

# Presidential Election of 2015

A reading from the Uva Province Election 2014

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## Presidential Election of 2015: A reading from the Uva Province Election 2014

### Introduction

The Uva Provincial Council (PC) election marked a turning point in post-war electoral politics. It was fought hard, as if it were a general election, and the result reversed the preconceptions that the UPFA's electoral dominance was unshakeable.

Compared to the general election of 2010, the UNP vote share bumped up by 12.5 percentage points in the UVA Provincial Council election and the UPFA vote share moved down by exactly the same amount. As a result the UNP vote share went up to 40 percent and the UPFA vote share came down to 51 percent. In short, the Uva election signaled that the super majorities enjoyed by the UPFA during the post-war period had come to an end, and the electoral competition between the two main parties was returning to past norms.

Analysis of election results in Uva over the last decade suggests that the war and war-victory created a deviation in voting patterns among UNP supporters. In the opportunities to vote in the early aftermath of the war-victory, a section of the UNP might have been persuaded to cast a 'gratitude vote' for the UPFA, especially President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The numbers suggest that in later elections the same voter might have decided to abstain (become a 'sleeper') thus making the UNP seem uncompetitive in electoral contests, even while the UPFA's vote share ebbed. The 2014 Provincial Council election in Uva signals a return from that deviation towards normal competitive politics.

### Four stages of shifting voter balance (The Sinhala Buddhist Vote)

It would be a mistake to read the Uva result as an altogether anomalous event. Rather, it was a continuation of trends that emerged in the Western Provincial Council (WPC) and Southern Provincial Council (SPC) elections of 2014. The present analysis sees the Uva election results as the culmination of voter movements over time.

The charismatic campaign of Harin Fernando and the coming together of Sajith Premadasa and Ranil Wickremasinghe of the UNP did contribute to the outcome, but their ability to make a difference depended on the timing: in the aftermath of the war the balance of voter response to the Ranil Wickremasinghe led UNP and the Mahinda Rajapaksa led UPFA shifted significantly from its historical norms, but by the end of 2001, at the Uva election, it was trending back to its pre-2006 balance.

The shifting balance between the two main political parties (mainly of the Sinhala Buddhist vote) that culminated in Uva, can be explained as a development that took place in four stages;

**Stage 1 (Gratitude):** In the immediate aftermath of the war there was a high turnout of voters and a huge shift of votes away from the UNP to the UPFA. We call this the "gratitude shift", where the gratitude was harnessed mostly by the personality of President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

**Stage 2 (Sleep):** The sleep phase kicked in, in varying degrees after the Presidential election of 2010. It was marked by reduced voter interest, and especially towards the UNP led opposition. It led to lower voter turnout at elections in comparison to Stage 1. The UNP votes that had shifted in the gratitude phase to the President/UPFA, mostly chose to stay home during Stage 2. This meant that the UPFA lost a significant part of the gratitude vote, but the UNP did not gain it. The UNP also lost votes due to reduced voting interest.

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**Stage 3 (Protest):** The protest stage started in 2013. The protest was not just against the UPFA but also the UNP. This stage saw some of the sleeping voters return to vote- but not to vote for the UNP. Instead they voted for 'third parties'. The UPFA did lose some vote share, but did not lose its dominance because the UNP was not showing any significant gain either. The Western and Southern Provincial Council elections even as late as the first quarter of 2014 were still marked by these symptoms of protest. The 'third parties' of the JVP and the Democratic Party (led by retired army commander Sarath Fonseka) received record vote shares, while the UNP failed to capitalise on the votes that were going against the UPFA.<sup>1</sup>

**Stage 4 (Change):** This last stage started in the latter half of 2014. It is marked by the voter expressing a stronger frustration with the incumbent UPFA, and where that frustration overcame to some extent the frustration with the UNP. Here the previously awakened protest voters and much of the UNP sleeping vote that had continued to sleep through the protest stage as well, returned to vote for the UNP, as the main opposition contender that could bring change. In this stage, which became visible in the UVA election, third parties such as the JVP and the Democratic Party did less well; the votes shifted away from them and congregated at the door of the UNP, which was by then doing better at presenting itself as a viable vehicle of change.

Using the results of the Uva election, the present analysis examines a few key aspects of the electoral landscape for the presidential elections. These include shifts in voter turnout, the shifts in vote share between the UPFA and UNP, the significance of minority voters, and the declining electoral draw of the Rajapaksa name and development rhetoric. A careful consideration of the voting patterns in Uva offers insights into how the electoral landscape of the country may have been shaping prior to what is now expected to be a closely contested presidential election.

N.B. Changes in votes received by parties can be measured in two ways. It can be measured as the reduction in **vote share**, or the reduction in the **number of votes**. The choice of measurement matters, even though the changes to both measures are expressed in terms of percentages. For instance, if the total number of votes is 100, and the UNP and UPFA both get 50 votes each in the election, then they both have a *vote share of 50 percent*. If in a second election 125 people vote and UNP and UPFA get 50 and 75 votes respectively, then the UNP, UPFA vote shares are now 40 and 60 percent respectively. This means the UNP *vote share* decreased by 10 percent but zero percent change in its *number of votes*. Likewise the UPFA *vote share* increased by 10 percent, but its *number of votes* increased by 50 percent.

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<sup>1</sup>See Alphonsus, D., and Kumarage A. (2014) "Provincial Council Elections 2014: Reading into the Margins", Verité Research.

## **Presidential Election of 2015: A reading from the Uva Province Election 2014**

### **1. Background to the Uva Election**

1.1 Sri Lanka's Uva Province went to the poll on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2014. The Uva Province (population of 1,259,800) accounts for 6.2% of Sri Lanka's population, and has two districts. The larger (in terms of population) and ethnically diverse Badulla, and the smaller preponderantly Sinhala Moneragala. Uva's median household income (LKR 24,228) is the third lowest in Sri Lanka, just ahead of the war-affected Northern and Eastern provinces.

1.2 At 76 percent, turnout at this election was up 6 percent of total registered voters compared to the last provincial election held in August 2009 and up 14 percent in comparison to the 2010 general election. The reports suggest that the level of election violence was also higher than in recent previous elections. The rise of election violence in Sri Lanka is usually associated with elections becoming more competitive.

### **2. Uva was a significant Election**

2.1 The election was significant for the UPFA because the Uva provincial election was often portrayed as a barometer for the latest national sentiment with regard to the government. The UPFA had indicated that it would call early presidential elections and even general elections, and thus the performance in Uva was seen as an important morale boosting stepping stone for the next national election. As a result campaigning in the province was intense - many national politicians, including the President and the Opposition Leader, campaigned vigorously.

2.2 With regard to the UNP post-war, it was also the first time that the party was contesting a province with a strong, clearly announced, chief ministerial candidate. It was also the election in which the UNP leadership was able to create positive hope about its internal leadership tussles being overcome. As such it was a test of the UNP's ability to attract voters at a time when it had patched over most of its visibly persistent dysfunctional features.

2.3 For the JVP and DP it was significant because they had both performed strongly at the Southern and Western Provincial Council elections. The JVP received 9 percent and 6.1 percent of vote share respectively in the two provinces and the DP received 6.2 and 8 percent. These were the highest share of votes, by far, that these two parties have posted in any election since 2010; where canvassing jointly they received only 5.5 percent of the total vote. This election was an opportunity for these two parties to further establish that they were now significant third forces in Sri Lanka's electoral landscape.

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### 3. Post-war gratitude vote shifted the electoral balance

3.1 Since the end of the war, from the 2010 general election onwards, the UNP had consistently received less than 30 percent of the vote share in all the national and provincial council elections, apart from the provinces of Sabaragamuwa (34.7 percent) and North Central (35.5 percent) in 2012. But in the decades prior to 2009, either of the main political parties getting under 30 percent was the exception, not the rule.

3.2 Taking Uva as a case in point, looking from the 1999 presidential election onwards, the UNP received 45 percent or more vote share in each of provincial and national election, except for the 2004 PC election in which it dipped to 37 percent. But this changed after the war ended. In the 2009 PC and the 2010 general election the UNP received less than 30 percent of the vote share in Uva.

3.3 In 2005 Uva was evenly split. Ranil Wickremasinghe received 318,826 votes in Uva which was only two votes less than Rajapaksa who received 318,828. For Wickremasinghe, it was 25 percent more votes than what the UNP had received in the general elections a year earlier. For Rajapaksa it was a smaller increase; 8 percent more than what the UPFA had polled a year earlier.

3.4 In 2009, immediately after the LTTE's defeat, the UPFA won 418,906 votes in Uva compared to the UNP's 129,144. This marks a huge shift from the general election of 2004. The shift is precisely a 123,628 reduction in the UNP vote, and an increase of the UPFA vote by almost the same number: 122,816 (see Exhibit 1). In numbers, almost 50 percent of the UNP voters defected and cast an ostensible 'gratitude vote' for the UPFA in the first opportunity to vote after the war victory of 2009.

<b>Exhibit 1: Uva Election on Election Change</b>				
Defection away from UPFA in 2010, towards UNP in 2014				
	UPFA Votes	UNP Votes	UPFA, e-on-e +/-	UNP, e-on-e +/-
2004 PC	267,045	168,101		
2004 GE	296,090	252,772		
2009 PC	418,906	129,144	122,816	-123,628
2010 GE	324,323	141,778	-94,583	12,634
2014 PC	349,906	274,773	25,583	132,995

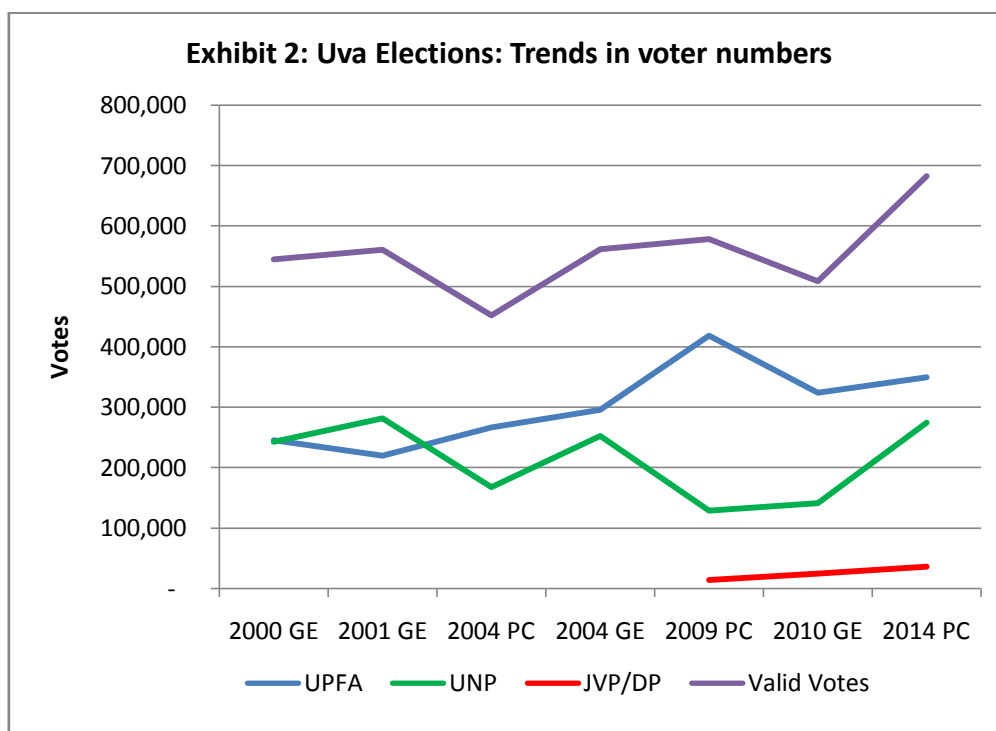
Source: Department of Elections, Verité Research analysis

**4. The post-war gratitude vote became a sleeping vote in 2011 and 2012**

4.1 From the general election of 2010 onwards, many of the voters who defected to the UPFA from the UNP to cast a gratitude vote in their first votes after the war seem to have stopped turning out to vote; that is, they became a sleeping vote.

4.2 This is seen in the Uva result, where the UPFA which had gained 122, 816 votes in the first post-war election in Uva, then lost 94,583 of those votes in the general election of 2010. However, these voters did not return to vote for the UNP either, the UNP which had lost 123,628 votes only gained back 12,634 of them. Most of these voters became sleeping voters and caused a significant reduction in voter turnout.

4.3 Furthermore, the number of those who voted in Uva hardly changed between the 2004 and 2009 election (there was an increase of less than 3 percent). In 2010, however, the number of voters fell by more than 10 percent (see Exhibit 2). This is an anomaly since usually voter turnout is lower for a provincial election than it is for a general election. Given the shifts towards and away from the UPFA and UNP in 2009 and 2010 in relation to 2004, this anomalous change in voter numbers in 2010 signals that a significant share of UNP voters became a 'sleeping vote' when voting for the second or third time after the war victory.



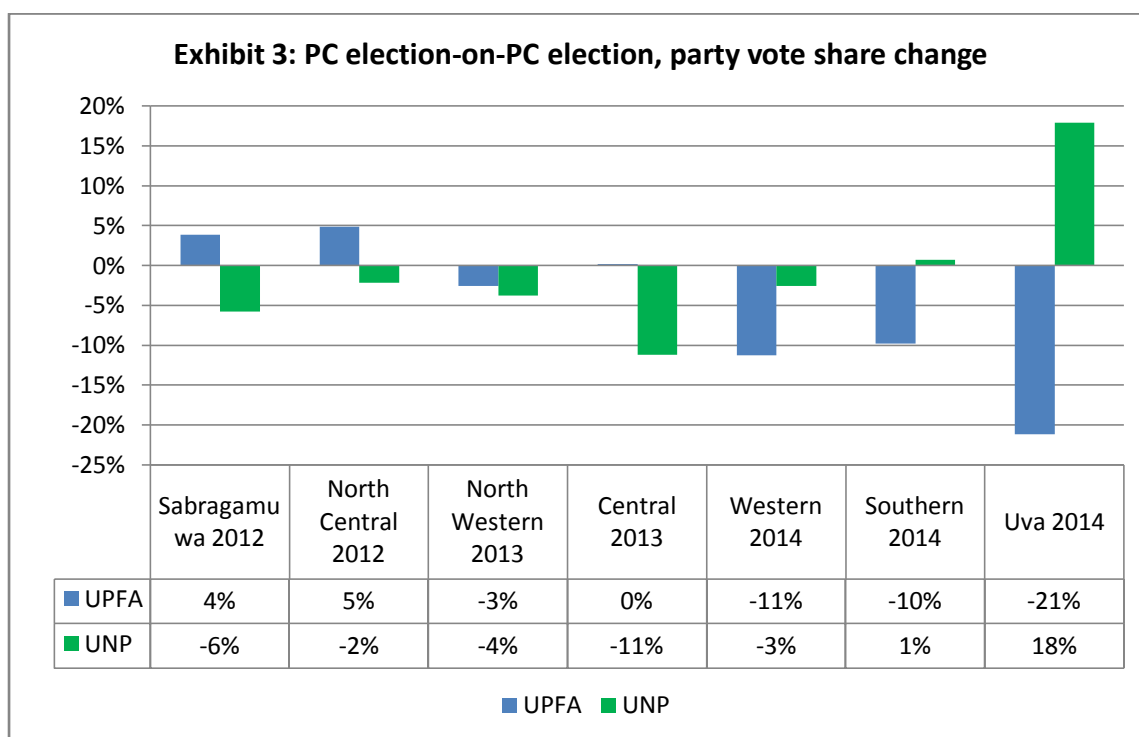
Source: Department of Elections, Verité Research analysis

**5. Some of the sleeping vote became a protest vote in 2013 and 2014**

5.1 The first major signal that the UPFA’s post-war election “honeymoon” was drawing to a close was the result of the Western and Southern province elections. The UPFA’s vote share declined by 11 and 10 percent respectively. However that decline of the UPFA vote was not picked up by the UNP, which also decreased 3 percent in the Western province and increased only 1 percent in the Southern province (see Exhibit 3).

5.2 This was the development of a trend. The UPFA vote share showed an increase until 2012 but stopped increasing and began to decline after that from 2013 onwards. However the UNP was also declining in that period. This UPFA vote share decline without a UNP rise in vote share (and indeed even a decline) signaled the rise of a protest vote. The sleeping voters were returning from their slumber, but not to vote for the UNP. They were protesting not only the UPFA, but the UNP as well (see Exhibit 3).

5.3 The beneficiaries of this protest vote were the JVP and the DPF which then gained an unprecedented vote share in the Southern and Western Province. The JVP received 9 percent and 6.1 percent of vote share respectively in the two provinces and the DP received 6.2 and 8 percent. This was the highest share of votes by far that these two parties have posted in any election when contesting in competition with the mainstream parties. Even in 2010 when these two parties formed a coalition between them and canvassed jointly the total received by them was 5.5 percent.



Source: Department of Elections data, Verité Research analysis

### 6. Sleeping voters return to the UNP for change by late 2014

6.1 The Uva election is a turning point in the behaviour of the protest vote, that is, the sleeping voters that had woken up and were voting for 'third parties'. In the UVA election, the UPFA vote share declined by 21 percent and the UNP vote share increased by 18 percent (relative to the Uva PC election of 2009, see Exhibit 3). In relation to the 2010 general election the UPFA vote share declined 12.5 percent, and the UNP vote share increased by the same quantum (see Exhibit 4). That this was the return of the 'sleeping vote' and not a result of defections is seen by two facts.

6.2 The first is that the absolute number of UPFA votes did not decline from general election vote it received in 2010<sup>2</sup>, in fact the number increased by 25,583. By 2010 in Uva, the electorate had already had two opportunities to register the gratitude vote (2009 PC election and 2010 January Presidential election) and by the previous analysis the opposition voter that had registered their gratitude vote had gone into sleep mode after that.

6.3 The second is that the number of UNP votes increased by 132,995. This number is a little in excess to the total number of votes that was lost to the UNP in the previously explained gratitude shift of 2009<sup>3</sup> (see Exhibit 1).

6.4 This implied that the protest vote did not accrue to the 'third parties' with the same vigour as it had in the previous elections. The large movement towards the UNP meant that the JVP and DNA which accounted for about 15 percent of the vote in the Southern and Western provincial elections were back to a combined total of around only 6 percent, similar to its performance in the general election of 2010.

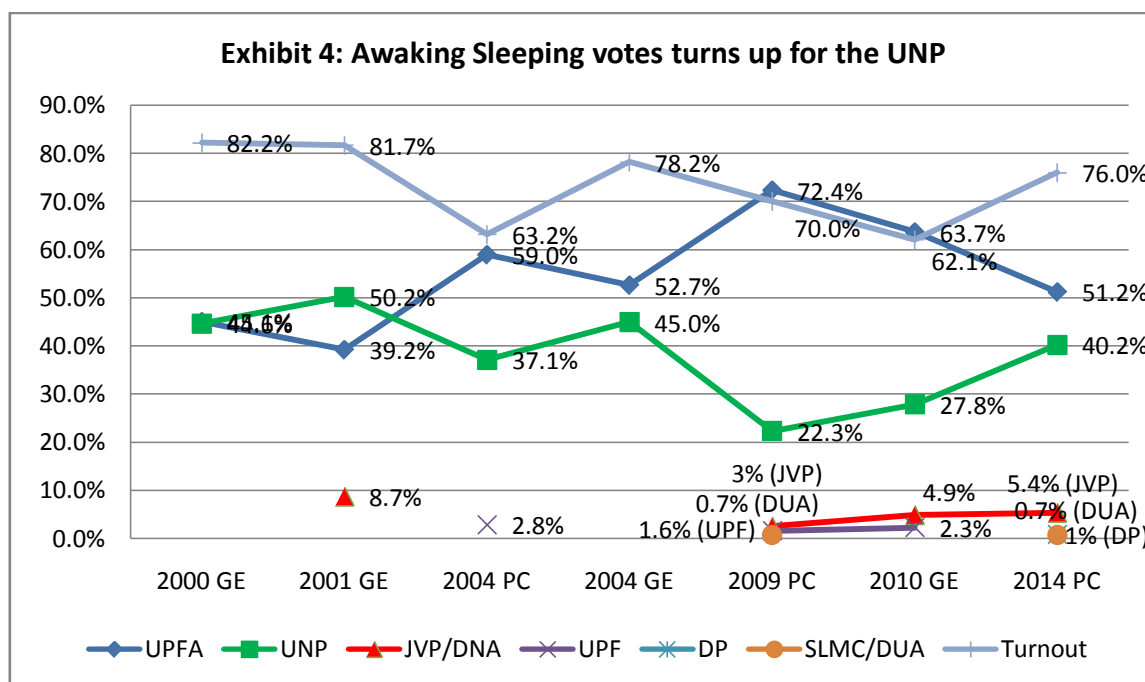
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<sup>2</sup> This claim stands even if one includes 26,177 new UPFA voters added between 2010 and 2014. Including estimated new voters, the UPFA lost only 595 votes (a negligible difference) over the time period. The 26,177 figure is obtained by multiplying the UPFA's percentage result in Uva with the number of new registered voters.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the excess can be explained by new voters: the increase in the number of registered voters.



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*Source: Verité Research analysis, Department of Elections data*

### 7. The Importance of the Plantation Sector Tamil Vote

7.1 While the UPFA had a post-war posture suggesting that it could win elections without depending on the ethnic or religious minority votes, its actual performance and electioneering has been invested in the votes from these minority groups. Plantation sector Tamil voters have been especially wooed by the UPFA. In Uva's Badulla district, this vote was crucial for the UPFA.

7.2 Based on an extrapolation of preferential votes it can be estimated that the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and Upcountry People's Front (UPF) account for approximately 7.2% and 2.9% of the valid votes polled in the Badulla district. If these two parties contested independently and received the same number of votes, the vote share of the remaining UPFA would have been down by 10 percent. As the vote share difference in Badulla between the UNP and UPFA was a mere 2.6%, even if only the UPF had switched to the UNP it would have been enough to give the UNP a majority in Badulla<sup>4</sup> (See Exhibit D in the annex).

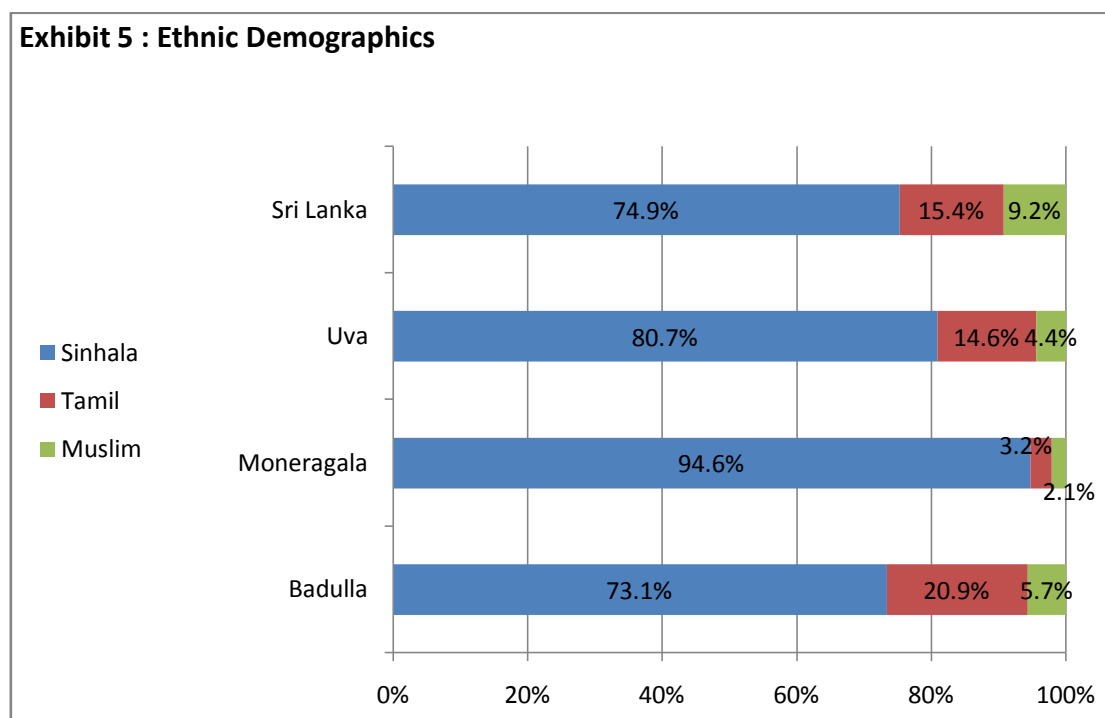
7.3 To provide more detail, since Aravind Kumar was UPF's most (perhaps only) viable candidate, the number of votes he received indicates the core UPF vote. Aravind Kumar, obtained 12,721 votes. The UNP lost Badulla by 11,348 votes. Therefore, the UPF contesting independently and not joining the UPFA is likely to have been sufficient to induce a UNP victory in Badulla. If the UPFA had not secured a majority in the Badulla district, it would have led to a

<sup>4</sup> These estimates are based on this assumption: the minimum number of votes a party secures is equal to the preference votes its highest performing candidate obtains. For example, the minimum number of preference votes the CWC obtained is equal to the share of preferences Sendil Thondaman, its best performing candidate, secured. Therefore, under this analysis the minimum vote share the CWC secured in Badulla was 7.2%. (See annexe for calculations). This assumption is not unreasonable in the case of the CWC and UPF. In the CWC's case, Thondaman was their main candidate in this election, and his vote share it likely to reflect the party's strength. In the UPF's case, Aravind Kumar, was their only viable candidate and thus they would have focused on ensuring that he received as many preferences as the party could secure.

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hung provincial council with 17 UPFA seats, 15 UNP seats and 2 JVP seats (See Exhibit D in the annex).

7.4 The voting of the plantation sector Tamil population accounts for about 4 percent of the total of the national vote. It is also less susceptible than the Northern vote to the stand of the TNA. Therefore, as it was in the Uva provincial elections, the plantation sector minority Tamil vote could once again be a decisive factor in the outcome of Presidential elections as well – given the expected close contest.



Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2012

### 8. Muslim Votes Shifting away from the UPFA

8.1 It has generally been surmised that the rise of Buddhist extremist groups in Sri Lanka has caused disaffection with the government amongst the Muslim voter base. But the disaffection has been not only with the government but also with Muslim parties that have remained in the government coalition. This has created the expectation that Muslim voters would also shift away, to some extent, from Muslim political parties towards strong opposition groups such as the UNP, TNA and JVP.

8.2. The Uva election offers some evidence of a shift of the Muslim vote towards the UNP. The preferential votes received by UNP's Muslim candidates was triple the total votes polled by the DUA, which consisted of the SLMC and ACMC electoral coalition of Muslim parties. DUA won 5,045 votes in Badulla, while the Muslim UNP candidates, A.M. Nazir and Ameer Mohomed, both obtained over fifteen thousand preference votes. The UPFA did not separately field any Muslim candidates in Badulla (NB the SLMC and ACMC were both UPFA coalition partners at the time of the Uva election; see Exhibit D in the annex).

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### **9. “Development” and the Rajapaksa name are not enough**

9.1 Government statistics show the average real mean income in households rising fast in Moneragala. In the three years between 2009/10 and 2012/2013 they rose 44 percent. Yet, there is a puzzle, because despite this huge income growth the number of votes polled for the UPFA in the Moneragala district did not show a strong positive response. They deviated by around twenty thousand votes plus or minus from the 2010 general election and the 2009 PC election respectively. Development activities do not seem to have kept the UNP voters from returning to their fold after periods of ‘shifting’, ‘sleeping’ and ‘protesting’ since 2009.

9.2 One reason for the weak impact of development programs might be the distribution of benefits. Despite the 44 percent average income growth in Moneragala, the median voter’s real income had increased by only 10 percent between 2009/10 and 2012/13. This indicates that the benefits of growth were not trickling down to half the population, and that inequality is increasing (See Exhibit B and C in the annex).

9.3 The UPFA’s chief ministerial candidate was President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s nephew Shasheendra Rajapaksa. It was surmised that the Rajapaksa name would lend him an advantage over other party members in getting out the vote. The general hypothesis was that the Rajapaksa family has lost less popularity than the UPFA.

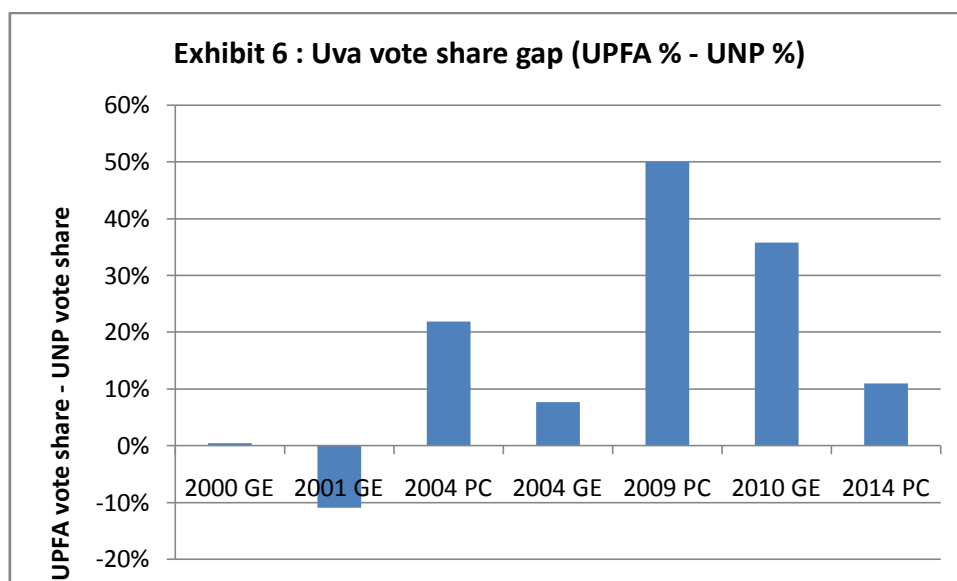
9.4. But contrary to this hypothesis the popularity of UPFA’s chief ministerial candidate Shasheendra Rajapaksa showed a steeper decline than that of the party. The number of preference votes he received dropped by 40,078 (29 percent of his preference votes lost) in Moneragala, in contrast to the UPFA’s number of votes in Moneragala dropping by only 12 percent between the 2009 and 2014 PC elections.

### **10. Normal electoral competition has returned at the end of 2014**

10.2 The Uva election appears to have ushered in a return to past patterns of electoral competition, where the SLFP and UNP coalitions compete closely with each other in National elections. In other words, the two post-war elections thus far, the 2009 provincial election and the 2010 general election, were anomalies. From 2000 to 2004 the difference between the UPFA’s vote share and UNP’s vote share was never greater than 22%. However, immediately after the war, the UPFA obtained 289, 762 or more than 3 times the number of UNP votes in the 2009 provincial election resulting in an unprecedented +50% gap in vote share. The anomaly reduced in 2010, but it is only in 2014 that the result reverted to mirror past patterns (See Exhibit 6).

10.2 The Uva election of 2014 is likely to have marked a general break from the anomaly of one-sided electoral competition in the post-war period and a return to established historical patterns. This is the first post-war election where the UNP and UPFA coalitions had results that were closely matched. The reduction of the difference in vote share between the UPFA and UNP was limited to 11%, and the UNP gained over 40% of the total votes polled. This is quite close to the historical norms that have persisted in the past (see Exhibit 6).

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*Source: Department of Elections data, Verité Research analysis.*

10.3 The analysis of the Uva election signals that in the current stage of voter sentiment, seeking not merely to protest, but change the incumbent political leaders, the UNP once again rises in prominence despite its prominence having declined substantially in the post war years.

10.4 The Uva results also indicate that in this stage of enhanced competition between the two main political parties the votes accruing through smaller parties such as the JPV and DP, as well as the minority ethnic and religious parties can have a decisive impact on the results of the election.

10.5 The results in Uva were counter-intuitive with regard to the outcomes of macro development statistics (and reflected the importance of micro impacts at the individual level). They were also counter-intuitive with regard to voter response to the Rajapaksa family name – where the popularity to Rajapaksa’s nephew slid a great deal more than the popularity of the UPFA party.

10.6 The results of elections in Uva over time, as well as the results of other elections indicates that voter behaviour with regard to the UPFA and UNP has moved through four stages in the post war period. These were summarised and explained in the outset of this analysis as the Gratitude vote, Sleeping vote, Protest vote and Change vote. Understanding this movement is critical to understanding the movement of voter sentiment at the cusp of the Presidential election in January 2015.

ANNEXE

**Exhibit A : Polling Division Demographics and Party Performance**

	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslim	UPFA	UNP	JVP
Passara	50%	45%	4%	56.2%	39.8%	1.9%
Haputale	53%	43%	4%	49.6%	44.3%	2.9%
Hali Ela	65%	31%	4%	44.2%	50.1%	4.1%
Bandarawela	71%	24%	5%	47.3%	46.8%	4.0%
Badulla	70%	20%	9%	38.4%	54.0%	5.8%
Welimada	71%	12%	17%	43.4%	44.8%	4.8%
Uva						
Paranagama	84%	11%	5%	44.8%	44.4%	6.0%
Wiyaluwa	88%	11%	1%	52.0%	43.3%	2.8%
Mahiyanganaya	98%	0%	1%	50.6%	40.0%	6.1%

Source: Department of Elections, Verité Research Analysis

**Exhibit B: Mean Income Growth, Badulla & Moneragala**

	Badulla		Moneragala	
	2009/10	2012/23	2009/10	2012/23
Mean Nominal Income	32,313	36,119	22,161	34,804
Mean Real Income	26910	27625	18456	26619
Mean Nominal Income Growth	11%		57%	
Mean Real Income Growth	3%		44%	

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Verité Research Analysis.

**Exhibit C: Median Income Growth, Badulla & Moneragala**

	Badulla		Moneragala	
	2009/10	2012/23	2009/10	2012/23
Median Nominal Income	20,982	25,067	17,226	20,686
Median Real Income	17474	19172	14346	15821
Median Nominal Income Growth	19%		20%	
Median Real Income Growth	10%		10%	

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Verité Research Analysis.

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<b>Exhibit D: UPFA Constituent Party</b>	
Vote Estimates	
Sendil Thondaman (CWC)	31,858
Aravind Kumar (UPF)	12721
UPFA	209056
<b>SLFP</b>	164,477
UPFA, SLFP %	0.78676
UPFA, CWC %	0.15239
UPFA, UPF %	0.06085
<b>SLFP Badulla</b>	<b>37.29245</b>
<b>CWC Badulla</b>	<b>7.223276</b>
<b>UPF Badulla</b>	<b>2.884277</b>

Source: Department of Elections, Verité Research Analysis

### Exhibit E: UNP Growth Ranked by Polling Division

	UNP Growth 2009 - 2010	UNP Growth 2009 - 2014	UNP Growth 2010 - 2014
<b>Badulla</b>	9	4	1
<b>Bandarawela</b>	5	3	4
<b>Hali-Ela</b>	6	1	2
<b>Haputale</b>	1	2	6
<b>Mahiyangana</b>	4	6	8
<b>Passara</b>	2	8	9
<b>Uva</b>			
<b>Paranagama</b>	8	9	5
<b>Welimada</b>	3	5	7
<b>Wiyaluwa</b>	7	7	3

Source: Department of Elections, Verité Research Analysis