

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## Elections, Soon?

**C**urrent political speculation in Colombo points to the possibility of snap parliamentary polls in or soon after April, 1993.

The year 1993 will in any case mark the beginning of an election era. Unless dates are advanced or postponed, Provincial Council polls are due to be held next year, followed by Presidential and parliamentary elections in 1994-95.

While the SLFP is still trying very hard to further complicate its own internal disputes, Mr. Premadasa's UNP appears to have already launched its campaign for elections. The 200-garment factories program, initiated in the aftermath of the politically under-successful *janasaviya* programme, is a key indicator of Mr. Premadasa's concern about the rural vote. Television viewers are treated to Mr. Premadasa's speeches at opening ceremonies of garment factories, practically every night. These ceremonies are well-orchestrated public spectacles; the speakers make campaign speeches. The UNP's electoral machine is well-oiled and activated.

Which particular election will take place first is a question that Mr. Premadasa has not yet hinted at. But, some analysts in Colombo argue that he is most likely to hold parliamentary polls before provincial councils polls, although the former is due only in early 1995. If held first, the PC elections, according to this analyst, might prove to be in favor of the DUNF, because the UNP will have to field its 'B team' against the DUNF's 'A team' which consists of a couple of powerful political figures. It will, however, not be a case of the UNP losing badly, but one of the DUNF gaining strength in a number of Provincial Councils, and even the control of one or two. The UNP leader, so goes the speculation, is unlikely to give any such chance to the DUNF.

Whether this particular reading of the UNP's strategy is correct or not, holding parliamentary elections while the SLFP continues to be in a deep crisis will certainly be to the immense advantage of the UNP. With no opposition unity in sight, the anti-UNP vote will also be split among two or more lists. With a strong showing at parliamentary polls and the possibility of Athulathmudali and Dissanayake et al back in parliament (the latter will not vie for Chief Ministerial positions in the Councils) the

UNP can comfortably go to the provincial polls from a position of strength.

There is also the possibility of yet another scenario. Given the fact that there is no legal bar for Provincial Councils elections being held on a staggered basis, the UNP may first opt for a mini election for a few safe PCS. The UNP can then go for the big thing on that strength. The rest of PC elections could then be held with a returned UNP majority at the central legislature.

## War in the North: Dissension and Desertions

**M**uch to the chagrin of the war lobby in the South, the Colombo press has begun to publish reports, stating quite openly that everything is not all that quiet at the front. Two themes have received wide media coverage recently : (a) differences of opinion between Service chiefs and top officials of the defence ministry, and (b) large scale desertions from the armed forces.

The strategy of the war in the North-east, according to press reports, is the bone of contention among the top brass. In March this year, the heads of armed services and the police were put in charge of all military operations, a function that was earlier the prerogative of the Joint Operations Command (JOC) in Colombo. This decision was taken by the President after receiving a memorandum from the services chiefs to their Commander-in-Chief, that the war could be ended in six months, if they were given a free hand to conduct it. After six months and many debacles, the war does not show any sign of coming to a victorious end; in fact, the military suffered stupendously heavy losses during this period, including the loss of the entire Northern high command. This was at a time when the supply lines of the LTTE are supposed to have been cut off. This has led to serious bickering among the military command, which the President has tried to overcome by bringing the Services under the JOC again.

According to an essay published in the usually pro-war daily *Island*, differences among the top brass regarding the military strategy have already had demoralising consequences. There is a new school of thought among officers, observes the 'Old Timer' who wrote this candidly informative essay, to argue that troops should no longer be concentrated in the peninsula; instead, they should be

deployed in the Vanni jungles and in border regions to provide protection to Sinhalese and Muslim civilians.

Desertions are meanwhile increasing, the number being over 8000 since the war started in 1983. According to a military spokesperson, in August this year alone, 502 soldiers have deserted the military.

Increasing desertions are coupled with another problem; the reluctance of youth to join the forces. At least until two years ago, there were long lines of young men in Colombo in front of the military camps, whenever new recruitment was advertised. Some zealous nationalists saw it as a sign of great patriotism among the youth; yet the fact of the matter was that the armed forces provided job opportunities for the educated, yet unemployed, youth. However, when the numbers of the dead and seriously injured increased, and the stories of political use of the war by politicians of all persuasions abound, the armed forces have ceased to be attractive to the youth even as a means of employment.

The cost of the war is meanwhile staggering. As reported recently in the *Sunday Times*, the estimated defence expenditure for the year 1993 would amount to a massive Rs. 42 million a day.

### Command Economy?

To the reported satisfaction of the World Bank and the IMF, the Premadasa administration is well on its way to fulfil all the major aspects of the Structural Adjustment Programme. The SAP's most visible component, the privatisation of public corporations, is almost complete, despite opposition protests. Protests did indeed compel the regime to somewhat alter the pace and mode of privatisation in regard to banks and plantations. Instead of selling all assets to private capital, only the management of these two politically sensitive sectors are de-statedized at the moment.

The privatization policy, ardently advocated by the Bank and the Fund, has a simple economic goal; let the market be freed from state control. In this age of free-market capitalism and market-socialism, command economies are supposed to be a thing of the past. Or is it, really?

No Sri Lanka watcher would have failed to notice the resurgence of late, of a kind of command economy in this island which has been described for the past 15 years as an exemplary test case for the many whims and fancies of the two neighboring international financial institutions in Washington D.C.!!! Case or not, President Premadasa's project of setting up 200 garment factories in rural areas smacks very little of free-marketism.

It is true that private industrial capital has always been extremely reluctant to move into districts outside the Western Province. In such a situation, the state might use its persuasive powers to locate industries in the peripheral regions. Yet, what is happening now is industrialization for electioneering. Stories that come out in private conversation (despite the 'freedom' in the market, crucial economic policy information is still the privileged domain reserved for private chats) tend to suggest that the state has been using little more than persuasion—coercion would be too strong a term—to obtain the consent of manufacturers to open up factories in new locations. Who decides the location, the size of the factory, the size of the labour force, and even the actual men and women who should be employed? Not, according to rumour, by 'capital unbound.'.... (Exercising the right of self-censorship, we will not complete this paragraph.)

We have commented, more than once, on the peculiarities arising from the fact that in Sri Lanka World Bank-IMF policies are being implemented by a populist regime. Regime populism is further strengthened by electoral imperatives; when politics subsumes economic policies, priorities follow suite. Only political feasibility studies matter then. The Samanalaweva disaster, in that sense, may not be an isolated blunder of monumental proportions.

Despite the overarching grid of sovereign power, the state constitutes a variety of multiplicities; in India, the state at the local level symbolizes itself often in microfascism of power; while the nation-state celebrates its commitment to the rule of law it also allows space even for surplus repression or reign of terror. It is historic fact that rule of law does 'peacefully' co-exist with the reign of terror.

Similarly, there is no nationwide human rights movement; there are only human rights movements. The trajectory of resistance to undemocratic practices of power, entailing profound violations of human rights is yet to be fully traced and understood. India is yet to find her own history, and historians of human rights.

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