

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS – 2006
1ST INTERIM REPORT
ON THE BEHAVIOUR OF ELECTRONICS AND PRINTED MEDIA
FROM 16.02.2006 TO 15.03.2006

1. INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of the human civilization, the archeological facts and folklores of primitive societies, establish that the gathering and dissemination of knowledge and information had filled an important part of human life. That the thirst for information in the minds of general public in modern era too, is evident by the dependence of people on the mass media. Irrespective of their social status, the average citizens in the modern day spend a considerable time out of their daily routine to watch or listen TVs and Radios as well as to read the Newspapers. In that context, Mass media, acts as a forerunner to disseminate information and determine the direction of public opinion. Based on the aforesaid reality, PAFFREL has started its' consecutive third election monitoring on the behaviour of mass media during election period.

Started from 16.02.2006, the nomination day for the elections for Local Government Institutes, media monitoring will be extended throughout the election period up to the post-election period. In our study all the possible precautions and preventive steps were adhered to overrule the risk being prejudiced and to avoid the circumstances of prejudgments.

2. METHODOLOGY OF OBSERVATION

2.1. In order to ease the practical difficulties that could arise due to the vastness of the subject field, whole exercise have been divided in to two main logical sections, viz :-

1. Electronics media
2. Printed media

2.2. Electronics Media

The electronics media once again, has been categorized to Television and Radio broadcasting.

2.2.1. Television Media – In this monitoring process most of the television channels have been taken in to consideration with exceptions of 2 TV channels. ETV and ART TV were exempted as no political programmes directly applicable to local elections are telecast by them. Programmes in the National Television Services, Independent

Television Network, Swarnavahini, Sirasa TV, TV Lanka, Derana TV Service, TNL, Eye channel, Shakti TV and MTV have been analyzed under the categories of The News Bulletin and the other political programmes.

2.2.1.1. Main News Bulletins of each television channel have been considered for the monitoring.

2.2.1.2. The direct political programmes including political discussions have been analyzed to ascertain the level of political bias of that programme. Generally, this kind of programme extend to 3-4 hours, in which period each representative of political party or independent group will have three occasions to express their ideas.

2.2.1.3. This whole exercise of that programme has deeply been studied stressing on the key points such as,

- a. the representative of the political party or the independent group, who made the opening speech of the discussion,
- b. the allocated time span for each and every representative,
- c. the representative of the political party or the independent group, who made the closing speech of the discussion,
- d. the visible differences among each representative in the fields of oratory, rhetoric and pressing an arguments etc.
- e. whether these representatives were nominated by their political party / independent party or they were named and invited by the producers of the TV programme.
- f. the roll played by the compere conducting the programme. Was he acting impartially or has he shown open allegiance to one party or another ?
- g. the total number of hours allocated for the programme.

2.2.2. **Electronics Media - Radio**

In the recent years many number of new radio stations started their broadcasting services. Altogether following radio services are operating in the country at present. Under the ownership of Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, Sinhala Local service, Commercial services, Tamil service, Tamil Commercial service, Hindi Service are operating. Independent Television network owns Lakhanda. Hiru, Sha, Sooriyan, Sun and Gold radio stations are belonged to Asian Broadcasting Company. While classic,

Sirasa, Shakthi, and Yes FM are owned by Maharaja Media Network, EAP Media Network has Sri, Raja and E FM under their management. Isira FM is an offspring of Teleshan Media Institute. TNL Radio Network has three radio stations. They are Esura, TNL Radio and Light FM. NETH FM, one of the recent innovations to Sri Lanka's radio field, is owned by ASSEST Broadcasting (Pvt) Ltd and Isura FM comes under RU-RES Lanka (Pvt) Ltd.

The latest addition to this lot is "Y" FM. According to the aforesaid detail, in Sri Lanka at the least 23 radio stations are broadcasting their programmes on daily basis.

Monitoring of all these radio channels was a formidable task for any organization. Therefore, it was decided to select 11 number of channels representing each media institute by at least one channel. This decision was strengthened by the fact of the apparent similarities of news, broadcast by the group of radio channels belonged to a same owner. Therefore, it is evident, that the News items, for a media network owned by one company, are modified in one News Room.

2.2.2.1. Accordingly following channels were used to our observation. (1) Local service of SLBC (2) Lakhanda (3) Isira FM (4) Hiru FM (5) Sirasa FM (6) Isura FM (7) Sri FM (8) Esura FM (9) Sooryan FM (10) Shakthi FM (11) Neth FM

2.2.2.2. Main news bulletins of all the channels were covered by our monitoring team. Each news bulletin was basically divided in to major parts viz. (a) Headlines (b) details. Both the headlines and details were analyzed to ascertain the implication of that news item to the listeners. Also, special attention has been paid to judge whether the distortion or fabrication of the news was taking place. The order of the presentation, the pattern of the sentences used to describe the incident, possible equivocations, if any and epilogue, were some of the other related aspects that have been used to decide the level of impartiality of a News Bulletin.

2.2.2.3. Apart from main News Bulletins, the number of occasions of hourly or half-hourly News briefs too, were counted and considered to see whether an undue favourable or adverse publicity was given for an incident or event or a speech, in the sense of exaggerating or extenuating; of value of the news.

2.2.2.4. Based on above (in 2.2.2.2. and 2.2.2.3.) number of minutes allocated in favour or unfavourable for each political party/independent group were counted to find whether an equal opportunity was provided for the listeners to decide their choice of political ideology.

2.3. Printed Media

The significance of the printed media in the context of electronics era has been a controversial issue for decades. However the influence and impression of Printed media as a conventional vehicle of dissemination of information has not been reduced, despite the ever increasing threat from the audio-visual contenders of the same field. That the printed material could be re-read leisurely numerous times and that it can produce and contain the information in a more flexible manner which suits to any reader, are some of the other reasons for us to engage in the observation on Printed Media.

2.3.1. With the view of regularizing the study, we divided this subject in to 3 logical components. They are (1) Daily National Papers (2) Weekend National Papers (3) Weekly Alternative Papers. Again, as in the case of electronics media, we were to apply a criterion, to select Newspapers relevant to this observation, out of vast number of publications.

2.3.1.1. We decided to stick to the conventional definition of Newspaper, i.e. “the paper that provides News” on this exercise. Based on that interpretation, we were compelled to leave out most of the tabloid papers.

2.3.1.2. Secondly, for the obvious reasons, the periodicals, monthly or fortnightly publications were excluded out of this study.

2.3.1.3. Thirdly, the publications that address to certain age groups, religious groups, ethnic groups or limited to local circulations, were exempted from our observation.

2.3.2. Consequently, daily and weekly publications of 24 Newspapers have been monitored during the period covered by this report. Following are the list of them.

2.3.2.1. Sinhala – Dailies :- (1) Divaina (2) Lakbima (3) Lankadeepa (4) Dinamina

2.3.2.2. English – Dailies :- (1) Daily News (2) Daily Mirror (3) The Island

2.3.2.3. Tamil – Dailies :- (1) Thinakural (2) Thinakaran (3) Weerakesari (4) Sudar Oli

2.3.2.4. Sinhala – Weeklies :- (1) Silumina (2) Sunday Divaina (3) Sunday Lakbima (4) Sunday Lankadeepa

2.3.2.5. English – Weeklies :- (1) Sunday Times (2) Sunday Leader (3) Sunday Island (4) Ceylon Observer

2.3.2.6. Alternative weeklies – Sinhala and English :- (1) Ravaya (2) Sathdina (3) Irudina (4) Lanka (5) The Morning Leader

2.3.3. To determine the political trend of a given paper, contents of Front page and the contents of other pages were analyzed separately. It is envisaged that the front page is designed in a such a way, where the general reader would be impressed of the outlook of that Newspaper.

2.3.3.1. The headline, the main news item, main photograph if any, other articles and politically oriented commercial advertisements were the main features, that we considered for this analysis.

2.3.3.2. Of the other pages of a paper, News related to political activities, political reviews, editorial, the other article of political importance, non-political articles and politically oriented advertisements have been the base for analysis.

2.3.3.3. The cartoons, and satirical columns were not included for the study, in spite of their sharp, strong political hints, because the stroke of brush or pen of the cartoonist and satirist implies an artistic view; rather than a political effect.

2.3.4. Quantitative and qualitative methods were applied to establish the fact whether given newspaper displays the political bias in reporting the News. With regard to these methods (a) Space covered by a headline (b) Space covered by the contents (c) Placement of the article (First page, second page, third page, top of the paper, corner of the paper, the font size, colours, outlines if any, the other news articles surrounding that particular news, their implication etc.) (d) Nos. of paragraphs (e) the extent of them (f) political implication of each paragraph (g) political message emerging through whole article, (h) sharpness and brightness and relevance of the photo (if any) associated with article etc, were used to analyze a news article.

2.4. As explained in the previous pages of this report, monitoring of the behaviour of the state and private media under the main categories of Electronics and Printed, is a strenuous task that requires a team of persons armed with the virtue, intelligence, impartiality and patience, in addition to the academic qualifications. Our media monitoring team with those characteristics are monitoring the media throughout this pre-election period with the intentions of assisting to mass media to evade and march independently without the risk of being trapped in pitfalls of political bias. To that extent, the monitoring team, almost in all the cases, reaches to conclusions on the media behaviour with the consent of majority of the term, leaving their individual judgment aside.

2.5. The Commissioner of Elections has issued guidelines for electronics and printed media during last Presidential election in 2005. These directives equivalent to code of ethics was also one of the criterions that we maintained in this monitoring process Annex No. I shows guidelines issued by the commissioner. With this background we believe the time is ripe for us to study the practical results of media monitoring process.