



**Report of the
Election Media Monitoring Team**

**Sri Lankan Parliamentary Elections
December 2000**

REPORT OF MEDIA MONITORING TEAM OF CPU IN SRI LANKA DURING ELECTIONS IN OCTOBER 2000

The Commonwealth Press Union put together and sent a five-person team to Sri Lanka for nearly three weeks to observe the conduct of the print media during the last parliamentary elections held there in October 2000. The members of the delegation were drawn from five different Commonwealth countries - Uganda, India, Malaysia, Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom, bringing a wealth of professional experience and insights to the assignment.

The CPU was partnered in this unique and pioneering initiative by the Editors Guild of Sri Lanka, an independent body comprising of the island's leading editors. Without their co-operation and acquiescence, this assignment could not have succeeded.

Mention must also be made of the co-operation given by the Sri Lanka government in general and its information department and the diplomatic missions in particular. At no stage was there the slightest hesitation in giving information or indeed facilitating the task of this mission. The government had already opened its doors to various observer missions, including from the European Union and the Commonwealth and the media monitoring team was accorded the status of visiting media-men, with all the rights and privileges therein. Right from the beginning the office of the competent authority responded to every request with alacrity and without this assistance, the monitoring team's task would have become difficult.

OBJECTIVE & METHODOLOGY

The objective was very clear and focused: to observe how the print media, both government-controlled and independent, covered various aspects of the election campaign.

The terms of reference for the mission stated the its job was:

- To assess the newspaper coverage of the election campaign
- To assess the professionalism of the coverage
- To assess whether the coverage is sufficiently informed thus allowing the electorate to make a fully informed decision on who to vote for
- To monitor and document fully incidents of harassment, coercion or intimidation of journalists and publishing houses

- To assess whether the independent media reflects a genuinely balanced view of candidates, members, parties and policies
- To assess whether the State-owned press reflects a reasonable coverage of non-PA candidates, members, parties and policies

The mission was very clear that it would not in any way get involved in the actual coverage of the campaigning. The idea was to observe and monitor, not influence. To the very end, there was no diversion from that tenet; this needs to be seen in the context of the fact that all the monitors spent over two weeks closely working with journalists from various newspaper groups, in and outside the newsroom.

As there was no precedent for this kind of initiative, the group had to chart out its own course and methodology.

Each of the four monitors, barring the team leader, who co-ordinated the entire effort, was attached to one of the three major newspaper groups, with some given the additional responsibility of working with other, smaller publications.

The three major groups are:-

Associated Newspapers Limited (popularly called Lake House) - the state-controlled newspaper group which was nationalised in 1973 and still continues to be in the hands of

the government of the day. The papers from this stable are among the highest circulating publications in the country.

Upali - a leading privately owned publishing house which publishes the only other major English daily, The Island as well as a Sinhala paper.

Wijeya - this group owns the most well regarded Sunday English paper, The Sunday Times, as well as the highly respected Sinhala daily Lanka-deepa, apart from an English morning Mirror, which has only recently turned from being a tabloid to a broadsheet.

In addition, one monitor was attached to the Sunday Leader, which, though only six years old, has emerged as a high-profile English weekly, not the least because of the stories it has broken and its well-publicised battles with the government. The monitors also spent time with other papers, notably with the Virakesri group, publishers of the leading Tamil daily of the same name and which also has an English weekend paper, the Weekend Express. The monitors also routinely met journalists and editors from other papers such as Ravaya, a well-respected Sinhala weekly and Thirukural, a relatively new Tamil paper, as well as other publications.

All the major groups have English as well as non-English - Sinhala or Tamil or both - newspapers in their stable. To monitor the non-English publications, we set up a three-pronged system to get the best possible analysis:

two translators (neither of them being journalists) were hired, a regular newspaper translation service was engaged and there was close co-ordination with independent individuals as well as with prominent NGOs involved in media monitoring, such as INFORM and Centre for Policy Alternatives..

The four monitors, who began their task immediately after arriving in Sri Lanka around the 24th of September, were rotated after the first week, to ensure objectivity as well as to get more than one point of view.

They attended office each day at their respective newspapers, attending meetings and editorial conferences (which are not the norm in Sri Lankan newspapers), going out on assignments - in and out of Colombo - and interacting with reporters, sub-editors and senior staff.

A monitor could not be sent in the beginning to Associated newspapers, or Lake House as it is popularly known, which is government-managed and which controls some of the largest circulating publications in the country. This was mainly because some of the group's editors are not members of the Guild and also because the Lake House management told us it had not been informed formally by the Guild about this mission and what was expected of them and hence would not be any position to participate.

This was done the week after and after that, the group was very co-

operative and allowed us free access to each and every department and editor, allowing us to liaise freely with the staff.

Each team member gave a weekly report of their observations and experience and the team held one, sometimes two daily meetings to discuss the day ahead and to take stock of the day gone by.

FINDINGS

Though naturally there are many differences between each newspaper's structure and approach and the way they covered the elections, there are some general comments which can be made about the Sri Lankan print media:

- Newspapers are by and large poorly staffed, with less than optimum number of journalists and even fewer trained journalists
- There are serious infrastructural problems and constraints in most newspapers - low budgets, lack of computers etc. and this shows up in the overall quality of the newspapers
- Journalists are paid badly and therefore it is not a very attractive choice as a profession. Bright young graduates tend to go into other professions, or if they do become journalists, leave after a few years.

In terms of coverage, these weaknesses reflect in the poor quality of writing and reporting in papers, though many Sri Lankans point out that non-English papers are closer to their readership and often do have professionally competent writing and reportage.

But, the one strongly observed aspect of the Sri Lankan media, one that becomes apparent even to the casual reader, is the strong polarisation of views which in turn leads to partisan and one-sided reporting. This goes beyond mere editorial stance or point of view, and spills over from the editorial page into the news sections. Newspapers are strongly “anti-this” or “pro-that”, and tend to equate personalities with issues. Hence, an “anti-government” newspaper would not find anything redeemable not only in government policy but also in the President personally and in her entire cabinet.

The polarisation is not limited to political views, though that is the most obvious divide, but also on ethnic issues. This reflects in coverage at all times, but during the elections took on a sharper hue. Selection and coverage of stories therefore is dependant on the editorial policy of the paper, and such bias, if it can be termed that, is reflected by omission as much as by commission. What the papers do not carry, in other words, is as significant as what they do.

For example, a sensational incident involving the son of a senior government minister, who was among the

accused in an incident of firing on a convoy of opposition candidates, was played down by government newspapers and when the three accused were produced in front of a magistrate, Lake House’s Sinhala daily Dinamina simply blanked out the news.

State owned papers would carry stories that showed the ruling dispensation in a flattering light and run down the main opposition parties, often in language laced with invective.

A sample headline for a lead story about an opposition candidate, a dentist, who made allegations about the President: “UNP dentist opens verbal sewer.” Serious allegations were made against the leader of the opposition in the state-owned media while his denial hardly found place anywhere.

If the government papers carried reports of speeches or statements of opposition leaders at all, these were used almost always in the inside pages; the front pages were reserved for proclamations by ruling party candidates, statements by ministers who were also contesting, stories ridiculing the opposition and, occasionally, astounding allegations by government functionaries about leading opposition figures, without even a single line of rebuttal. The Prime Minister’s allegation that the leader of the opposition had a “secret understanding” with the terrorist organisation, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was carried baldly as the truth and repeated ad nauseum.

In addition, ruling party ministers,

who were also candidates, got a free ride because their ministries released full page advertisements (in government papers, naturally), extolling the achievements of the respective departments, thus giving them free publicity paid for by the tax-payer.

The privately owned media too was not without blemishes, lack of objectivity even on the news pages being the most obvious one. Some papers, like the Sunday Leader, an erstwhile supporter of the ruling party but now completely on the other side, carried hardly any story that was even remotely favourable to the PA. A glance at any issue of that period would confirm that impression, but this was also borne out by a study carried out by the media monitoring unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives.

It found that in the six issues preceding the elections, the Leader carried 3 features which were “favourable” to the PA, as compared to 41 features that were “unfavourable.” Conversely, it carried 6 features favourable to the UNP, and none at all which were unfavourable. Of the six editorials that were written in that period, 5 were against the PA and the remaining 1 was for the UNP.

Such one-sided coverage could still be ascribed to editorial policy, but for the fact that the criticism, of the opposition by the state-owned media and of the President and her party by the independent media, often bordered on the personal. The Leader carries a front page gossip column every week which lampoons the ruling dispensa-

tion and also the President personally - though much of the gossip is fairly innocuous and is fairly normal journalistic activity, its placement and selectivity in taking on only one side gives the impression of unfairness.

It must be pointed out that both Leader and Ravaya are among the papers that have earned for themselves a reputation of strong investigative journalism, often treading in areas that other privately owned publications would hesitate to venture in, but their approach has been largely selective.

The Ravaya, a Sinhala weekly, was sober in its tone and approach in its criticism, but did not carry many favourable pieces on the PA during the elections. This has to be seen in the context of the complete support given by the editor and the paper to the PA in the 1994 elections, when, like many other journalists and newspapers, the Ravaya had come out openly in support of the PA's presidential candidate. The falling out between the paper's editor and the ruling government was a public affair, with the President openly accusing him in a widely broadcast interview, of having accepted a huge sum of money from her.

This is not to say that there was no professional coverage at all - indeed, papers like The Sunday Times, The Island and several non-English newspapers like Lankadipa and Virakesari were largely balanced in their news coverage. The Weekend Express, a relatively small weekend paper with all

its resource limitations in terms of staff, tried to give comprehensive coverage to all major and significant political parties. The Sunday Observer, despite being a government paper, was broad-based in its reporting.

But there are other systemic lacuna in the media that become discernible when they are closely analysed. There is a kind of “ethnic” polarisation in the media that, many Sri Lankan analysts say, is a reflection of the social divide. The Tamil papers, for example, saw the elections through Tamil eyes—i.e. focusing mainly on Tamil politics and on the main parties only to the extent of how they perceive issues related to Tamils, while the Sinhala papers tend to give a “mainstream” Sinhala viewpoint, largely ignoring Tamil parties. “They could be covering elections in two different countries,” was the opinion of a local analyst.

One example—disputes between rival Tamil parties, including violence, were lead stories in Tamil papers but barely got a mention in the Sinhala papers of the day. The military operations in the North and North-East were often considered more important than the elections and “community” affairs more critical than the political process.

ISSUES

The issues that dominated the election coverage were:

- Violence

- The LTTE and the war against it
- Political allegations and counter-allegations
- The economy

There was another issue, that has been a dominant theme of the political and social landscape of Sri Lanka for many years - devolution of power and constitutional changes - but as far as these elections were concerned, it had virtually disappeared into the background. This is surprising because the President had made no secret of her intention to turn the next parliament into a constituent assembly to discuss and pass a new constitution.

Violence - or the fear of it - dominated the headlines almost everyday. If it wasn't perpetrated, it was spoken about. The opposition had turned the phrase “free and fair elections” into a kind of mantra, successfully selling the idea that the ruling coalition was indulging in violence and if it did win, it would be because there had been large scale rigging with official connivance. The presence of monitoring groups, local and international, and the reports of clashes among supporters of rival political parties gave credence to these perceptions and though Colombo itself remained calm, there were reports of violence from the central provinces and the hill regions.

More than the actual violence - which in the end lead to the death of 11 people and injuries to many more -

were the fears of election day violence and fraudulent tactics like ballot-stuffing. The newspapers reflected these fears in their own way - the government media did not mince words when it came to pointing fingers, clearly indicating that it was the main opposition party that was responsible for raising tensions.

How one-sided the coverage was could be seen in the reporting of the Daily News about a mob that has gathered outside a police station in Kandy to demand that perpetrators of a violent act (among which the son of a high-powered official was alleged to have been involved) be arrested. While the other papers reported the entire incident, for the Daily news only the slogan-shouting of the crowd (of mainly UNP supporters) was important. This was bias and un-objectivity at its worst.

The LTTE - the Tamil Tigers have been a major presence in Sri Lanka for over a decade and a half and this time round too they were a “bizarre fourth force” as the President so succinctly put it. Their shadowy presence showed up in election coverage in all sorts of ways—their alleged links with the leader of the opposition, (a big story for the official papers) their exchange of letters with the government about a peace plan (seen by strongly anti-government papers as a kind of double-speak by the President) the difficulties in campaigning in areas where they are a dominant presence and also in the suicide bomb attacks at public rallies, an operation that bore all the hallmarks of the

LTTE. The organisation remained on the front pages for most of the pre-polling period.

The state-owned papers highlighted military successes in the run up to the elections—in one case, the recovery of a small town was mentioned in glowing terms, even though its initial loss had not been reported due to censorship and the battle had reduced most of the town’s buildings to rubble.

Allegations and counter-allegations - Making wild charges and rhetoric is part and parcel of the heat and dust of an election campaign and Sri Lanka is no different. But in the media, if a paper had allegations about one party, often it did not have the rebuttal or the clarification from the accused. Pro-government and anti-government but pro-opposition papers at the opposite side of the media spectrum, viz The Daily News and the Sunday Leader were the two truly blatant examples of this tendency and often they were mirror-images of each other. The Island, gave space to all sides, but it was clear that it was no friend of the government and the opposition parties, including some smaller parties like the chauvinistic Sihala Urumaya got tremendous play.

Economy - The mainstream English papers, including prestigious ones, tended to look at most parties and a wide range of issues, but considering that the most important issue - at least overtly - was the economy, there

was barely any studied analysis of either the issue itself or how various parties saw it in their manifestos. (A word here about the manifestos - here appeared to be a lot of cynicism about manifestos and whether any party had any intention of fulfilling any of its electoral promises.) The economy was not covered on the news or the edit pages in any significant manner - neither in macro-economic terms (though the Daily News occasionally assured its readers that all was well with it) nor in lay terms, to explain to the ordinary reader why the price of bread had been shooting up.

Even on the question of voter education - facts and figures about various constituencies, programmes of various parties and an explanation of the complex voting system for new voters - the coverage of papers seemed thin on the ground.

The Daily News among the English papers, along with its sister language publications, offered the most comprehensive backgrounder to the elections, carrying a daily, full-page, graphics-intensive ready reckoner that gave details of previous voting patterns, profiles of the candidates (done largely in an objective manner) as well as other details that could be of value to the reader/voter.

For the most part, however, newspapers tended to confuse covering politics with politicking, i.e. “mudslinging”, allegations and counter-allegations by rival politicians and statements of politicians, often bor-

dering on the scurrilous, carried blandly and without any kind of corroboration or even a clarification from the other side. The concept of the political economy, or covering issue-based rather than personality-based politics is woefully lacking. This has ended up in politicising every issue by both politicians and the media

One reason for this is the systemic problem of lack of experienced political correspondents. With meagre staff resources, very few papers have even a Political Editor, leave alone a team of political correspondents. The Editor is the de-facto political editor, not only laying down the political line but also doubling up as a columnist and/or vetting political copy. Sri Lankan newspapers accord tremendous importance to politics and to coverage of the larger political parties and a close supervision of what gets in becomes very crucial.

But another reason for the dearth of middle-level political journalists is that very few people stay on in the profession for the long term. The general tendency is for young people, often just out of their A levels, to join a newspaper for two or three years while pursuing other academic or career options, and then leave for better paying jobs in advertising, PR or even banks and the like. Journalism not only does not pay well, as compared to other professions, but also does not hold much glamour, or, indeed, “social prestige.” (Interestingly, many senior journalists and editors too, pursue other professions on the side).

(Many journalists also complained that though their newspapers were very profitable, and the groups that owned them had other, profitable business interests, not much investment by way of infrastructure or personnel found its way into newspapers. This was borne out by the empirical observations of the monitors, though in some groups there was an understanding on the part of the management that something more needed to be done by way of training)

Hence, newspapers are forced to deploy youngsters to cover politics and it is not uncommon to see bright but inexperienced journalists in their 20s, setting out, with little or no mentoring, to cover campaigns or parliament or to interview leaders and write about the critical political issues of the day. Indeed, in one newspaper, the political correspondent confessed she got all her stories on the phone and did not like to meet politicians because “they would then expect favourable coverage.”

Even so, the more experienced journalists and editors managed to use their ingenuity to send out reporters to various constituencies and districts to provide at least a glimpse of the election mood and flavour outside of Colombo. In the main though the coverage tended to concentrate on the capital city, where most of the leaders were based and which was easy and accessible (and cheap) to cover.

Journalists were sent out on whistle-stop tours outside the city - as much to save money as to get the reporter back in the office in the shortest pos-

sible time - which meant that rural coverage was sketchy.

Perhaps the most noticeable and also disturbing feature of the media, especially during the pre-election period, was the lack of space given to the concerns of the common Sri Lankan. These elections, like many others, were about the price of bread, the rising cost of fuel and the all round spurt in the cost of living. These were issues clearly reflected in the letter's columns of newspapers and, in private conversations with ordinary Sri Lankans.

Sri Lankans in general are a very politically aware lot and while they are more than aware of the importance of resolving the war and understand the debates on devolution, it is the bread and butter issues that concerned them the most. Even simple journalistic techniques like getting *vox pop* quotes were not used in any significant manner - the coverage of the elections remained from the point of view of the contestants, not the voters. Even language papers reporters confirmed that they were covering the elections by talking about the candidates rather than the needs of the people. (Editors also tend to often write about other editors and even during this short three week period, there were many digs made by editors against their peers in print).

This “incestuous” tendency, to use a word most often employed by Sri Lankans themselves to talk about the inner circle of media, politicians, owners and the elite in general, results

in an alienation of the ordinary reader, which is exacerbated by the high price of newspapers. A daily English newspaper costs Rs 12, which is much more than the (inflated) price of a loaf of bread—language papers are only marginally less costly. This makes newspapers unaffordable for a large section of the populace and in the villages, one paper is shared among 8-10 people. It is an ironical situation in a highly literate country like Sri Lanka that between them, the daily papers of the country don't even add up to one million copies, while over 90 percent of the adult population can read and write.

Newspapers are seen as luxuries, because of their high pricing, making them even more remote from the general populace. Thus, to expect that people would buy more than one paper to get a better and more balanced idea of what was happening in the country, would be futile.

COVERAGE OF SMALLER PARTIES

One of the aspects we were keenly looking out for was the coverage of the smaller parties. In these elections, a large number of new parties emerged and a record 5000+ candidates, from 29 parties, contested.

Apart from the PA and the UNP, there were some smaller parties like the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna, an erstwhile left-radical group that is now in the mainstream, the Tamil

United Liberation Force (TULF) and the National Unity Alliance, composed of Muslim parties that got considerable coverage in the papers. The many marginal parties that had sprung up in recent months did not obviously get much space, given that they were new and had little or no influence or following.

However, an exception seems to have been made in the case of the Sinhala Urumaya, an outfit set up barely three months before the elections. This party, formed by breakaway constituents from the two larger parties and consisting, in the main, of professionals, stands for "Sinhala rights", often using blatantly racist terminology to promote its main idea, that the rights of the majority Sinhala people have been trampled upon by successive governments.

The party's line seemed to have struck a chord with some newspapers and the party got tremendous coverage, totally out of proportion to its size, track record and ideology. One paper carried a reference to it almost every day, and just before the elections, had no less than four big articles in one edition alone, a favour not extended even to the bigger parties, let alone to other smaller parties, especially those representing Tamils.

Indeed, while a Tamil-owned English paper, Weekend Express, in its series on interviews with political leaders, gave over a full page to the Urumaya, Tamil parties, including some which have been in politics for a long time, got similar coverage in the Sinhala or

English press.

CONCLUSIONS

The following are some of the conclusions drawn from a close observation and monitoring of the print media during the pre-election campaign in October 2000.

- The Sri Lankan media's coverage of the run up to the elections was patchy, to say the least—in style, substance, content and approach - but some papers did maintain high professional standards
- There was clearly a polarisation of coverage in obvious and not so obvious ways. Many papers appeared divided in the “pro-government” and anti-government camps, with the former segment almost totally comprising of government-owned publications
- Issues and personalities more often than not got mixed up
- News reports more than occasionally had the flavour of editorial comment
- Criticism tended to focus on the personal, with a few papers (including, it must be pointed out, papers controlled by the government) throwing all professional standards to the winds

- The general populace would be justified in claiming that it was not served well by media coverage and that it got one sided coverage and unsubstantiated allegations when it wanted news and analyses

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the heartening features of the media in Sri Lanka—and this cuts across the “government-controlled/private owned” divide—is that most practitioners, publishers and policy-makers admit that there are serious systemic flaws in the profession which need to be set right, and on an urgent basis. Many of these problems showed up, in stark relief sometimes, during the pre-election coverage. The lack of training, of proper mentoring and guidance, of infrastructure etc. cannot be changed overnight. A medium and long-term approach is needed to bring about a radical shift in the overall quality of the Sri Lankan print media.

Some steps that might help, include:

- Providing proper training to young Sri Lankans entering journalism. This can be done by setting up an independent and autonomous training institute which focuses on producing highly-trained, professionally qualified journalists for absorption into the local media

- Training journalists however is not enough—they need to be kept back into the profession. Better salaries are one part of it—giving them respect and pride in what they do will also contribute towards making them want to continue as journalists.
- Changing laws which are detrimental to the practice of good journalism. Criminal defamation is one such law that has been abused over the years, and even though the government's claim that things are much better for journalists than they were during the previous dispensation, many journalists operate under the threat of being sued under criminal laws or even of being verbally and physically attacked. This is also a deterrent to those who want to become journalists.
- Broadening the ownership of Lake House—this was a commitment given by the government when it nationalised the company in 1973. Since then, various governments have paid lip service to the idea, but have refused to move forward, often using the fig leaf of wanting a voice to counter hostile government propaganda. The government's refusal to let go of Lake House and the unprofessional manner in which the papers are run contribute in no small measure to the lowering

of the overall standard of journalism in the country. While the government attacks the privately owned media for bias, its own record is very poor and this vicious circle needs to be broken.

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