criminal gangs openly associated with politicians and were suspected of handling the more dubious parts of their political campaigns.

The change of government in 1994 held the promise that the political culture would be transformed and the democratic system would function effectively and rid itself of the violence and deep hostility that had become a regular feature of the electoral process and party relationship. This has not happened: Though the experience of Wayamba had a sobering impact and the ruling party took care to prevent a recurrence, there has been no fundamental change in the political value system that guides the major parties. What are the means open to citizens to mobilise themselves and bring public pressure on all political parties to bring about that change ?

The Elements of a Citizens' Programme of Action to Eliminate Political Violence

A nationwide citizens' campaign against political violence has to be conducted on many fronts. Such action must be directed at :



- “ promoting the necessary legal and institutional changes
- “ changing the political culture and value system to enhance self-regulatory political behavior and observance of democratic norms
- “ developing the public awareness and capability in civil society for sustained vigilance and effort to improve accountability and prevent abuse of power.

Ten initiatives

Some of the main elements of such a programme are listed below :

- “ Nationwide non-partisan dialogues between people, community leaders and politicians (from the village level upwards) on issues of political violence. These dialogues will develop programmes of community-based action for elimination of political violence.
- “ A campaign for reconciliation and peace focusing on the electorates with a high propensity for political violence for which religious and other community leaders are mobilized.
- “ A public non-partisan campaign for exclusion of candidates who have a proven record of violence.
- “ Public non-partisan agitation for internal reform of the political parties with necessary legislation to ensure transparency and accountability.
- “ A campaign to persuade political parties to agree on codes of conduct for elections and the necessary party discipline, including criteria for selection of candidates :



.. Strengthening existing media programmes and developing new ones for prevention of political violence as well as promoting knowledge and public awareness of issues of political violence.



.. Programmes in schools and universities and programmes of non formal public education to promote skills and capacities for peaceful conflict resolution (for example, the recruiting ground of the new generation of politicians are the institutions of higher learning where recourse to violence to deal with dissent has become almost habitual).



.. Concerted public pressure for constitutional reforms that ensure the independence of the Police, the Public Service, the Authority responsible for the conduct of elections and the Judiciary.



.. Promoting reforms of the electoral law essential for ensuring free and fair elections some of which have been listed in the recommendations made in the PAFFREL report on the Provincial Elections 1999 and the Presidential Election 1999.

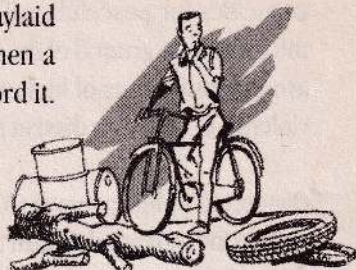
.. Systematic monitoring of law enforcement in cases of political violence and election-related violence.



CHRONOLOGY OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN SRI LANKA DURING ELECTION TIMES

1947 Parliamentary General Election

- Incidents of violence go beyond harassing, assaulting and intimidation of political opponents.
- A lady Member of Parliament for Kiriella was waylaid and assaulted by a gang of UNP supporters. When a complaint was made, the police refused to record it.
- Allegations of impersonation, non-registration of eligible voters etc. were made but perhaps due to the fact that they went on unimpeded they did not lead to much violence.
- The absence of a powerful opposition party and the lack of polarisation of society on party lines also might have contributed to the relative peaceful and orderly election.



1965 Parliamentary General Election

- As the Commissioner of Elections reported "The Parliamentary General Election of 1965 was completed quietly and without incident"
- First outbreak of post-election violence in Matale

1970 Parliamentary General Election

- Election day calm and peaceful.
- Islandwide post election violence worst ever known upto that time.



1977 Parliamentary General Election

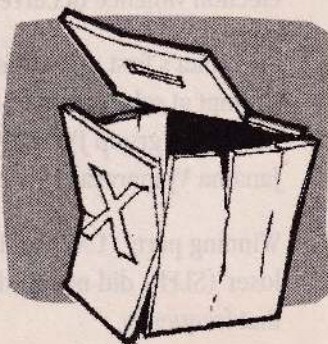
- Election day peaceful, orderly and calm.
- Post-election violence worst ever known in the election history of Sri Lanka.

1981 District Development Council Election (Jaffna)

- During the election campaign Dr. A. Thiagarajah, the UNP candidate was assassinated by an unknown group.
- On the eve of the election three police constables were shot at while on duty, when they were providing security for a TULF rally.
- Jaffna Public Library was burnt and destroyed by an unidentified group.
- The first election where there is disruption of the entire election and where there is systematic rigging and tampering of the ballot with impunity.

1982 Referendum

- The lethargy and inaction on the part of the police in curbing violations of referendum law created a climate of public fear to the extent of preventing those who favoured 'No' from going to the polls.
- Government sponsored political thuggery and voter intimidation continued unchecked right upto the polling day.



- Government allegation of a "Naxalite coup" directed against the SLFP, figured prominently in the referendum campaign of the governing party, thereby justifying government sponsored violence.

1988 Provincial Councils Election

- Throughout the year killings and all other forms of political violence were prevalent which escalated during election time.
- Killing of candidates and death threats for those who contested, campaigned and voted in the election were ubiquitous.
- UNP and United Socialist Alliance candidates who dared to contest despite the insurgent (DJV) threats became the victims of insurgent violence.

1988 Presidential Election

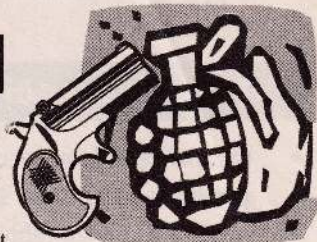
- High incidence of pre-election and Election Day violence throughout the country. Relatively less post-election violence occurred.
- Sri Lanka's first ever experience of islandwide attempt at sabotage of an election by a non contesting group JVP-DJV (Deshapremi Janatha Vyaparaya).
- Winning party (UNP) and the immediate loser (SLFP) did not clash with each other that frequently.
- Mostly, the UNP was targeted by the insurgents, in their campaign of sabotaging the elections.



- Nature of violence - death threats for voters and election staff, felling of trees and thereby blocking highways, damaging power supply systems leading to blackouts in many areas during the election period. Widespread incidents of political killings occurred throughout the election campaign thereby causing panic among the voters.

1989 Parliamentary General Election

- Killings and threats of murder against candidates throughout the election campaign.
- SLFP, who were relatively unaffected by insurgent violence during the election held in the previous year, became victims during this election campaign.
- 669 politically motivated killings during the period from December 19th to February 10th, were reported.
- Threatening and intimidation of voters and election officers, stuffing of ballot boxes by armed gangs etc. were reported.



1993 Provincial Council Elections

- In contrast to the two earlier elections the 1993 Provincial Council elections were conducted during a period of relative social tranquillity despite the assassinations within the space of a week of the President of the Republic and a leader of a major opposition party in the pre-election period.
- Widespread political violence was not an issue at this election.



- On the day prior to voting, the election secretariat of the police said that they had received 550 complaints from the nomination day.
- Alleged offences were categorized as follows: attempted murder, assaults, threats, intimidation of supporters of political parties, arson, abduction and robbery etc.

1994 Parliamentary General Election

- Campaign violence was widespread in the 6 week period leading upto the poll on August 16th and escalated considerably on and after the deadline for nomination on July 11th.
- As of 6.00 A.M. on the 16th, the Police Election Secretariat reported a total of 2092 incidents of some form of election related violence. These included 12 murders, 47 incidents of serious violence and 1003 incidents of simple assault.
- Most violence took place during the campaign. Election day itself was relatively peaceful though it was not without its problems and incidents of violence.

1996 Cooperative Election

- Violence associated with the political process surfaced again in 1996. Beginning with election to the management of cooperative societies in early 1996, political violence erupted in many areas of the country.
- One very disturbing manifestation was the use of violence to disrupt meetings and propaganda rallies



of UNP. Such incidents took place in Negombo, Matale, Anamaduwa, Hasalaka, Galewela and Matugama. In most of these cases, organizers in the election campaign were attacked, banners and posters advertising the meetings were destroyed and people were intimidated and prevented from attending.

1997 Local Government Elections

- Incidents of violence during a local government election were unprecedented.
- About 80% of gravely violent incidents took place among the UNP and PA supporters.
- The first incident was the assassination of Nalanda Ellawala, an MP of the PA from the Ratnapura District; the alleged assassins were Punchinilame, a UNP MP and Ratnathilake, a UNP ex-Mayor of Ratnapura.
- Nalanda Ellawala killing at Ratnapura on the nominations day drew much attention to election and political violence, especially the illegal and unauthorized use of weapons by politicians.
- Property belonging to UNP supporters and family members of the alleged assassins were destroyed and several police stations were attacked.



1999 Wayamba Provincial Council Elections - (January)

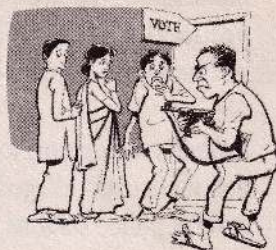
- Incidence of violence and gross violations of election law worst since 1994. Pre-election violence mostly by PA against UNP.

- Violence on the election day particularly in the morning was so organized to determine the result of the poll.
- Violence during the campaign was aimed at suppressing the opposition and preventing it from campaigning freely.
- Forms of violence most prevalent were : armed gangs moving around in vehicles thereby causing fear and intimidation, assault, violence against women and media personnel, sabotaging election rallies by attacks on them, burning and destroying party offices, chasing away of polling agents, forced entry into polling stations on election day and unlawful introduction of ballot papers into ballot boxes.



1999 Provincial Council Election - (April) (Five Provinces)

- Government, specially the President, intervened to ensure the non-violent conduct of the election. Police (STF) was summoned to take action in grave instances.
- During the election campaign many confrontational situations were expected following the trend of the controversial Wayamba Provincial Council election. But timely interventions, specially the all-party monitoring committee, had a strong restraining effect on such incidents.
- Reported incidents of violence were threats and intimidation of voters, party supporters and activists, assaults causing grievous injuries, acts of arson and attacks on party offices etc. Four homicides were reported.



1999 Provincial Council Election - (June) Southern Province

- Comparatively less violence in pre-election, election day and post election periods, compared to the other elections held in 1999.
- Alleged acts of violence were mostly committed by PA against JVP.
- JVP complained that they were the target of violence by both PA and UNP.
- Most prevalent acts of violence were :

Assaults by groups on individuals, damaging and destruction of decorations, campaign literature and party offices, threats and intimidations to voters, party supporters and activists etc. No homicides were reported.

1999 Presidential Election (December)

- Pre-election period was tainted with incidents of violence. In the North and East the allegations were leveled at LTTE for these incidents. In the rest of the country, mainly the supporters and activists of the UNP and PA clashed with each other.
- Bomb attack on UNP meeting at Eppawela and the attack on UNP Sirikotha headquarters were among the more serious incidents.



- Bomb explosions at Town Hall at the final PA rally and the Ja-Ela UNP rally were attributed to LTTE. The President was injured and a large number of party supporters and activists in each party were injured or killed.
- Threats, intimidations, assaults on party activists, arson, damage to property and murder etc. were reported during election time.
- Although there was no post-election violence on a major scale, incidents like arson, assaults causing grievous injuries, destruction of property, abductions, attempted murders and homicides attributed to election-related causes were reported.



The virtues of Good Governance

"Thereupon his son Buddhadasa became king, a mine of virtues as the sea is of all jewels... gifted with wisdom and virtue a refuge of pure pity and endowed with the ten qualities' of a ruler¹, while avoiding the four wrong paths². He won over the people by his four heart winning qualities³"

1. dana (giving and sharing); sila (moral conduct) Pariccaya (liberality) ajjava (fair dealing) maddawa (gentleness) tapas (self discipline) akkodha (without anger) avihimsa (without violence) khanti (patience) avirodhana (without enmity)

2. chanda (aggression) dosa (hate)
moha (illusion) bhaya (fear)

3. dana (magnanimity) peyyavajja (friendly speech) attacharya (beneficent action)
samanattata (sociability, accessibility)

Culavamsa chapter 37 verses 105-109, translated by Geiger and Rickmers.

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