

A YEAR OF POLITICAL CONFUSION

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The year 1992 began with hope for the betterment of Sri Lanka's politics, but ended in confusion and disarray. The short-term beneficiary of a whole year of political stagnation is President Premadasa who, thanks to his own opponents as well, could consolidate his power and also define the path of events for 1993.

There were three themes that dominated a larger part of the previous year and carried their impact through 1992: (i) the politics of the impeachment crisis, (ii) the Presidential election petition, and (iii) the Select Committee exercise on the ethnic question.

Aftermath of Impeachment Crisis

The attempt made by the Opposition in parliament and some sections of the UNP itself to remove Mr. Premadasa from office by means of an impeachment motion in Parliament technically ended in November 1991. Yet, the course of events which it activated had a number of other implications for 1992 as well.

The first concerned the question of Mr. Premadasa's own strategy to consolidate his authority within the ruling party and the hegemony of the office of Executive President, which was considerably undermined by the re-invigorated Opposition. The first objective Premadasa achieved in a way that was uncharacteristic of himself; He did not remove the MPs who had most probably signed the Impeachment motion at the behest of Athulathmudali, Dissnayake *et al.*, from the UNP. Making a statement of allegiance to Mr. Premadasa's leadership was, curiously enough, adequate to save the political life of many a UNP back-bencher in parliament. This non-move to purge nearly 40 members of the UNP's parliamentary group belied speculations that Premadasa would show no mercy to the dissident elements in the party. Instead of completely cleansing the party, Premadasa made a rather unanticipated move: he created new positions in his administration for the disgruntled members and made them supervisory MPs attached to various ministries. Obviously, Premadasa was shrewd enough not to strengthen the Democratic United National Front (DUNF) of Messrs. Athulathmudali, Dissanayake and Premachandra by expelling his own members of Parliament. And indeed, by keeping the second-rung of dissident elements under his control and thereby severely curtailing their option to

join any other party, Premadasa proved himself to be a politician of somewhat unconventional and unpredictable temperament.

To ensure the continuous hegemony of the executive President *vis a vis* parliament, Premadasa was ably supported by the Opposition. Of course, the opposition was in a belligerent mood throughout the year, attacking the Premadasa administration on a number of fronts. However, by excessively focussing on issues that had the potential to generate anti-Premadasa controversies, the opposition parties let slip away one of the most important themes that they, themselves, had introduced to the political debate in the previous year: constitutional reform.

In the debate provoked by the impeachment controversy, the opposition initially concentrated its political arguments on the need to abolish the executive presidential system. Restoration of parliamentary sovereignty was the consensual option offered. Although this proposal for the re-introduction of a parliamentary system of government was limited in scope as the objective of a broad democratizing project, it nevertheless had kindled the democratic expectations of the people. None of the opposition parties, however, appeared to know the need to sustain mass democratic aspirations by means of widening the terms of the political debate. Instead, they made every effort to conduct the debate within the narrow confines of anti-regime agitation.

Udugampola Controversy

The opposition, nevertheless, had a few good opportunities to keep public interest alive in its anti-regime mobilization. The controversy surrounding the revelations made by ex-deputy inspector general of police, Premadasa Udugampola, was an instance that had the potential to weaken and isolate the Premadasa administration.¹

Udugampola, who had earlier played a major role in cracking down on the JVP, had also figured in a High Court judgment on the death of a lawyer, Wijedasa Liyanarachchi—a suspected JVP activist, in police custody. The court ruling had suggested Udugampola's complicity in the death of Liyanarachchi and requested the Attorney General's department to take necessary legal



steps to prosecute him. The government's reluctance to do so appeared to have angered the international donor and human rights community which had been putting pressure on the Premadasa administration to improve the country's human rights conditions. In order to improve its international image, the government apparently decided to 'sacrifice' Udugampola, despite his connections with leading political figures. Udugampola struck back by going underground and releasing to the press what he claimed to be the details of political killings carried out by unofficial death squads.

The Udugampola revelations pointed an accusing finger at a killer squad called the 'Black Cats,' and long lists of names of purported 'Black Cats victims' were published in the opposition tabloid press. Udugampola quickly became a close ally of the Opposition which had earlier made many unsuccessful attempts to establish links between politicians of the ruling party and the extra-judicial killings that took place in 1988-89. Deeply embarrassed, the government took the rather peculiar step of filing cases against Udugampola and the tabloid press on charges of bringing the government into disrepute. The government's real intentions of prosecuting Udugampola and the press were transparent: to prevent an opposition campaign on Udugampola's disclosures, hiding behind the principle of *sub judice*.² However, the so-called 'Black Cat killings' were too public a controversy to be hushed up by the government's legal manipulations. On May Day 1992, the Opposition's main theme in processions and rallies was 'Black Cat killings.'

The Udugampola affair revealed some disturbing tendencies in Sri Lanka's current politics. Firstly, it amply demonstrated the government's callous determination to shun the responsibility for grave human rights violations even after revelations by a top official in the security apparatus. Instead of initiating inquiries into disclosures made by Udugampola, the administration resorted to a strategy of stone-walling any official investigation into activities of dreaded death-squads. Secondly, the Opposition's response to the Udugampola episode revealed the limits of its own capacity to broaden the terms of the democratic agenda. In all its political campaigns, the Opposition has indicated a tendency to marshall democratic issues in a campaign to oust Premadasa from power. The Opposition's politics seemed to be bridled by their own construction of a demonic Premadasa, thereby narrowing the bases of political

issues that were broad enough to expand the focus of political conduct on a reform project. Failing that, the opposition allowed the Human Rights issue to be subsumed by partisan politicization. Thirdly, the Opposition failed to present an alternative vision of governance in which recently emerged repressive apparatus could have been dissolved, human rights honoured and the state become responsive to human and civil rights needs of society. Udugampola may have been heroic in challenging an entire regime alone, but the opposition should have taken steps to expose the very repressive institutions of which Udugampola himself was a leading functionary.

Politics of Death: Kobbekaduwa Episode

An event that led to a major political controversy in 1992 was the death of Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa, the Northern Military Commander, along with nine other senior officers. The explosion that took place on August 8 in Kytes, Jaffna, cost the Sri Lankan state its entire leadership in the Northern military command. This was the gravest military setback suffered by Colombo since the ethnic war began ten years ago.

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The explosion in Kytes set in motion a political chain-reaction in Colombo. Rumours had it that Kobbekaduwa was not killed by the LTTE, but by sections of the state that wanted to prevent the General from entering politics after retirement that was due

shortly. At the funeral of Kobbekaduwa held in Colombo, large crowds gathered to pay homage to a 'national hero.' In an emotionally charged atmosphere, coloured by political antipathies to the Premadasa regime, violent mobs ran amok, assaulting government politicians and supporters attending the funeral. Mass hysteria, reminiscent of the circumstances that led to the anti-Tamil riots of August 1983, returned to politics nine years later at the same burial ground.

Public anger and mistrust in the government over the unconvincing and hurriedly made official explanation of the Kytes explosion, in turn, exposed the vulnerability of the Premadasa regime. An entire series of events in the previous couple of years had by this time led to the accumulation of suspicion in the manner in which the government was handling the North-East war. In fact, one of the major accusations made against Premadasa



during the impeachment crisis was that the regime had supplied large quantities of arms and money to the LTTE. Sinhalese militarist elements had also accused the government of conducting a 'fake' war in the North, with no clear commitment to a military triumph over the LTTE. Even the regime's half-hearted support for a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic question had been interpreted by the Sinhalese war lobby as a measure of betraying Sinhalese interests.

Party Politics

Fragmentation of political parties has been a frequently visible trend in contemporary Sri Lankan politics and 1992 witnessed further developments in inter-party rivalries. The only exception is perhaps the UNP, the outward unity of which is largely the result of two factors: Mr. Premadasa's firm grip over the party, which was tightened after the expulsion of Athulathmudali and others, and the advantage that a ruling party would normally enjoy in managing dissent. In any case, after powerful politicians like Athulathmudali and Dissanayake were treated with such a contempt and enmity by Premadasa, no lesser politician of the UNP would have dared to challenge the monolith that was the post-impeachment UNP.

The re-emergence of the UNP as a monolith, in response to the impeachment crisis, further highlighted a long-term negative trend in Sri Lanka's party politics: continuous rise of authority of the party leader. One would have expected the UNP leadership to respond to the party crisis by reforming its internal structures so that dissidence is accommodated and ambitions addressed. Meanwhile, with the departure of Athulathmudali and Dissanayake, the shift of the social bases of the UNP's leadership, from the traditional bourgeois elite to the new elite with non-bourgeois class origins, reached the point of completion.

The internal crisis of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, meanwhile, carried in it far reaching implications for the entire political party system in the country. The year 1992 saw intensification of rivalries within the Bandaranaike family about the party leadership. Mrs. Bandaranaike's induction of her daughter, Chandrika Kumaranatunga, into the party central committee, angered Anura Bandaranaike who had been battling with his mother and sister for party leadership. Combative interviews, to the chagrin of party faithfuls, given by the Bandaranaike trio, with accusations and counter-accusations, were regular features in Sunday newspapers throughout 1992. The split between Mrs. Bandaranaike and her son affected the ability of the party to carry out its own work and further demoralized party activists. The SLFP began to look more like a

troubled and disintegrating coalition of two rival antagonistic factions, led by brother and sister.

A symptom as well as a consequence of the SLFP's internal crisis was the emergence of the *Hela Urumaya* group among Sinhala nationalist sections of the SLFP's parliamentary group. Formed in late 1991, this group which militantly opposed any political concessions to Tamils before achieving a military victory over the LTTE, launched its propaganda campaign early in 1992. *Hela Urumaya's* extreme Sinhala chauvinism caused tremendous embarrassment to Mrs. Bandaranaike whose party had been involved in the parliamentary Select Committee proceedings aimed at finding a political solution to the ethnic conflict. Mrs. Bandaranaike once moved to suspend *Urumaya's* leader, Tilak Karunaratne; but Anura Bandaranaike's backing helped Karunaratne remain in the party.

Hela Urumaya, however, could not mobilize much public support for its Sinhala racist platform. Alliances with much smaller militant Sinhalese groups—notably, *Jathika Chinthanaya* and Sinhalese Defence League—could not add much to its already non-existent public enthusiasm. This was notwithstanding the fact that *Hela Urumaya* received massive publicity and generous propaganda space in the *Island* and *Divayina* newspapers. Yet, *Hela Urumaya* succeeded in achieving one objective: it frightened away minority religious and ethnic groups from the SLFP. Mrs. Bandaranaike's inability to take disciplinary action against this faction and Anura Bandaranaike's alignment with it resulted in further political decline for the SLFP which earlier had some sympathy among minority communities. The SLFP is now a party which has no firm constituency among minorities.

The newly established Democratic United National Front consisting of ex-UNP dissidents faced 1992 with tremendous enthusiasm, yet saw the year pass by without much headway being made. Its main failure could be seen in its inability to emerge as a party with a new set of policies and programmes, alternative to those of the UNP and to some measure of the SLFP. Indeed, the DUNF's decline towards the end of 1992 proved that in Sri Lankan politics today there is hardly any room for a second major party which is merely opposed to Premadasa being the President. The DUNF leaders also failed to fulfill a promise which they made to the electorate, namely, to issue its party manifesto. Squabbles among three top party leaders—Athulathmudali, Dissanayake and Premachandra—added to the party's own political poverty.

With regard to smaller parties, a nice combination of decline and apathy appears to have made them tag along with major parties. An already fragmented Sri Lanka



Mahajana Party, founded by Vijaya Kumaranatunga, saw its factions drifting in a number of directions. While Chandrika Kumaranatunga went back to the SLFP along with a group of followers, one faction led by Ossie Abeygunasekera aligned itself with the UNP. Mr. Abeygunasekera took a further step in 1992 by volunteering to be a major public speaker at Mr. Premadasa's propaganda rallies. The third faction of the SLMP, led by Y. P. de Silva, is engaged in a legal battle with the Abeygunasekera faction for the mantle of the party.

With regard to the Left parties, no significant trend towards the regeneration of socialist politics developed in 1992. The CPSL and the LSSP, the two main Left parties, were essentially gravitating towards what was termed as anti-UNP opposition unity, while the NSSP argued for the Left to remain independent within a general opposition grouping.

Minority Parties and the Ethnic Question

For the minority parties, 1992 was a year of compromise-seeking parleys which ended in disappointment and frustration.

The Tamil and Muslim parties first found themselves in a mini forum, created by the All Party Conference. Beginning in 1991, they had been negotiating among themselves the thorny issue of devolution of power in the Eastern Province, so that both Tamil and Muslim interests could be better accommodated. Their negotiations went on till the middle of 1992 with no conclusion reached. Tamil and Muslim parties appeared to have been holding on to positions that were not conducive for a compromise. While the Tamil parties constantly held the view that the North-East merger was non-negotiable, the Muslim parties opposed the merger and pressed for special arrangements for the Muslim areas. Failing to reach a compromise on the Tamil-Muslim issue, the APC also found itself in a state of deadlock. Subsequently, the APC deliberations came to halt in May.

The second forum on which the minority parties met was the Parliamentary Select Committee, the mandate of which was to find a consensus for a political solution among parties represented in Parliament. In addition to the larger question of an all party agreement among Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities, the nature of political arrangements for Eastern province Muslims constituted a particularly complex theme for negotiations and compromise. In the Select Committee deliberations, the Muslim factor assumed greater complexity in the light of a series of mass killings of Muslim civilians in the East, carried out by the LTTE in 1992.

Indeed, the LTTE's massacres of Muslim civilians was described by Muslim leaders as well as by the Colombo press as an act of 'ethnic cleansing', similar to that in Bosnia. The leader of the Muslim Congress, M. H. M. Ashraff, went to the extent of reminding the Muslims that they would have to prepare themselves for a *jihad* against the LTTE.

The Tamil-Muslim tension in the East, precipitated by LTTE atrocities, in turn, made the envisaged compromise between Muslim and Tamil parties still more difficult. Most of the Tamil political leaders had meanwhile been re-iterating the position that a solution to the ethnic question should be worked out on the basis of the notion of a 'Tamil speaking people,' an umbrella formulation to include both Tamil and Muslim communities. However, Muslims were in no mood to accept this notion, particularly after the LTTE's anti-Muslim pogroms. The security of the Muslims in a devolved set-up thus became a crucial issue for inter-ethnic negotiations in 1992.

Grass-Roots Politics

A noteworthy feature of contemporary Sri Lankan politics is the emergence and spread of issue-oriented grass roots movements. The first to emerge in recent years is the Mothers' Front, an organization of women whose children had either been killed or had 'disappeared' during the crack-down on the JVP in 1988-90. The Front's activities in 1992 included the mobilization of the parents of the disappeared in a number of religious rituals. Sponsored by the opposition political parties, these activities also took the form of mobilization against the government, highlighting issues of democracy and human rights. The anti-government character of this type of politics in a way resulted in depriving the movement of the autonomy from partisan politics, which is very vital for grass roots social movements.

Two agitations, initially spearheaded by religious groups and later developed into social movements of significant popular support, emerged in 1992, incidentally on a similar theme: opposition to the intrusion of urban capital into the rural society. The first, led by the Catholic clergy, organized fisher communities in the North-Western sea coast against the setting up of a tourist resort in Iranawila. The second, led by the Buddhist clergy, was opposed to the construction of a tourist hotel in Kandalama, a village near Dambulla. The central argument made in these two campaigns was that the construction of tourist hotels in rural locations would be detrimental to the rural communities, the environment and the traditional religio-cultural settings. The second, popularly known as the Kandalama protest movement, attracted greater political interest with the participation of opposition political parties and groups, the NGO community and



many activist groups. It also brought Buddhist and Christian clergy together. Meanwhile, the government's hostile reaction to the campaign made it into an oppositionist movement as well.

Although the Kandalama campaign was able to arouse tremendous public sympathy and interest in such issues as environment, negative consequences of urban-led development projects in the countryside and social consequences of the arbitrary movement of urban capital, it gradually lost its dynamism and energy. This was primarily due to the attempts made by opposition parties to direct the campaign along partisan political agendas. Attempts made by some political groups to give the Kandalama campaign a Sinhala chauvinistic character finally contributed to its gradual loss of vitality.

Media Freedom in Grass Roots Politics

Yet another grass roots movement which aroused considerable public interest is the movement for media freedom. This campaign sprang up in a new context for Sri Lanka's media culture. The latter part of 1991 had witnessed an explosion of media freedom: in the midst of the impeachment crisis, the opposition press, which had remained dormant for many years, began to indulge in a great deal of freedom in political journalism. Themes that were usually ignored by the mainstream press—controversial political issues, human rights, corruption and political favoritism—became the hall-mark of the new media culture. Parallel to the assertion of more freedom by journalists were the hostile responses to the press by the state, the police, politicians and their like. Political and police assaults on media persons, harassment of newspapers in a number of ways compelled journalists to close their ranks and launch a public campaign for media freedom.

Initially launched by journalists, the free media campaign soon received the support of the opposition political parties and university students. Propaganda rallies, usually with significant public attendance, were held in Colombo and provincial towns. An important feature of this campaign was that journalists of the tabloid press began to play an active role in it. This prompted the pro-regime media and the ruling-party politicians to brand the free media movement as one of openly anti-government political intention. Even granting that the free media campaign had a strongly activist

orientation, the fact remains that it is the first organized public campaign launched by journalists for media freedom.

Vicissitudes of Premadasa Regime

A brief look at President Premadasa's high-profile activism reveals some of the political constraints and contradictions with which the regime has been grappling. Continuity of the regime had hung in doubt till the Supreme Court delivered its judgement on the Presidential election petition. In fact, the entire opposition was counting on a verdict that would unseat Mr. Premadasa; the Opposition's line of action was largely dependent on this possibility. However, the Supreme Court, in a unanimous determination delivered on September 1, found Mrs. Bandaranaike's allegations unsubstantiated. This removed the juridical hurdle—a formidable one, indeed—to Mr. Premadasa's legitimacy as a duly elected President.

Although the outcome of the election petition placed Mr. Premadasa's incumbency on a firm legal footing, the regime's legitimacy was not fully established. Probably, Mr. Premadasa too is acutely aware of the fact that in Sri Lankan politics, today, regime legitimacy is a matter of great consternation. Hence his agit-prop campaigns that reached an intensive phase after the Supreme Court judgement on the election petition.

Despite Premadasa's attendance of regularly held mass meetings—mass mobilization is a distinct feature of Mr. Premadasa's presidential style—and the feverish propagation of his messages through all forms of state media, the regime continued to face a severe credibility crisis. One instance where this became evident was the reluctance of many people—notably, the 'man in the street'—to accept the official version of the demise of Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa and nine other senior military officers in the North. The government's explanation of the explosion that killed the entire leadership of the Northern military command was that the LTTE had triggered off a land-mine. Later on, the LTTE too claimed responsibility for the explosion. The opposition immediately seized this event, casting serious doubts on the official version and even suggesting Colombo's complicity. Quite apart from the fact that the opposition had on many occasions managed to undermine the credibility of the Premadasa administration, it is also a political fact that large sec-

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tions of society tend to believe any, even unfounded, rumours rather than official versions of controversial political issues.

The credibility crisis of the regime was further aggravated by the recurrent revelations of political corruption highlighted by the tabloid press, along with 'insider disclosures' made by ex-ministers Athulathmudali and Dissanayake and the ex-top cop Udugampola. A theme continuously stressed by them was the alleged supply of arms to the LTTE by the government in 1989.

The State

A significant feature in Sri Lankan politics during the past four to five years has been the transformation of the state in the context of macro-economic re-structuring, induced by international capital. In the Sri Lankan case, however, there have been some notable specificities which were highlighted by the developments in 1993.

Privatization of state economic ventures, a key component of the structural adjustment programme, took a rapid turn in 1992; its main implication for politics was the withdrawal of the state from the sphere of economic production and exchange. Theoretically, this would have implied the lessening of the traditional interventionist role of the state. But, the Premadasa administration has belied this assumption. It has accorded to itself new and increasingly interventionist tasks in social engineering and political manoeuvres. Meanwhile, the *Janasaviya* welfare programme was the populist mainstay during the first three years of the Premadasa presidency. 1992 saw an astonishing dimension in the interventionist project of the administration when the three objectives of social welfare, economic control and social engineering were fused into a single programme: the scheme to set up 200 garment factories. This narrowly conceived and politically inspired programme of 'export-oriented industrialization' introduced in mid-1992, operates under the direct guidance and supervision of the

President. Capital for the manufacturers is partly provided by the state through state banks. Meanwhile, the President has announced the setting up of 300 hospitals during 1993. In January, the government executed another massive welfare programme: provision of material for uniforms to all school children in the country.

This brings up some engaging questions concerning the way in which the state is being transformed in Sri Lanka today. Reconstitution of the state is surely a part of the politics of macro-economic re-structuring. In Sri Lanka, this process has assumed a somewhat unorthodox character. If the state under the previous UNP regime of J. R. Jayewardene (1977-88) was gradually withdrawn from the sphere of social welfare, it was also underlined by the policy disregard for social engineering projects attached to the state. In contrast, the reconstitution of the state in the post-1988 period has entered a different desideratum, defining a new economic sphere for the state in conjunction with short-term political imperatives of the regime.

A second question to be posed in this context concerns the apparent accommodationist attitude shown by the IMF and World Bank towards the regime's high-spending welfare programmes. These indeed go against the grain of IMF-World Bank policy prescriptions. What appears to have evolved, nevertheless, is the informal division of labour, or even of priorities, between political imperatives of the President and the economic policy fashioned by the IMF, the World Bank and the local economic bureaucracy.

Notes.

1. See, 'The Fall and Rise of Udugampola,' *Pravada*, Vol.1, No 4, March/April 1992.
2. See, 'Sub Judice?', *Pravada*, Vol.1, No 5, May 1992.

The city lies still, but why are there armed men?
The Governor's palace lies at peace
But why is it a fortress?

From The Caucasion Chalk Circle
Bertolt Brecht