

## **Are the elections in Sri Lanka free and fair?**

There are two inevitably stated words in defining elections in almost all the academic interpretations about the elections. One of them is “free” and the other is “fair”. When considering about the current potentials in relation to elections, these two words can certainly be seen in the reports presented at the end of any election and theoretically these two terms are supposed to provide the gist of the whole election mechanism that took place.

Sri Lankans too have a long history in relation to elections. Despite of the controversies about the representative democracy which is established in the country, there is no reason holding the citizens back from agreeing upon one fact. That is, since the obtaining of universal franchise, the establishment of the government of the country has been done under democratically held elections. It is an accurate fact that those elections were relatively free and fair. And that was in a situation where there was no reliance about few of the elections that took place. They were,

- Local government election in the North western province in 1999
- Public referendum in 1982
- The developmental council election in Jaffna in 1981
- Presidential election in 1988
- Provincial council election in the Eastern province in 2006

The above mentioned elections could not be held under a free atmosphere owing to several crucial factors that prevailed during that time, and hence there was no justifiability seen in them. And it is not wrong to state that the elections which took place except to them were, relatively fair and were conducted under favorable situations. Moreover, in addition to the above stated two words, there is another word which is commonly used today to interpret the superior quality of an election. That word is “integrity”. It is an internationally accepted standard that an election should not only be free and fair but it needs to be integral too. That means, at the end of an election, the election should be evaluated on a scale of securing public trust about the election mechanism. There, we should pay our inevitable attention to several facts. They are,

1. Obtaining the participation of all qualified people including the people with disabilities for the election mechanism.
2. Developing the facilities to enable the migrated Sri Lankans to other countries to utilize their voting rights.
3. Creating a level playing field by imposing financial restrictions for the candidates in order to minimize the difficulties in carrying out campaigns by some candidates.

We should question whether there is such a situation established in the country and if there is no such fair situation, immediate remedies should be done to create the background suitable for an election with integrity secured.

The third fact stated above, that is creating a mechanism to monitor election expenses is already being discussed in the society. Sri Lanka is one among the free countries which allow any of the candidate to spend any amount of money in any of the means they wish. The most recent harm of this situation is that it demotivates candidates with low financial strength despite of their qualifications to be elected. It is not difficult to say that elections that take place in a country which has no regulatory mechanism to control campaign finances, has no integrity at all.