

THROUGH A SPLINTERED MIRROR :

THE IMPEACHMENT AS VIEWED BY THE MEDIA

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The suddenly sprung motion of impeachment against President Premadasa took the mass media as much by surprise as every other sector of the country. In the case of the people this could be understood for there had not been the slightest sign that the powerful Presidency could be so challenged. In the case of the media no such legitimate excuse can be made out. After all, the media is supposed to be 'the watchdogs of democracy' to use a phrase which rings with a quaint earnestness. But the media's lack of alertness is equally easily explained. During the last so many years of pressures by Governments, both of the United Front and the UNP, the media has been both emasculated and subject to self-castration.

Though we use the word 'media' in deference to the current verbal fashion, our analysis is here confined to how the newspapers in Sri Lanka handled the impeachment issue. The Government-owned radio and television have stoutly behaved as if there has been no such contretemps while giving wide coverage to the speeches of the President where, in what can only look like shadow boxing to their audiences, Mr. Premadasa has lustily punched the impeachers.

The most dramatic feature of the newspaper coverage is how the Government through its newspapers was able to launch a preemptive strike on the impeachment motion while the independent newspapers were agonizing over how to break the news.

For example on August 29, *The Island*, the country's only English daily newspaper not managed by the Government, only had a small double column news item tucked away on page one quoting Mr. Anura Bandaranaike, the SLFP MP, that a petition seeking the removal of the President had been

signed by the Opposition and sections of the Government and handed over to the Speaker. The paper then proceeded to reproduce a Reuter report giving more details. In contrast, the *Daily News*, the flagship of the Government-managed Lake House, had a banner page one headline 'Conspiracy to Impeach the President?' with a strap-line "SLFP move fearing dissolution" over a photograph of a smiling Mr. Premadasa with the Lion flag suggestively forming the background to the presidential visage.

These two examples were typical of the mood in the country. While *The Island* was not quite sure how to handle a story of the magnitude of the move to impeach what looked like an impregnable Presidency, the *Daily News* had no such hesitations. In what looked more like a political commentary than a page one news story, the *Daily News* pugnaciously set the tone for the Government's campaign against the impeachment motion. The story suggested that this was a conspiracy on the part of a disgruntled section of the UNP which had ganged up with the SLFP to prevent the dissolution of Parliament and generally halt the forward march of the country under President Premadasa. The next day, the *Daily News* continued with the good work. It carried (again as its lead story) an item saying that the Cabinet was firmly behind the President and that three Government MPs who had signed the motion had retracted their signatures. It also carried a story that these MPs had claimed to have been misled into signing the motion. All this was supported by an editorial, one of a series which the *Daily News* wrote during this period, taking its fight directly into the camp of the enemy. In contrast, the same day's *Island* had to satisfy itself by quoting Cabinet Spokesman Ranil Wickremesinghe in his weekly exchange with reporters after the Cabinet meeting. In this he confirmed that the Speaker had

'entertained' a motion of impeachment but that to his knowledge no government MP had signed it.

The contrasting coverage of the two newspapers is easily explained. The *Daily News* had no qualms about getting into the fray because it obviously had the sanction of the Government at the highest levels. In fact the whole history of the impeachment controversy shows a clever and calculated campaign by the Government using the entire array of the media at its command to press its point of view home and destroy its detractors. Ridicule, calumny and all the other devices at the command of the propagandist were used against the dissident Lalith Athulathmudali - Gamini Dissanayake group (dubbed the GAG, meaning Gamini Athulathmudali Group, by a gleeful *Observer* Editor) specially in the editorial columns of the *Observer*, its political article written by Editor H.L.D. Mahindapala and in the regular Sunday article written by Anuruddha Tilakasiri in neo-Marxian lingo. *The Island* on the other hand was under twin constraints. One was political. As an independent newspaper it was hesitant about how exactly to handle a story of this magnitude. After all it was not so long ago that the Colombo correspondent of *The Hindu*, Thomas Abraham had noted that *The Island* and the *Divaina* were the country's two leading independent daily newspapers, but could not be prevented from commenting in passing that, however, they appear tame by western standards. Long years of subjection to government pressures, the timidity of proprietors and the self censorship and self-doubts of editors and journalists have reduced the country's independent press to this position.

The other reason was professional. The newspaper had no source to quote from. While the *Daily News* had the licence to lead with a political story bordering on the propagandist,

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The Island had to wait two full days till August 31 when it could quote Mr. Lalith Athulathmudali who announced at a press briefing that he had signed the motion, resigned from his portfolio and was in the vanguard of the struggle for democracy. With that news peg to hang its story on, *The Island* could come into the open. These agonizing hesitations of *The Island* are typical of the situation where a small independent press is hemmed in by both a powerful Government and a large Government-managed media.

This brings us to a point which has been discussed in the context of the impeachment controversy. The view has been widely expressed that the controversy had released the print media from its timidity and acted as a catalyst towards a freer media. Among those who have expressed this view are some of the dissident leaders themselves. But can such an optimistic reading be supported by the actual conduct of the print media during this period?

One fact that should have struck observers of the media was the refusal of the newspapers (except, of course, those managed by the Government) to take a clear cut position on the issue. All newspapers were reduced to taking refuge in vague generalities, nebulous phraseology and high-sounding expositions of basic constitutional theory. There was a refusal to discuss the issue in clear-cut terms though reading between the lines the sympathies of sections of the press may not have been hard to determine. It was left to constitutional pundits,

lawyers and similar personages marshalled in their numbers by the newspapers to take up positions on either side of the divide. This refusal or inability of the print media to take up clear positions on so vital a national issue is the best proof that the press had not by any means liberated itself from its coils of fear.

The awe of the Executive Presidency clearly pervaded even sections of the independent media. *The Sunday Times*, the independent Sunday newspaper published by Ranjith Wijewardene, heir of the legendary Lake House baron, D.R., in the aftermath of the impeachment motion (on September 1) went out of its way to outline the virtues of the President in its editorial. However, by the time the motion was rejected by the Speaker, the same newspaper had plucked up enough courage to say editorially that though the motion had been rejected, its contents had never been debated or scrutinized; the closest an independent newspaper came to a bold comment on the issue.

On the whole the Sinhala newspapers were more daring than their English counterparts but this too was basically confined to reporting the meetings of the dissident UNPers at great length. Here the *Lankadipa*, the daily newspaper of the Times group was more cautious than the *Divaina*, its counterpart at Upali Newspapers but for the first time there was a sense of release signified by the fact that an influential section of the UNP had come out with tales from out of school against the President. But this was a legitimate reaction to a regimented press and has to be understood as such.

The opposition, during the controversy, suffered through the lack of a press of its own. It had only two newspapers, the *Aththa* and the *Ravaya* which was later joined by the *Yukthiya* until its press was sealed. The *Aththa* even started a midweek edition during this period and continued its customary racy style of journalism. The less journalistically sophisticated *Ravaya* was sometimes guilty of wish fulfilment journalism such as when it boldly proclaimed the abolition of the Executive Presidency at the beginning or the announcement of Lalith Athulathmudali as Prime Minister as a possible outcome of the motion being victorious. Perhaps Editor Victor Ivan, a keen political animal but not a journalist with experience in the mills of conventional journalism, must understand the difference between news reporting and commentary, particularly in the main news story. Sometimes it is necessary to adhere to conventions even in order to reject them.

All in all, the impeachment period was a period of release for the country's print media but not a period of lasting liberation. For that Sri Lankan politics will have to labour more. After the heady sense of release, the print media has again gone back to the predestined state of timid self-doubt. That is a situation which should cause concern among the liberals, dissidents and others of the same ilk who raised hurrahs to the media during the brief summer of the abortive impeachment. To liberate the media much more will be needed than spectacular pyrotechnics.

ANCL employees concerned over drop in circulation

The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., Employees' Independent Union has told the Lake House Chairman that the circulation of the institution's publications was fast dwindling due to their partial coverage of current events in the country.

In a letter to the Chairman, the Union has said that it has pointed out from the outset the importance of balanced news presentation.

The Union has urged the Chairman to pay his attention to the matter with a view to improving sales and

safeguarding the interests of the institution.

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