

Trust, elections and technology

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What this presentation is about

- Doing this at short notice, at request of Chair of Elections Commission
 - Since 1979, I've lived in Sri Lanka only in 1985-87; 1998-99; and 2002-now; not present for many of the key events we will be discussing
 - Been engaged with electoral reforms only since January 2015; not involved in actual conduct of elections
- 1. I am a social scientist → will provide you with conceptual framework that will help you organize and assess facts
 - Trust and government is a broad topic with relevance beyond elections
- 2. Facts: we will elicit comments from Chairman and his colleagues
- 3. Trust and technology will be discussed last

Trust and how to build it

Conceptual framework

What is trust?

- Trust is an essential element of an iterated set of transactions between the same parties, or a relationship
 - “Relationships are ties based on trust, where trust is not pre-given but worked upon, and where the work involved means a mutual process of self-disclosure” -- Giddens (1990, p. 121)
- Trust in a system: “confidence in the reliability of . . . a system, regarding a given set of outcomes or events, where that confidence expresses faith . . . in the correctness of abstract principles (technical knowledge).” Giddens (1990, p. 34)
- Need for trust is created by lack of full information about a system whose workings are not fully known and understood
- Lacking full information, a person has to develop a trust-related attitude toward the system, ranging from complete trust through mistrust to angst

How is trust produced?

- If trust has to be worked upon, it is possible that the work may fail, resulting in mistrust or angst
- Trust work involves information
 - Not complete disclosure which would make trust redundant, but
 - Some form of self-disclosure, or
 - Design of, and behavior at, “access points” of a complex system (e.g., airlines, banks)
- Technology which makes the systems more complex or which distances the user may make the work of building trust harder
 - Though technology can also be used to increase self-disclosure and thereby make that work easier

Do we need trust in electoral system?

- Complex system
 - 15 million electors
 - Thousands of candidates, competing across and within parties
 - Voting conducted in 22 electoral districts
 - Highly complex ballot paper
 - Complex two stage counting, first for district percentages by party/independent group and then preferential votes
 - People unaware of Constitutional provisions
- Obviously, requires trust because information is incomplete

Actions that led to loss of trust

- Before 1978, some instances of election-law violation
 - Entire villages deprived of the vote by thugs
 - Widespread violence at Dedigama by-election in 1973
- But courts and mechanism of election petitions controlled the erosion of trust
 - Two members of Sri Lanka's first post-independence Cabinet lost their seats as a result of successful election petitions

Deepening erosion after 1978

- Proportional representation with party lists introduced in 1978
 - Widespread violence in 1981 DDC election, especially in Northern Province
 - No consequences to perpetrators because incentives for launching election petitions changed with PR
- Presidential Election and Referendum of 1982
 - Opposition Presidential Candidate Hector Kobbekaduwa's own vote was cast by time he went to vote
- 1989 Parliamentary Election
 - Massive violence and low turnout
- 1998 Wayamba Provincial Council election
- 2010 elections
 - Jilmart allegations

How was trust worked on traditionally?

- Throughout, agents of candidates allowed to observe voting and counting activities
 - Chasing out agents or coercing them became part of electoral manipulation
 - Dummy candidates file nominations in order to increase number of agents
- External observers
- Use of stamps on ballot boxes in 1994
- Elections Commissioner communicating to media
 - Sometimes backfires? “Athathiya”
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Recent actions

- Specific actions to address concerns of post-conflict electors
 - ??
- Specific actions to respond to claims that voters had been excluded from voters' lists
 - ??
- Actions to address allegations of jilmart
- Allegations of bias in Uva Provincial Council election
- Education of voters and officials

Trust and election technology

What can ICTs do?

- Greater communication with political parties and stakeholders
- Making voter registration easier and more transparent
- Electronic voting machines
- Authentication of voter identity
- Videography in polling booth; could be streamed
- Vote tabulation using computers
 - Not relevant if EVMs used
- Videography in counting locations; could be streamed
- Real time reporting of voting
- Voter education

Can technology help or hinder?

- I have been complaining about why we are still not mobilizing potential of ICTs, when India and Bangladesh (larger populations; lower literacy; less electricity) use EVMs with no problem
 - Even Bhutan (pop. 700,000; no manufacturing capacity) uses EVMs
- But let's first discuss current use of ICTs in Sri Lankan elections and the impact on trust

Sunday Times 2

Barking up the Jilmart tree

By Ruvan Weerasinghe

View(s):


So we come to yet another time of electioneering where politicians run a circus to amuse the rest of us. And, to a large extent we oblige, exchanging cartoons and videos via social media and even reading posters and cutouts smiling down on us from giant hoardings.


Almost exactly five years ago, I had to lead a team from the Colombo University's School of Computing to assist the Elections Commissioner in the final processing of results. As has been done at all presidential and general elections since 1982, our team ensured that an error-free processing was carried out during that election too. However, most readers would remember that particular election for the new term coined by an opposition politician — computer jilmart, which was alleged to have taken place to make the incumbent win. In hindsight, this was completely understandable owing to the heightened expectations of the opposition at the time. It was, however, distressing to our team, since it marked the first occasion for aspersions being cast not just on our competency (which, of course, is important to us), but more crucially also our independence. While the independence of universities since then has eroded, the Colombo University's School of Computing has, in all its dealings at least with the elections, been fiercely holding on to our reputation of neutrality. Those who are even indirectly involved in politicking are not welcome on the team assisting the Elections Commissioner.

How then can we explain the 'computer jilmart' phenomenon, or the situation that prompted it – an apparently inexplicable defeat of a popular opposition candidate? Elsewhere I've written about the focus of the two campaigns — one on those aspects much more basic and lower down on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the other on issues much higher on that scale such as the freedom of speech, anti-corruption and the rule of law. Here I wish to focus on something much more basic, and easy to understand: the entire election process.


It is our very own honorary citizen Sir Arthur C. Clarke who famously stated that any sufficiently


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Credible third parties speaking out can help

- Five years ago, I had to lead a team from the Colombo University's School of Computing to assist the Elections Commissioner in the final processing of results. As has been done at all presidential and general elections since 1982, our team ensured that an error-free processing was carried out during that election too. However, most readers would remember that particular election for the new term coined by an opposition politician — computer jilmart, which was alleged to have taken place to make the incumbent win. . . . It was, however, distressing to our team, since it marked the first occasion for aspersions being cast not just on our competency (which, of course, is important to us), but more crucially also our independence. While the independence of universities since then has eroded, the Colombo University's School of Computing has, in all its dealings at least with the elections, been fiercely holding on to our reputation of neutrality.
- It is our very own honorary citizen Sir Arthur C. Clarke who famously stated that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. It is also in the human psyche to attribute things that are inexplicable to a fairly surface level logic, to that same 'magic'. Given these two, it is not rocket science that enabled the esteemed opposition politician to conclude that the election loss, which so defied the logic of what happened on election day (fairly peaceful if my memory serves me), was due to the magic of technology.

Prospects for action

- No allegations in 2015
 - Except for some minor quibbles about the counting of preferential votes
- Is now the time to introduce EVMs, leveraging high credibility of Department/Commission?
 - Can we follow the Bhutan example and use EVMs manufactured elsewhere?
- Other ICT applications to enhance “self disclosure” and thereby trust?

Voting rights of overseas citizens will necessarily involve ICTs

- Will this increase/decrease trust?