

Politics and Ideology of the ‘Sinhala-Buddhist Political South: Some aspects of the political transformation in Sri Lanka (2005-2010)

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Since Mahinda Rajapaksha’s victory at the 2005 presidential election, fundamental change has been taking place in the political landscape of Sri Lanka. One of the major aspects of this change is the emergence of a new constituency, which I call as the ‘Sinhala-Buddhist Political South’ (hereinafter SBPS). This is mainly constituted by rural and semi-urban sections of the Sinhala-Buddhist population.

President Rajapaksha won the 2005 election with a slender majority over his main rival, Ranil Wickramasingha, election boycott in the North by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam being, arguably, a crucial factor. However, the performance of the former in the SBPS region is disproportionately higher, compared to other constituencies such as minority ethnic communities and Colombo urban upper classes. The consolidation of this particular constituency was proven quite crucial again in the recently concluded 2010 presidential election. This time, the majority was extremely high in favour of the incumbent over his rival Sarath Fonseka.

Results of local governments and provincial council elections held between 2005 and 2010 clearly show the ascendancy of Rajapaksha’s ‘United Peoples’ Freedom Alliance’ (UPFA), in the SBPS region. There is also a sharp decline of the support for the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the same constituency. Both these parties commanded significant popular support among this constituency. Especially, JVP membership almost exclusively came from this constituency.

Decline of UNP vote base in the SBPS region’ was compensated by its commanding position amongst the minorities and urban upper classes. However, the decline in the last five years was so heavy that this is not enough to fill the gap. Does this decline of the UNP in the SBPS region challenge the two party equilibrium system in the Southern politics in favour of a ‘one coalition-party formation’?

In this scenario, Opposition elements are being forced to find their support base from other constituencies. The changing attitude of the JVP towards the Tamil nationalist parties is a clear indication of this situation. Before 2005 the relationship between the JVP and Tamil nationalist parties was extremely hostile. By 2010 it had changed into a level of supporting a common candidate. The JVP has also alluded to its willingness to form a government in case of a victory to opposition parties in the April 2010 general election.

In the pre- 2005 period, hegemonic ideological voices of the ‘Sinhala-Buddhist Political South’ functioned outside the political power. On the contrary, three groups’ namely Jathika Hela Urumaya, Jathika Nidahas Peramuna (a split away group from the JVP) and the Jathika Chintanaya group, that articulate the ideology of SBPS function within the UPFA.

The present study attempts to map out this political and ideological unification of the SBPS region under the UPFA and understand its future implications especially in the context of the Post-LTTE context.