MOVER & SHAKER -BASIL RAJAPAKSA RECAPS AFTER THE ELECTION TRIUMPH



Mover and shaker. Ace strategist. Powerful not because he handles key ministries, he has none, but because he is one of the most trusted of the President’s many advisors. Vilified by some because he is the President’s brother and confidant, admired by others for his indisputable political skills and a track record of being a doer, Basil Rajapaksa has a way of being thick in the middle of political discussions even as he tends to shy away from the limelight. A busy man, a hands-on politician, especially during elections, Business Today caught up with him immediately after the North Central and Sabaragamuwa PC elections were done. He was, happily, in a reflective mood. These are his thoughts on the political scene, the North and East and the future.

Let’s start with the elections. What was the logic in holding the elections for the North Central and Sabaragamuwa Provincial Councils early and how do you interpret the outcome?

There were several reasons. First of all a situation had arisen where the Provincial Councils could not function smoothly. Removing this obstacle necessitated elections. Secondly, the President wanted to get a pulse of the people’s sentiments. He is close to three years into his term. We had already cleared the East and held elections. These two provinces contain a good cross section of the population. From Panamure to Kadugannawa in Sabaragamuwa and from Kebithigollewa at one day to the borders of Puttalam and the Eastern Province, we had the opportunity to obtain the general disposition of ordinary people with respect to the track record, the stated objectives and the way things are in the country at the moment.
In terms of the result, first and foremost a win for the Government is necessarily an endorsement of policy and policy direction and therefore a boost. It strengthens the hand of the Government and the President. The message was, “we are on the right track”. It was therefore a vote of confidence.
It also gave a huge boost to the morale of our heroic troops currently closing in on the LTTE in the Wanni. The people expressed their support for the troops and basically said they are confident that the security forces will deliver. There are many ways where the civilian population can support the efforts of the security forces. This is one and it is very significant too, because the morale of any military

outfit suffers if the people are not with it.
Finally, we can interpret the result as a message delivered by the people to all the political parties, to certain NGOs, sections of the media and even some ill-informed persons in the international community. If things are as bad as some people claim they are, if we are a failed or failing state as some have portrayed us, then the blame must fall on the Government. We must remember that this was not a wafer-thin victory for the United People's Freedom Alliance. This was an emphatic victory in an election that was without major incident, and especially one that repudiated the predictions of being one of the most violent in our history. The people have not said that things are rosy; but they have not said they are insufferable either. They have reaffirmed the mandate they gave Mahinda Rajapaksa; they have expressed faith in his regime and the policy direction that he has outlined.
There are other lessons as well. I think everyone, including those in our party, learnt that character assassination and mudslinging does not have an iota of impact in elections. The UNP leaders designed a campaign based on name calling and bad-mouthing. They ridiculed the President and their rhetoric was laced with much invective against some mythical monster called 'The Rajapakse Samagama' which is nothing more than the product of a fertile though puerile imagination. They abused our candidates for the post of Chief Minister. They failed to convince the people.
The same goes for those among us who campaigned negatively against the candidates that the UNP had put forward for the posts of Chief Minister. They failed to have any impact on the minds of the voter. Both UNP candidates were returned with a significant number of preferential votes.
Punchi Banda Ratnayake, a candidate in the Polonnaruwa District, was beaten up. At the last Provincial Council election he was placed 5th in terms of the number of preferential votes polled. On that occasion he got 20,959 votes. This time he topped the list, polling 39,411 votes. Those responsible for that attack suffered. One of them was placed 9th.
If all those who engage in politics learn this lesson, democracy will become the civilized and civilizing exercise that it was meant to be. Unfortunately, politicians tend to have short memories and at the next election you might find them doing the same thing again, and still more unfortunately both perpetrators and victims will mirror one another in such silly and counter-productive acts.

This Was An Emphatic Victory In An Election That Was Without Major Incident, And Especially One That Repudiated The Predictions Of Being One Of The Most Violent In Our History.

Did you anticipate this result?

Well, we were confident. Elections happen when bodies are dissolved on account of their terms coming to an end. Sometimes elections are called before the term ends. Typically, this is because there is a felt need to assuage the general feelings of the voting public. Typically also elections are called because one feels confident of winning. The President felt that the people were with him.
This was not a Presidential election. It was more like the by-elections we had under the Westminster model. It is therefore like an opinion poll. You might remember how J R Jayewardene resigned his seat in the 70s and was returned with an overwhelming majority. That was a test. He submitted himself to it and in the process everyone, including the then Government, was tested.
There are other elements at play in election. We all know that all major parties enjoy the support of a block vote. They are with the party, regardless of the candidate, regardless of the policy orientation at a given time. There is also a floating vote, which is what everyone fights over. For such voters, ideology matters, policy is important, personality is important. People can vote out of sympathy or out of hope. When it comes to marking preference, some will come out in favour of the tried and tested. Some might pick the proverbial ‘known devil’. Others are sometimes moved to vote for a fresh face. We saw all this in this election. We can never know what was the overriding factor for each individual voter, but the collective has spoken and I believe it is justifiable to conclude that by and large there was an overall approval of the status quo.

The UNP has suffered a series of election debacles. The JVP too suffered a huge setback. What happened and what next for these parties, in your opinion?

The UNP is a big party and a party with a long history. They have not really lost much ground in this election. It so happened that the UPFA is stronger and more popular right now. There’s very little anyone can do under the circumstances.
The JVP result is the most surprising and perhaps you should ask them what happened. Maybe they don’t know either. I didn’t expect them to perform so poorly, even though everyone knew that all was not well with that party’s rank and file and that they didn’t unanimously approve some of the decisions taken by certain sections of the leadership.
What we learnt here is that the split has gone down deep and impacted the support base as well. When Wimal Weerawansa made that historic speech in parliament, I thought he would be alone. That evening I found there was a significant group of

MPs with him. Later they registered a political party. I still thought that this would not affect the party at the grassroots level. This result, however, indicates that there has been a serious erosion of support for the JVP. Still, it is not our business. It is a problem for the JVP to sort out.

Whatever the reasons behind the split, it definitely works in the President's favour, doesn't it?

Yes. He's very fortunate. Recent political developments in these other political parties have certainly benefitted him. At the same time, I believe that to the extent that the people endorse his leadership and his policies, when the President benefits, so does the people and the country. The election showed that the people are with him, so these developments are happy outcomes for the people.

You have been the person who has been behind the development thrust in the Eastern Province after the success of the humanitarian mission to liberate the province from the clutches of terrorism. What's happening there now?

Progress should be measured in terms of whether or not the living conditions of the people have improved. The Eastern Province is a region which for years was in regression in terms of development. The conflict naturally exacted a huge price from the people, as conflicts usually do. This was compounded by the tsunami, the East being the worst hit province on the coastal belt. In some districts or provinces or regions, people have some key issues to contend with. It could be water. Electricity. Roads. Irrigation. Livelihoods. In the Eastern Province, however, you have to do everything. Water and electricity and roads and irrigation and livelihood development and a countless number of other things such as health, education, information etc.

One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of skilled workers. So there is a human resource issue. Money is not a problem, there's enough funding coming in. The international donor community has been generous and is aware of how committed the Government is to develop the region. The USA, Japan, European Union, France, the United Nations, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are all contributing to this effort and we are very appreciative of the fact.

The three forces and the police are absolute in their commitment to ensure law and order and this will go a long way in restoring normalcy in the area for true and sustainable development activity.

I must also mention that non-governmental organizations have also shown a lot of commitment to helping uplift the region. International and local NGOs and community based organizations have come forward to complement the efforts of

the Government. They work closely with us, we monitor their activities and there's considerable synergy in the overall effort.
However, the main asset we have is the commitment and enthusiasm of the people. This is clearly evident in the farmer who sheds his sweat on the field, the dedicated official and the politician who genuinely desires to serve the people. However much vested interests attempt to divide people along ethnic, religious and other lines, we see a greater people to people interaction, mutual respect and a genuine attempt at unity.

The International Donor Community Has Been Generous And Is Aware Of How Committed The Government Is To Develop The Eastern Province.

The focus has been on the development of infrastructure. Could you expand a little on this?

As I said earlier, in the Eastern Province, what was required is a comprehensive development thrust. We have to cover all spheres, all sectors. One of the main projects is to link the province with the rest of the country. We strongly believe that this connectivity has to be restored and strengthened so that the people of the province reap the benefits of development. It is this need to establish links that made us focus on road construction.
This has to be complemented by the development of the inter-district road network as well as inter-city roads. In other words, the network of provincial roads has to be built. We have received funding from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and Japan for this purpose and the year 2009 will see the implementation of this aspect of the overall programme in full swing.
In terms of electrification, all the major lines are now in place. Only the distribution lines need to be put in. We have arranged to provide connections to those who were victims of the tsunami free of charge. For the others we are trying to work out an arrangement with the Ceylon Electricity Board to provide the connection and charge the amount to the electricity bill.
Providing electricity to everyone means that we have to complete the overall housing project. We still have 2800 families to resettle. However by the 31st of December this year there will be no internally displaced persons in the Eastern Province. The delay actually has not been due to want of political will, as some charge, but quite the opposite: we can't put anyone's life at risk, so we have to complete the de-mining operations.

You mentioned internally displaced persons or IDPs. We hear allegations

that speak of numbers that run into ‘hundreds of thousands’. Many NGO personalities and working on human rights issues, relief and rehabilitation as well as certain journalists frequently quote such numbers. What the truth about this discrepancy?

People should be responsible in what they say and the figures they quote. As I implied earlier, there are people with vested interest. There are people who are not necessarily motivated to help people in distress but are politically motivated to vilify the Government. For such people this is a business.
Recently there was a full page news feature referring to the situation in the Wanni. The pictures used to decorate the page were of refugees in the Eastern Province! Even in these pictures, the efforts to take care of these, the most vulnerable of our citizens, is clearly evident. This kind of irresponsibility is evident among certain NGO personalities. They quote old figures. Many of them have not travelled to the East, or have travelled to limited areas. They’re selective in what they choose to say and they are given to wild exaggeration at times.

Alright. Let’s get back to the issue of development and what’s happening in the Eastern Province…
Roads and power are key to development. On the other hand, the benefits of establishing connectivity take time to accrue to the people. People must live. This is why livelihood development has received our attention. We have taken steps to extensively develop irrigation in the province. The Allai Kanthalai project in Trincomalee, the Rugam Project in Batticaloa, the Karavaru Project in Ampara, the Morawewa Project in Trincomalee and the Unnachchi tank and water supply project as well as the construction and/or repair of the canal system will all soon bear fruit. In the next Maha season 41,234 hectares or 103,085 acres will come under paddy cultivation. We have arranged to provide 50,000 bushels of seed paddy as well as other agricultural implements to ensure that everything goes smoothly.
It is of course not about rice alone. Agriculture is about other crops as well and we have taken concrete steps to ensure greater productivity in this area. The cultivation of corn, ginger and cashew has also received our support. To encourage the farmer, in addition to the above mentioned irrigation projects, we have helped them build agri wells as well.
Agriculture is not only about cultivation. It is also about livestock development. We have so far given over 80,000 head of stray cattle to the farmers. Such projects will not only help raise general income levels, but will help us save valuable foreign

exchange, which we otherwise use to pay for milk food imports.
We have not forgotten that a considerable number of people in the Eastern Province engage in the fisheries industry. This is an industry that has suffered a lot over many years due to the conflict. We have provided fishing boats and fishing gear. Our main thrust is to focus on the long term. Work on the Valachchenai Fisheries Harbour will begin soon. The Oluvil Harbour is a dual purpose facility. We will be providing ice storage facilities as well.
Development is not only about infrastructure and enhancing livelihoods. It is about education and health as well and in this regard most of the work has been completed.

In The Eastern Province, What Was Required Is A Comprehensive Development Thrust. We Have To Cover All Spheres, All Sectors.

Let's move to the political developments in the Eastern Province. There was tension between the TMVP and Mr. Hisbullah immediately after the election. There is speculation that these antipathies will resurface sooner or later. Your views?

People are free to speculate. I would say it is wishful thinking. To be honest I am surprised by what I see in the Eastern Province. All the ministers in the Council are capable, energetic and dedicated and moreover have succeeded in transcending ethnic and language divisions. They are united in their desire and efforts to improve the lives of all people regardless of what community they belong to.
All of them have taken the trouble to find out what the problems are and to educate themselves on the same. I was speaking recently with the ministers in charge of agriculture and irrigation and found them to be extremely knowledgeable about the issues involved with respect to the new lands that will come under cultivation in the next Maha season.
Mr. Hisbullah is a very skillful and able politician. The Chief Minister, Chandrakanthan balances everything very well. The donor community is equally impressed. They have seen things happening and have a very positive perception of the developments that have taken place in the East. They have said that the Provincial Council, the members and officials should be strengthened and that they can't afford to let them down. If they fail it will be a big blow to the cause of national unity. We are aware of this but so far all the signs are positive.

How about the North? We know that the security forces have the LTTE on

the run and some are predicting a quick end to the war. The President has said that elections for the Northern Provincial Council will be held soon, probably envisaging a comprehensive military defeat of the LTTE in the near future. The people in these districts have suffered for too long. What kind of plans do you have?

The security situation naturally does not allow us to do much on the ground. So there is not much to show physically. However, we are getting ready. This is why we set up the “Northern Task Force”. Before proceeding to development proper, we have to deal with issues of scarcity and resettlement. Then we can move to democracy and development. We have deployed officials to do the initial studies on roads, irrigation and other sectors which, like in the East, need to be developed in a comprehensive and holistic manner.
We will be deployed Rs. 385 million to rehabilitate Giant’s Tank, Rs. 200 million for Walukkaru in Jaffna, Rs. 50 million for Pavattakulam in Vavuniya and we will also be targeting the rehabilitation of Iranamadu Tank.
Everyone knows that the LTTE damaged the Madhu Church and that the Army repaired it. The Navy is building St. Mary’s Church in Allaipidy. You will see a gradual intensification of such efforts as we begin to restore normal civil life in this area once the humanitarian mission nears completion.

In certain circles in Colombo they say the economy is in crisis. Is this true?

How does one measure the health of an economy? There are indictors. If there are 10, then 8-9 are positive. Per capita income was $ 1,060 in 2005. In three years it has gone up to $ 1614. We have maintained a 6% growth rate for three years running. We must remember that the growth rate in Britain in the last quarter was zero and that in Germany it was just 2%. Unemployment rate is down to 5%, the lowest in a long time. In other countries unemployment has gone up.
Our foreign reserves have increased even as our oil bill has gone up. After the rupee was floated, the rupee was stable for 10 months for the first time. The debt ratio is down and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has doubled.
Remember also that we are faulted for ‘neglecting’ developing in favour of executing what every sensible person must realize is a necessary humanitarian act to liberate a section of our citizens who are trapped by a terrorist. We have not neglected our people. The last three years has seen a huge augmentation of development activity and our security concerns have not stopped us from

implementing policies that are pro-poor.
Yes, there is inflation, but it is coming down. Poverty was at 22.8% in 2002, now it is down to 15.2%. The budget deficit is narrowing. Debt as a ratio of GDP stood at 105.8% in 2003; in 2007 it was down to 85.8%.
In 1994, what was promised was capitalism with a human face. What we have done is to go back to the local economy but with a human face. We have taken steps to encourage the farmer, recognizing his importance and restoring his dignity. This has been complemented by economic incentives such as the fertilizer subsidy, guaranteeing a decent price and ensuring a market.
We did not impose controls. We provided incentives for industries to go out of the cities and into the countryside. Through the “Gama Neguma” programme, we are slowly but surely bridging the gap between town and village, urban and rural. When there is electricity, when there are hospitals, schools and other facilities there is no need to come to the city.
At the same time, we have taken brave steps to build a better society through programmes such as ‘Mathata Thitha’. In the sphere of environment protection too we have introduced new eco-friendly measures.
People are quick to forget. Back then it was a David vs Goliath struggle. Not all Davids win. Now we can compete with the best. We pruned the flour subsidy. People said this wont work. It did. We were in debt to Prima. We have been selective in who we subsidise. In all this, the national interest and the well being of our people have been the paramount concern that drives policy.

Through The “Gama Neguma” Programme, We Are Slowly But Surely Bridging The Gap Between Town And Village

The UNP is weak and even senior and staunch party members admit this. This is good for the UPFA of course, but is a weak opposition a good thing in a democracy?

People say that the UNP is in crisis, that the leadership is weak and there is no internal democracy in the party. On the other hand we must not forget that the UNP did get a considerable number of votes.
You must not forget that the SLFP went through a period like this between 1977 and 1994. There were splits in the party. Some left the party. Some joined the UNP, some formed their own party. There were people who remained loyal. They defended party and leader. They spoke on behalf of the people. People like Mahinda Rajapaksa. Maybe the problem for the UNP is that it lacks the equivalent of a

Mahinda Rajapaksa.
What they are doing today is a copycat kind of politics. There’s nothing new, nothing fresh. And most of all, the leadership is not listening to the ordinary people. There is a lack of synergy. The UNP of today does not seem to understand the ground reality. Almost 80% live in rural areas or are connected with the rural. It is unfortunate that some sections of the media write for Colombo, so to speak. “Colombo” is not equal to “The People”. The Sri Lanka that is inhabited by those who vote people into power and vote people out of power is not limited to a tiny piece of land 15 square kilometers in extent. This, the UNP has to understand. There are thousands of UNP supporters outside this area and it is their pulse that has to be taken, their heartbeat that has to be listened to.