

The Fall and Rise of Udugampola

Tough cops do not retire; they embarrass their masters.

Premadasa Udugampola and 'Keerthi Wijebahu'; these were the two names that sent shivers down our spines in 1987-89, the years of Southern insurgency. Wijebahu, the JVP's military-wing leader who sent out orders of execution, signed personally, is no longer around. Captured in November 1989, he was probably summarily executed, thereby sharing the fate of thousands of his own victims. Udugampola, the Deputy Inspector General of Police who played a leading role in the counter-insurgency efforts of the state, made a name for himself, by matching the ruthlessness of 'Wijebahu' and his killer comrades. On his own admission, Mr. Udugampola came down really hard on the JVP. Those who lived in Sri Lanka and survived those three years of living dangerously would know what the word 'hard' actually meant.

Udugampola, the tough top cop, is again in the news, now pointing an accusing finger at his own political mentors for 'human rights violations.' His 'revelations' were published in the *Sunday Times*, *The Island* and *Aththa*, a left-wing Sinhala bi-weekly. Udugampola has made pointed observations about the involvement of some unnamed leading politicians of the ruling UNP in the counter-JVP terror campaign.

Politically more damaging for the UNP is Udugampola's story about the 'Black Cats', that killer squad about which there was so much public fear. Udugampola has alleged, according to newspaper reports, that this killer squad was directed personally by some influential UNP politicians. He has also provided a list of over ninety names of people whom he claimed to have been killed by 'Black Cats' in January-March, 1989. *Aththa* published these names with a still more

damaging story: these victims were supporters of the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party in the North-Central province and the killings were carried out during election time behind the veil of JVP terror.

Of course, when DIG Udugampola made these 'secrets' public, he was already *persona non grata* with the Government. He also had his grievances: his service in the police had not been extended and an inquiry into his alleged involvement in the death of lawyer Wijedasa Liyanarachchi in 1988, had already begun. The government had also given wide publicity at home and abroad to the inquiry against Udugampola as evidence of its intentions to punish those being accused of human rights violations. In fact, when Udugampola was denied an extension of his service in early February, the Sri Lanka Aid Group was to meet in Paris on February 7. The UN Human Rights Commission too was to meet in March. Meanwhile, diplomatic and donor pressure on the government had been increasing to make Udugampola accountable for very serious allegations of human rights violations.

The seriousness with which the government reacted to Udugampola's 'revelations' became evident when Prime Minister Wijetunga came on prime-time television to present the government's version of the 'Black Cats' and other stories. The Prime Minister's statement did not deny the 'Black Cat' killings, but suggested that Udugampola himself may have been involved in the killer squad. The gist of Mr. Wijetunga's rebuttal is that a disgruntled police officer, against whom a murder inquiry was under way, had become a willing pawn of anti-government elements.

The opposition, meanwhile, seized the opportunity to make political mileage

out of the government's discomfiture. Udugampola's allegations of para-state death squads operating against SLFP personnel during election time had come in the wake of the Election Commissioner's strictures regarding malpractices at parliamentary polls. At a joint opposition press conference held on April 9, Mrs. Bandaranaike, the Leader of the Opposition, demanded the resignation of the government and the appointment of an international commission of inquiry to investigate Udugampola's allegations.

For the non-state press, which has of late been asserting a considerable degree of independence vis a vis the Premadasa regime, Udugampola's disclosures could have been rich material for 'exposure' journalism. It was rumored in Colombo that Udugampola had circulated a number of affidavits, giving more details. It appears that the government strategists immediately decided on a political damage-control exercise. On April 9, the day after *Aththa* carried the news story about Black Cat killings, the Attorney-General filed two indictments in the High Court of Colombo, one against Udugampola and the other against the editor and publisher of *Aththa*. The charges, framed under Emergency Regulations, are for causing hostility, ill-will, hatred and contempt of the government of Sri Lanka and between different groups of citizens of the country.

Ironically, Udugampola was the *bete noire* of the Opposition and opposition-aligned press, until perhaps early last year. He was portrayed in the press as the epitome of brutality. The story of his meteoric rise during the Jayewardene administration was attributed by his ex-critics to his blind loyalty to the state and to his willingness to disregard norms of human



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rights. Still more ironically, his demonic image began to change when he was brought from Kandy to Colombo in 1990 to head a newly formed anti-vice police unit called the Bureau of Special Operations. He then led a series of raids on under-world business ventures in Colombo. His reported contempt for political patronage of vice won accolades in the press.

Framing charges against *Aththa* by the A-G is being viewed by the independent press in Colombo as a blatant attempt to intimidate the non-state controlled press. Both the *Sunday Times* and the *Island* have strongly denounced the government's move. The *Sunday Times* political correspondent pointed out on April 12 that by filing indictments against Udugampola and *Aththa*, the government has also sought to invoke the principle

of *sub judice* on the entire episode.

Meanwhile, the opposition parties in parliament have been making preparations for a no-confidence motion on the government. They have pointed out that issues raised by this senior police officer warranted a full parliamentary debate.

A public discussion in the press on Udugampola's disclosures may have legal implications as there are already two indictments pending at the Colombo High Court. Some more are likely to be filed against other newspapers which published the Udugampola story. Nevertheless, the whole episode should not be swept under the carpet. Nor should it fall victim to political bickering between the government and the Opposition. Indeed, the truth or otherwise of Udugampola's disclosures should be found out, not merely because the good names of many a politician and an official in the present ad-

ministration have to be cleared, but essentially because they raise some profoundly disturbing questions about the nature of the Sri Lankan state, and even of politics, today.

DIG Udugampola is not an ordinary cop; he has been, for many years, a major figure in the state apparatus. Judging by what is already public knowledge of his own activities in the entire decade of the eighties, he can be seen as one personification of the horrendously violent state apparatus evolved in response to violent political conflicts in Sri Lanka. His disclosures which appeared in the press are not just incriminatory stories about his ex-friends and patrons, but alarming accounts of subterranean or secret structures of the state about which very little 'authentic' information is as yet available.

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