CHAPTER-VII
CONCLUSION
Elections play a central role in the political process of a country that chooses to follow democracy as a form of governance. Elections reflect the state of the mind of the people on the basis of which one can assess the requirements of the country as a whole. Elections have played an important role in the political process of Sri Lanka under parliamentary democracy that was practiced between 1947 and 1977. However, in the post-1977 period Sri Lanka went through enormous stress and the elections that have been held since have been under partisan and unusually violent circumstances.

The present study was an attempt to understand the following: (1) the factors that led to the erosion of democracy after 1977 especially during the Presidential election of 1988; (2) to what extent the violence affected the electoral process during the second Presidential election; (3) to what extent the factors such as violence, socio-economic issues and the minorities influenced the election result; (4) the factors that led to Premadasa's victory and Mrs.Bandaranaike's defeat notwithstanding the anti-government sentiments that prevailed at that time.

The erosion of democratic institutions after 1977 was primarily a handiwork of the UNP-led government. Though the adoption of a Presidential system coupled with drastic changes in the electoral system outlined a lot of prospects for strengthening the democratic institutions, yet the con-
stitutional coup by the ruling party often prevented the system from working to its full potential. The trend set by the SLFP between 1970 and 1977 was continued to a great deal during the UNP's rule. The UNP often hijacked the Constitution by using its steamrolling majority and systematically eliminated the forces that were against it. This was evident from the advance of the first Presidential election under partisan circumstances to favour the UNP's chances in the elections. In addition, the term of Parliament was also extended through a controversial referendum which witnessed, for the first time in the electoral history of Sri Lanka, large-scale intimidation and violence. The UNP did this simply to maintain its political dominance over its opponents. This virtually denied the opposition parties their due share in the political process and left them in political wilderness.

Meanwhile the ethnic crisis that was mishandled for the past three decades, thanks to the self-centred policies of both the UNP and SLFP, turned into violent riots in 1983. The failure on the part of the democratic forces provided a space for radical groups like the LTTE to gain confidence among the Tamil people who took up arms against the state and demanded a separate nation. Although a solution was tried through the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, it only generated violent protests all over the island. The Accord failed in its objectives because
of the government's half-hearted commitment and the opposition's self-seeking protest against it. The SLFP's protest against the accord directly or indirectly enhanced the confidence of anti-systemic forces like the JVP which were engaged in violent campaign. Hence the weakening of the democratic forces coupled with the protracted violent ethnic conflict, sealed the growth of democratic institutions. All these had an impact on the second Presidential election held in 1988.

The 1988 Presidential election was held in an atmosphere of unprecedented violence and large-scale intimidation unleashed by both systemic and anti-systemic forces. On the one hand, anti-systemic forces like the JVP and the LTTE unleashed violent campaigns to deny legitimacy to the electoral process because their demands were not met. On the other hand, the government, in the name of countering these anti-systemic forces, exploited the services of the army, the police and the newly-created shadow paramilitary forces like the Green Tigers to manipulate the outcome of the election in its favour. As a result, neither could the candidates present their views to the voters nor could the voters exercise their franchise in a free and fair atmosphere. Violence could be singled out for the poor voter turn-out that robbed nearly half the Sri Lankan electorate of their fundamental right. If one goes by David Butler's view, it cannot not be
considered as a democratic election. But although the election was not held under a free and fair atmosphere, the fact that more than half the Sri Lankan electorate braved the violence and participated in the electoral process cannot be overlooked or undermined.

We can identify three important factors that played a decisive role in the electoral outcome. Firstly, violence was one of the decisive factors during the second Presidential election. It was violence that came in handy for the UNP to overcome the anti-government sentiments that prevailed on the eve of the election. As discussed earlier, the government exploited the services of the army, the police and the shadow parliamentary forces like the Green Tigers to its advantage. While these forces gave full protection to the UNP candidate and its support base, they also harassed and terrorised the support base of the opposition, especially the SLFP. This was evident from the poor voter turn-out especially in areas that have traditionally been considered as the SLFP's support base.

The SLFP fought a lone battle with its weak party structure and without enough resources to confront the violence. The SLFP also contributed towards its own defeat by associating itself with the JVP for a brief period and by its failure to denounce violence. This may have led that part of the electorate which was against the government not to take
the risk of coming out and voting for the SLFP which, to a certain extent, encouraged violence. Although violence did largely benefit the UNP, it is quite doubtful whether the SLFP would have won if the elections had taken place in a free and fair atmosphere. Because out of the eight electoral districts that polled above 65 per cent of votes, Premadasa secured absolute majority in six and a simple majority in one. Moreover, if there had been no law and order problem then the UNP would have been better placed to face the electorate.

Secondly, the socio-economic issue was another factor that played a decisive role. The UNP, though, gave importance to other major issues in its programme. It presented a constructive programme for solving problems like poverty, unemployment, housing and the rising cost of living. This did help the UNP to gain the support of the poorer sections of society. The SLFP, on the other hand, failed to present an alternative economic programme to overcome the legacy of bad economic management during its earlier term in office. Instead, it relied solely on the issue of restoring law and order and bringing peace to the island. Hence the SLFP's failure to create confidence among the people was one of the reasons for its defeat.

Lastly, the minorities played a crucial role in deciding the outcome in the UNP's favour. In the event of a fifty per
cent margin to win the presidency, and the UNP's and SLFP's support base being more or less evenly distributed among the Sinhalese, the minority vote became crucial in deciding the outcome of the election. On the ethnic problem, the UNP took a moderate stand of replacing the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord with a Friendship Treaty and of doing away with the merger of the North-Eastern province by holding a referendum in the East. By doing this, the UNP avoided, to an extent, antagonising Sri Lankan Tamils which enabled it to secure the support of the Sri Lankan Tamils living outside the North-East. At the same time this sent a positive signal to the Sinhalese that action would be taken to de-merge the North-East province. But the SLFP took the extreme stand of abrogating the Accord and abolishing the provincial councils. Moreover, the SLFP which was against any kind of devolution of power to the Tamils surprisingly came out with a proposal for creating Tamil and Muslim regional units by demarcating the North-East province. While these proposals could not help the SLFP to gain the support of the Sri Lankan Tamils, this could have discouraged the Sinhala Buddhist electorate from voting for the SLFP and thus risk their lives. Further, the UNP swiftly accommodated the interests of the SLMC which led to the latter withdrawing from the SLFP-led alliance. While this helped the UNP to secure the support of the Muslims, it cost the SLFP dearly in terms of votes. Moreover, with the support of the CWC, the UNP was able to secure the major portion of
votes of the Plantation Tamils. Notwithstanding the DWC's support, the SLFP could not succeed in influencing them.

There is also another factor that played a prominent role in deciding the electoral outcome. Traditionally, the SLFP had never been able to win an election without the support of the Left parties. This is evident from its earlier electoral experiences. The differences between the SLFP and the Left parties on the issue of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord led to the latter supporting the SLMP candidate Ossie Abeygunasekara. Although Ossie Abeygunasekara secured only around five per cent of the votes, it still would have made a big difference to the electoral outcome if both the parties had minimised their differences. The split in the anti-UNP votes helped Premadasa to secure victory by a narrow margin. Thus, the UNP's manipulation and clever politics and the SLFP's failure to present itself as an alternative force led to the defeat of Sirimavo Bandaranaike and to the victory of Premadasa.

FUTURE ROLE OF ELECTIONS IN SRI LANKA

Although the Presidential and Parliamentary elections of 1988 and 1989 respectively experienced unprecedented violence, large-scale intimidation and poor turn-out, the subsequent elections for both these institutions were held in 1994 under a largely free and fair atmosphere. While the voter turn-out almost reached the level of 80 per cent, it
brought out a change in the government through the election of a SLFP-led coalition government under the leadership of Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunga. However, the dilemma among the leadership of various political parties on the future of the country's political system highlights the fluid situation. The problem with the existing Presidential system is that power is vested with one single individual. This has marginalised the role of the parliament in the nation's governance. Further the President has authority to dissolve Parliament at his will. As a result, there is no institution that could act as a check on the powers of the president. More importantly, the opposition is no longer able to play a constructive role in such a system where the parliament does not have any meaningful role. If Sri Lanka decides to continue with the Presidential system, it should suitably amend the Constitution and envisage an equal role to the Presidency and the Parliament. This would introduce a proper system of checks and balances and thus strengthen the country's democratic institutions.

Already there are calls from most political parties for the reintroduction of the Parliamentary system of government that was in practice before 1977. Even the SLFP had promised during the 1994 election campaign that it would revert to the Westminster model. Moreover, it also proposed to overcome the distorted nature of the first-past-the-post system by
introducing the German electoral model. This includes both the first-past-the-post system as well as Proportional Representation (P.R.) to elect the members of parliament. If this system were to be introduced, Sri Lanka would have the unique distinction of being the only country to adopt the various models of democracy practiced in the world.

Although the political leadership is looking forward to a change in the political system, one cannot deny the merits of the Presidential system. It changed the electoral patterns of the past. Political parties were denied an opportunity to harp on communal issues to win the elections. Elections, thus, have strengthened the democratic institutions in the country. However, the political leaders' hunger for power and their interpretation of the Constitution to suit their own agenda has led to the erosion of democratic institutions.

Moreover, they have not stood up to the expectations of the people, especially on issues of national importance like the ethnic conflict. One reason for this has been the failure of both the major political parties to put their differences behind them and work for the larger interests of the nation. Unless this happens, Sri Lanka would find it difficult to emerge as a true democratic country whatever the political system it chooses to follow in the coming years.