

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Politics of Anger

The mood of the Head of State is often a barometer of the political pressures of the country. Going by President Premadasa's rather intemperate mood, exhibited recently in a series of public meetings, one would not be wrong in concluding that the political climate in the country was once more becoming unsettled and uncertain.

Political observers have recently noted a sense of disquiet, if not panic, among the leaders of the present administration. It is strange that Mr. Premadasa, who did not show any signs of panic in public even during the impeachment crisis, has been so vitriolic at public meetings. His acrid verbal attacks on the non-state controlled press, particularly on the Upali and Times newspaper groups, were remarkable in their political implications. Of course, when an otherwise unruffled Head of State decides to be angry before his audiences and television cameras, all sorts of political implications begin to reverberate in the minds of his listeners.

All signs indicate an ongoing struggle involving two groups of power elites—the traditional and the new. If we look for parallels in recent history, the impeachment episode of 1991 was a concrete manifestation of the resentment and hatred with which these two groups confront each other. One does not have to be a political sociologist to realise that Mr. Premadasa's rise to power has marked a class-based rupture in the political unity of the ruling bloc. An outsider came to preside over the formal political power structure; and he did not come alone, he brought in to the networks of political power a host of his own social kinsmen. Ironically, it is the JVP's onslaught on the Bandaranaike-Senanayake-Jayewardene family oligopoly in Sri Lanka's politics which ultimately paved the way for the new power elite of the Premadasas, the Coorays, the Rajapakshas and the Ranasinghes.

Mr. Premadasa's problem, as a political leader, is an exceedingly complicated one. He is a ruler without a clearly defined, readily identifiable and solid class base. The traditional bourgeois elite does not provide any class backing to the Premadasa administration. Nor do the poor masses on which the regime claims and perhaps aspires to be based. The fact that it is working in close collusion with international capital also shuts out some possibilities for the class re-location of either the UNP or Mr. Premadasa's administration. In fact, populism tends

to erode the class bases of political parties and the present UNP administration is no exception.

Public displays of anger by politicians may at times expose the sudden eruption of deep-seated feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. If that is the case with President Premadasa, he probably feels threatened by the Colombo upper class elite. Hence his repeated invectives against the 'aristocrats and capitalists'—the two Wijewardene families and their kinspersons who own the Upali group and the Times group of newspapers. To be fair by Mr. Premadasa, one should admit that the traditional Sinhalese bourgeoisie has not yet come to terms with the fact that the age of mass politics enables bourgeois-plebeian alliances.

It is the plebeianist project, which Mr. Premadasa has been promoting for many years, that has now created new problems. He has probably realized that he had no effective control over the masses, because the masses read the tabloid press, not the propaganda handouts coming out of the state-controlled semi-official press. And Mr. Premadasa has no control over the tabloid press which provides the masses with what they prefer—political gossip, stories very critical of government politicians and officials, reports of high level corruption etc. So, it is a vicious circle for the President; he seeks to represent the masses, but the masses are not particularly enthusiastic about his message. The moral is simple: the political utility of the Premadasa variety of right-wing populism is fast coming to an end.

Pains of Adjustment and Impending Discontent

While Mr. Premadasa's populist project is losing its political momentum, the country appears to be heading towards a period of intense discontent.

Some time ago, a virile 'advisor' to the government advised Sri Lanka's press to act as an 'early warning system.' Good advice; let us also warn ourselves of certain things that may come our way in the course of what is left of the year.

The significance of 1993 will rest largely on the fact that the full impact of Structural Adjustment reforms would be felt during this year. By the end of last year, all the major reform measures had been implemented except for those concerning important areas of monetary policy. The rest are to come stealthily, but surely, well before the



budget in October. Among the measures that the government will be compelled to adopt is the free-floating of the rupee. After India free-floated its currency in February, Sri Lanka may have to follow suit; or else the tide of foreign private investments is likely to be India-bound.

What would happen if Sri Lanka's monetary policy is drastically altered? A worst case-scenario would be that inflation would rise beyond control; prices of consumer goods—imported as well as locally produced—would escalate. Despite some macro-economic indicators that may satisfy the World Bank and the IMF, the living standards of the Sri Lankan middle class populace may begin to crumble.

The government's massive expenditure on social welfare projects can in no way be considered as constituting an adequate safety network for the middle class and poorer social groups. The expectations of creating a stratum of self-employed small entrepreneurs through the various mechanisms of *Janasaviya* etc. are largely utopian; their failures are likely to germinate new forms of, at least, short term social discontent. In any case, the hostile forces of the market, that have replaced subsidies and price-controls, have already eclipsed the economic benefits brought about by *Janasaviya* and other targeted welfare programmes. Savings accumulated by poor families because of the distribution of free school text books and uniforms are immediately consumed by the spiralling price levels of essential consumer goods. Besides, the welfare programmes already in operation have given rise to another dialectic; they have gained new intensity, though unrealistic in the context of macro-economic adjustments—the welfarist expectations of the masses. Even a brief conversation with *Janasaviya* recipients would reveal that they expect continuous state support in the form of outright grants and consumer subsidies.

This scenario will have to be placed in the context of the absence of a social market approach to capitalist macro-economic reforms.

The existing safety-net approach, which targets exclusively the poorest sections of society—the so-called food stamp recipients—excludes from its considerations vast sections of middle and lower-middle class social groups. Specially hurt by the current market reforms are fixed and stagnant income groups, in the state, private, informal and self-employed sectors. They are simply abandoned to the mercy of a hostile capitalist market. The pains of macro-economic adjustment will be specifically felt by them. As these social groups are now condemned to learn the hard way, the market hath no heart.

Social despair among a range of middle class strata is growing. There may, perhaps, not be food riots in the streets of Colombo. But IMF/World Bank inspired social discontent can assume many a nasty form. In the South Asian context, the economic discontent of the middle classes is usually expressed in ethnic, religious and even caste terms. It has also had a tendency to manifest itself in election-related violence. May the text-book economic pundits of the World Bank and the IMF stay longer in Washington to regret what they did to Sri Lanka, by pushing the middle classes into economic ruin, social frustration and political despair.

One more point for pessimism. Sri Lanka's political system has begun to show unmistakable signs of deep cracks and fissures. Intra- and inter-party rivalries, deep hostilities among politicians resulting in gang battles, the entry of the underworld into the political arena, and impending elections—all these are likely to provide ground for frightening and ominous alliances among most undesirable political forces.

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CAMPAIGN

They had questioned him for hours. Who exactly was he? And when
He told them, they questioned him again. When they accepted who he was, as
Someone not involved, they pulled out his fingernails. Then
They took him to a waste-ground somewhere near the
Horseshoe Bend, and told him
What he was. They shot him nine times.

A dark umbilicus of smoke was rising from a heap of burning tyres.
The bad smell he smelt was the smell of himself. Broken glass and knotted Durex.
The knuckles of face in a nylon stocking. I used to see him in the Gladstone Bar,
Drawing pints for strangers, his almost-perfect fingers flecked with scum.

Ciarán Carson
From *Bitter Harvest*, An Anthology
of Contemporary Irish Verse