

Uva: The Slap And The Signal

By **Tisaranee Gunasekara** -

“Now near enough.” - Shakespeare (Macbeth)

Uva is an electoral slap in the face for the Ruling Family, a clear sign that the Rajapaksa magic has begun to wane.

The Rajapaksas scraped through in **Uva**, with an unflattering, uncharacteristic 51.2%.

This lacklustre performance is post-18th **Amendment** which created a lopsided electoral playing field; it is with an inept elections commissioner whose forte is buffoonery and a subjugated police force which could neither prevent election violence nor arrest a single lawbreaker; it is despite a campaign waged like a mini-war by the regime.



There is no doubt that Harin Fernando's candidacy had a huge impact on the election outcome. In previous provincial elections, a key problem faced by the UNP was its inability to field suitable chief ministerial candidates. The UNP's other chief ministerial candidates may have been popular in their own areas but none of them had a national profile. In the eyes of the electorate, they lacked gravitas. By deciding to give up his parliamentary seat and contest Uva, Harin Fernando filled this

important gap. Mr. Fernando did what Sajith Premadasa should have done in Southern Province, Ravi Karunanayake or Harsha de Silva should have done in Western Province and Dayasiri Jayasekera should have done in North-Western Province – should have done but did not.

The Rajapaksas did not make it to the 50% mark in Badulla. The UPFA got 47.37% while the combined UNP, JVP, DA vote was 50.6%.

Even in the Moneragala district, which suffered through an extremely violent election campaign, the Rajapaksas vote base and their margin of victory decreased drastically, from an all time high of 81% at the 2009 provincial election. (It will be interesting to see how [Shashindra Rajapaksa](#) has fared personally, both vis-à-vis his performance in 2009 and Harin Fernando's performance this time.)

Uva election was marred by overwhelming violence, overwhelming abuse and overwhelming bribery. Had the election been less unfree and unfair, and had the Opposition been united, the Rajapaksas could have been defeated in Uva.

Uva has always been good to the Rajapaksas – in the past. In Uva, the UPFA scored 72.39% at the 2009 provincial council election, 58.6% at the 2010 presidential election, 63.6% at the 2010 parliamentary election and 55.87% at the 2011 local government election.

Given this past performance Uva should have been a cakewalk for the Rajapaksas.

It was anything but. In Uva, the Rajapaksa performance was worse than in any other province, barring the North and the East.

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Western Province and [Dayasiri Jayasekera](#) should have done in North-Western Province – should have done but did not. Whatever happens in the future, Mr. Fernando deserves praise for his courageous decision which obviously gave the UNP a much needed boost in the arm. (Incidentally, the UNP's remarkable performance was not due to the supposed Sajith Factor, Sajith Premadasa appeared only in a handful of election rallies and reportedly spent the crucial final week not in Uva but in Hambantota.)

A Path to the Future

Uva election proves beyond reasonable doubt that a united opposition fielding a strong candidate can mount a very serious challenge to [Mahinda Rajapaksa](#). Such an opposition will have an excellent chance of preventing an outright Rajapaksa victory and pushing the election into a second round.

The average national vote of the UPFA at 2012/13/14 provincial elections was an unimpressive 54%. Different dynamics operate at national and non-national elections; it is also possible that Mahinda Rajapaksa is more popular than many of the UPFA provincial politicians. Even so one conclusion is logically possible – the popularity of the Rajapaksas has dropped quite substantially compared to the 2010 peak levels.

After unexpectedly losing the 1988 Plebiscite, Chile's [Augusto Pinochet](#) had no intention of leaving power and was planning to stage another coup. Former air force general and member of the then ruling Junta Fernando Matthei revealed in his memoirs that he and other Junta members opposed Gen. Pinochet's plan to ignore the popular verdict[i]. If Mahinda Rajapaksa fails to win outright and the presidential election goes into a second round, the Rajapaksas may find key elements of the state not so willing to do their bidding. Such a situation may also embolden closet SLFP dissidents to come out and declare themselves against Rajapaksa power.

But for any of that to happen there must be oppositional unity.

The JVP is necessary in Lankan politics. And when it comes to propaganda and

organisation, the JVP has unmatched capacities. But for better or for worse, Sri Lanka is still a two party electorate. Nationally the third party is not the JVP but the TNA. The JVP needs to understand this reality. If it refuses to do so, its false consciousness will prevent it from doing its part in defeating Rajapaksas rule.

The UNP too must understand that though the JVP is not a major vote-getter, it can still make the difference between victory and defeat in a closely contested national election.

The JVP and General [Fonseka](#) need to be realistic and the UNP needs to be generous and accommodating. All three parties will lose much if the Rajapaksas win again.

Opposition unity needs to happen along ethno-religious lines as well. If the Rajapaksas win the next election, they will use that victory to disembowel the [13th Amendment](#) still further and to create game-changing facts on the ground in the North and the East. In a Rajapaksa third term, the demographic reengineering of North/East will accelerate phenomenally. And once that transformative project is completed, the politico-electoral bargaining power of the minorities will be drastically reduced. That is why the minorities need to back an Oppositional alliance, because they can afford another Rajapaksa term even less than the Sinhalese.

According to the latest public opinion survey by the CPA, 43.4% of Uva respondents think their economic condition got a little worse in the last two years while 31.9% think their economic condition got a lot worse. 28.6% of Uva households had to go without medicine or medical treatment in the last year while 43% had to make cutbacks in the quality of food purchased[ii].

Obviously economics played a significant role in Uva vote. Abolishing the Presidency (a necessary task given its malevolent potential) might be the platform on which the opposition can unite. But the opposition cannot de-prioritise popular economic concerns and win elections.

Perhaps a good place to start would be to oppose the UDA's wanton and illegal destruction of lower-middle class houses in 34 Watta in [Wanatomulla](#). The demolition

commenced even as the Uva campaign came to an end. This is an injustice which can and must be resisted by both the UNP and the JVP; a joint protest can even become the first step in a future oppositional alliance.

The Rajapaksas have been forewarned in Uva; they will spend the next several months arming themselves with every possible weapon. Already plans are afoot to amend elections laws so that certain unfair electoral-practices will cease being illegal[iii].

The Presidential election will be infinitely more violent, unfree and unfair than Uva. The Opposition's only chance in prevailing against the resultant juggernaut lies in unity. If that essential precondition is fulfilled, the country and the people might yet be spared of another Rajapaksa term and the horrors it will beget.

