

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Return to Paganism?

Sri Lanka's military operation, *Kilali*, ended October 04. After the burial of the dead and caring for the wounded, the military high command went to Anuradhapura to initiate a week-long celebration in connection with Army Day. *The Island's* main news item on October 11 featured this event. The army commander, General Cecil Waidyaratne, was quoted by *The Island* as having said:

The armies of ancient Sinhala kings got their flags blessed by the Thrividaratne (Triple Gem) and the Maha Sangha, and encouraged, they went forward and saved the country and the nation. Following this tradition today, we pledge all our battalion flags to the historic Sri Maha Bodhi (Sacred Bo Tree) and received the blessings.

The report also carried two photographs. In the first one, the Army Commander was addressing his officers while in the other, he was placing battalion flags of the army at the foot of the Sacred Bo Tree.

This most interesting news story did not however find a very prominent place in the regime-controlled Lake House press. *The Daily News* reported it in its 'provincial news' page, without photographs. Perhaps, it was too much for even the government propagandists' taste to headline this pagan ritual.

We have from time to time pointed out that a particular a tribalist ideological tendency has been on the rise among some sections of the Colombo society. It was the other day that Gamani Jayasuriya, President of the Mahabodhi society and the leader of the Sinhalese Defence League felt re-assured that the present President of the Republic would not betray the country and the nation because he was a true son of a Sinhalese father and a Sinhalese mother. Gamani Jayasuriya's Sinhala-Buddhist tribalism is now given a practical demonstration by the Army Commander. And the holy tree in Anuradhapura carries the burden of the narrow patriotism of a group of men who are obviously trying to represent the state's war with a section of its own population, as a holy religious war.

The army commander is not the first person to mimic ancient Sinhalese kings in this war 'to save the country and the nation.' J. R. Jayewardene, Lalith Athulathmudali, Gamini Dissanayake, Ranjan Wijeratne and R. Premadasa also thought that they were little Dutugemunus while Rohana Wijeweera thought that he was Wijayabahu re-incarnate. V. Prabhakaran too thinks that he is the collective re-incarnation of Chola warrior

kings. All these people lived and continue to live in worlds of historical fantasy where contemporary realities are re-enacted in distorted forms.

Quite apart from the dimension of invoking fantasies and hallucinations, these men by their actions of mimicking ancient kings also demonstrate an utterly regressive world view through which they perceive modern problems.

JVP at Cross Roads

The Sinhalese political tabloid *Yukthiya*, in its usually well-informed monitoring of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's (JVP) moves towards resurgence has come out with a startling news item. The JVP's international branch, located in London, has called for an end to all forms of political violence, including anti-state violence. *Yukthiya* quotes the JVP's publication *Ginipupura* (Spark):

The assassinations of Lalith Athulathmudali and Premadasa clearly show that the capitalist class is caught up in a vicious cycle which is its own creation. It is the cycle of political violence. Violence leads to more violence and those who take to the gun perish by the gun. But the greatest tragedy (of violent politics) is that those who fall victim to violence in great numbers are innocent men, women and children who would never have touched a gun.

Our main aim is to end all forms of political violence, the state as well as anti-state violence.

It needs to be cautioned, however, that the London Branch may not represent the official JVP. As *Yukthiya* reported recently, the present JVP is trifurcated and its London branch is the most moderate of the three factions. The three factions are the group working underground in Sri Lanka, the London branch and the group led by Somawansa Amarasinghe, the only surviving member of the Polit Bureau of the JVP under Rohana Wijeweera.

Amarasinghe, a veteran of the 1971 insurgency, managed to flee Sri Lanka in 1989, thereby escaping arrest and instant death—the fate met by all his PB colleagues. For the past three years he has been trying to re-organize the rebel movement, while claiming the coveted position of the JVP's General Secretary. His loyalists are reportedly operating from Australia. According to latest reports, both the Sri Lankan and London groups do not accept him as the party's secretary any more. Amarasinghe appears to want to revive the old JVP without any critical evaluation of the past experience while the JVP's Londoners



seem to be for a reformed JVP. Critiquing and renouncing violence is evidence of this new trend of thinking among some expatriate JVPers.

It is still not clear whether the London group's critique of violence is a sign of an on-going internal debate among JVPers about their strategy for power. What is increasingly clear, however, is that the kind of radical romanticization of political violence is losing its appeal in Sri Lanka. The LTTE may perhaps be the last armed political group to have been functioning in twentieth century Sri Lanka.

The Son Sets to Rise

The sudden resignation of Anura Bandaranaike from the SLFP and his "claim" to quit politics have only further complicated the SLFP's internal crisis. The studied silence maintained by the party leadership over Anura's move indicates that Mrs. Bandaranaike and her close allies in the party had been taken by surprise.

Pravada has no stake in the SLFP's factional struggle; nevertheless, it is keenly interested in the party's internal developments for reasons of political concern. We do not gloat over the crises and predicaments of opposition political parties as the government press does because we think that a strong opposition is a pre-requisite for Sri Lanka's ability to maintain at least the present level of political openness.

As we have suggested in our editorial, one of the disturbing trends in Sri Lanka's contemporary politics is the degree of arbitrariness exercised by those in power when it comes to accommodating other persons or ideas. This malaise - the desire for total power - manifests itself not only in the ruling UNP; the internal struggle of the SLFP demonstrates that all its factions too are afflicted with it. Observers of the SLFP's crisis could not have failed to notice the spirit of mutual bitterness and hostility with which internal party conflicts were articulated and conducted by all factional leaders. It is as if when an internal conflict develops, one faction is determined to annihilate the other. A perception of the 'enemy within' appears to have ultimately led the SLFP to its potentially most damaging split.

The responses to Anura Bandaranaike's resignation from the party which his late father founded and mother now leads indicate interesting and varied nuances. There are many accolades for Anura, portraying him as a great parliamentarian, a moderate and a liberal; but, in general, there is a studied silence and a remarkable reluctance to speculate on its implications for the party. Meanwhile, the UNP is obviously pleased. Anura is getting a 'good press' in the Lake House newspapers; Sirisena Cooray, the UNP's General Secretary, has said that his party would welcome him. Perhaps, the faction of

Premadasa loyalists would want him in the UNP for their own factional considerations.

Will Anura form his own political party? If he does, he too will find that in Sri Lanka's current party politics, there is hardly any room for a third party, as an alternative to both the UNP and the SLFP. Mr. Gamini Dissanayake of the DUNF appears to have already learned that electoral politics in Sinhalese society is sharply bi-polarized. Whenever there appears to be some space for a third party, it turns out to be both deceptive and temporary.

As we go to press, we learn that Anura Bandaranaike has decided to join the UNP. He does this as a lone individual, taking with him no others from the SLFP, even though there are rumors of others waiting to follow him once their pensions as members of parliament have been secured. The UNP has hailed his move; the kept press declares that he has finally returned home, to the party of which his father was once a senior member. This is obviously a forced position. Anura is in fact turning back on the policies espoused by his father. But this is only a peaking of the changes that his political thinking has undergone in the context of the country's economic policies since 1977. He now obviously feels that there is no alternative to the current market-oriented economic policies and that the prospects of guiding the SLFP openly in the same direction are non-existent.

These same feelings concerning current economic strategies are probably shared by his supporters and associates in the *Hela Urumaya* group of the SLFP. Interestingly, the core of this group consists of rich businessmen-turned-politicians whose economic and political upward mobility has been primarily facilitated by the UNP's open economy and the politics of anti-minority communalism. The difference is that they represent the extremely communalist strand of the party while Anura Bandaranaike has so far cultivated a liberal image on the ethnic issue. He may have realised that his political future will be doomed to fail if he launched his new political career on a Sinhala-Buddhist platform. There are too many competitors, some with better accreditation, vying for its control.

Anura Bandaranaike may find his political future in the UNP terribly unrewarding. It is highly unlikely that the SLFP voters who stood by him earlier would want to support a UNP Anura Bandaranaike, because in Sri Lanka's political culture, an SLFP voter is an SLFPer because he/she is essentially anti-UNP.

The UNP may merely see in him a tool to further demoralise and fragment the opposition. It is unlikely that they see in him a large vote bank, unless his move is followed by a substantial number of other MPs.

P