



Party representative address gathering



Election campaign on the road



Campaign outside polling booth

ELECTIONS WITHOUT A DEPARTMENT OF ELECTIONS

A Norwegian experience



Part I

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This article is written with the intention of sharing my experiences during a short stay in Norway as an International Election Observer for the Norwegian Local Government Elections, with my colleague, Additional Commissioner of Elections, R.M.A.L. Rathnayake.

REGISTRATION OF VOTE AT BIRTH

Different methods are used around the world to register voters. Some countries still do not use systematic procedures to register voters. Some register annually, semi-annually, or from election to election or with birth registering companies. Also, the age limit to cast the vote ranges from 16 years to 22 years in different countries of the world.

Even though a citizen of Sri Lanka is eligible to vote when he or she completes 18 years, it is a must that they register themselves at the Department of Elections. Also, even if the voter completes his/her 18th year on the day of the elections that person is not lawfully eligible to cast the vote. One must register themselves and should always inquire after it. Generally, the registrations are called in the months of June/July.

Before year 2010 this process took nearly one and half years, but thanks to the dedication and the mediation of the Commissioner of Elections and the Department of Elections, they were able to limit this duration up to six months.



Fully covered polling booth

More than 14,000 Grama Niladharis (Village Officers) are making efforts since for months on end. Annually, only for the Grama Niladharis, the government allocates a sum of Rs 50 million. But, there can be complaints when the citizens were not able to vote as a result of the name not being printed in the electoral register.

Based on our experience at home, we asked the Norwegians about the shortcomings in their election system. And much to our surprise they answered with a wide smile, telling us that "we do not register ourselves in the electoral register". And we further understood from them that everyone who is born in Norway is registered in the Civil Registration List automatically upon his/her birth. With this registration when one completes his/her 18th year, they are considered as eligible to vote. So, according to this method, anyone who completes their 18th year even on the day of the elections he/she is eligible to cast their vote. There

are no extra charges to register one and the voter does not face physical exhaustion in the process. If you happen to complete your 18th year on a day of the elections, your official ballot paper will be sent to your house for free on the very same day.

Another important yet an interesting fact about registration is that if he/she is a citizen of Norway he/she can use the Citizen Identity Card (ID) and register themselves on the spot and also they can cast their vote. This is practically executed for those who are not a citizen but living in Norway for more than three years (Expatriates). This means that even the expatriates can actively participate in the process of electing the ruling party. It was made clear to me during the past Local Government Elections. Freida, my Swedish assistant, on the day of the elections, used her service ID of three years to register herself and cast her vote, and to me all of it was very new and for a second it really piqued my interest.

It is high time for the bureaucrats to give a serious thought on this matter of registration of votes. In Sri Lanka, we can easily complete this process of registering citizens as it is mandatory to register someone at his/her birth and also because the use of technology remains very high. By making slight changes in the legal framework and in the administrative sector, we can save an enormous amount of money spent every year to update the register and of course a lot more of

conclusions on this system, even though the success rate of the process is highly transparent. It is quite difficult to hold such a debate to decide on the candidate, when there are five million of registered voters. But, it was made clear that before selecting the candidate, the voter should engage in some sort of conversation or discussion. Not only that, the voter has the power to make changes to the order of the nominations list made by the political party. Moreover, the voter enjoys his/her freedom as to where he/she can vote for a particular political party but also to select the candidate from another party.

In the Sri Lankan practice of politics, the followers of a certain political party cannot get involved in the selection process of a candidate. It is given to the leadership of the party or to his/her agent.

Looking closely at the statistics of the previous elections held in Sri Lanka, it is made clear to us that ironically the candidates must fulfil three criteria if one wishes to be a candidate. They are:

1. Obedience or the partiality towards the party leadership/the regional leadership.
2. The capability to spend money on oneself and for the party.
3. How popular the candidate is (not the social recognition).

These factors are considered crucial even though there are many factors which can affect the quality of an election.

Also, a major problem in the Sri Lankan political culture is that, there are the weaknesses (of the candidates who are elected as the peoples' agents) in the quality, capability and the knowledge of their role and weaknesses in implementation of the policies. As

a practical solution to these problematic areas, the March 12th Declaration of the March 12th Movement of PAFREL has given a head start to drive the Sri Lankan political culture towards a new direction.

During our short but very interesting stay in Norway, our experiences helped us to understand that the followers of a political party also can select their agents. And from the regional elections held on 17 September 2015, it was visible that the candidates are called for an open debate and then the candidates are selected. The members who confirm their membership after paying a certain amount are entitled to this process.

As a result of the March 12th Declaration, we succeeded in urging all the political parties to abide by the guidelines in selecting candidates for each party.

But it remains problematic, to what extent they followed those guidelines or the criteria presented.

According to the prevailing election system in Sri Lanka, the voters can select their candidates only from the list prepared by the political party. If the political parties fail in their duty of including the most eligible candidate, the voters have no choice left. This will be critical, if the election system will be shifted to a system which depends on a list system. In this case, we need a political culture, where the candidates are selected through a debate, while considering their intentions with the members of that party.

There is a vital necessity of forming a long term plan to decide the candidates of a political party, while considering the opinion of the party supporters.

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the valuable time as well as manpower. Most importantly, citizens will be made sure of their right to vote without any hassle.

PARTY MEMBERS TO SELECT CANDIDATES

On our visit to Norway, we were able to meet the Secretary General of the Labour Party (one of the major parties in Norway), a Member of the Parliament and a Managerial Officer from the Key Elections Operations Bureau. According to them, everyone who seeks to gain the candidacy of a certain party, should forward an application, mentioning his/her qualifications and his/her intent to be a candidate at the election. And these candidates will be called in front of the party members (paid membership) of each electoral division depending on, to which electoral he/she belongs to. Then the party members will have the opportunity to question them and the candidate will be decided after a debate between the two parties.

It was a bit difficult to draw any

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Inside the polling booth