

Six Blue Months in Kotte or Local Government under Gaullism

Vinod Moonesinghe

The local government elections of May 1991 appeared to be a straight-forward victory for the governing UNP. However, in those areas in which there had been elected representation over the past decade, (i.e. in the Municipal and Urban Councils) there was a definite swing away from the UNP. The area in which this trend came most sharply into focus was the Sri Jayawardanapura Kotte Urban Council (UCK).

Kotte has had a dramatic history. A collection of hamlets in the middle of a marsh, it was converted by the Dravidian 'Kingmaker' Alagakkonara (the heroic Alakesvara of Sinhala historiography) into a bastion of the Gampola Kingdom. This fortress (Tamil 'Kotte') was the Bastogne at which Blitzkrieg of Arya Cakravarti was held, the hinge on which Alakesvara's counter-offensive swept back. Later, it became the capital of the Kotte Kingdom, at which time its beauty was praised by poets. After the retreat of the Portuguese to Colombo, the city fell into ruin, the stones of its structures being excavated for construction of new bourgeois edifices.

The modern city was built, not as a continuation of the old, but as an extension of Colombo. It can be divided into three separate areas, Welikada (comprised of wards 1,2,3 and 4), Kotte proper (5,6 and 7) and Nugegoda-Gangodawila (8,9 and 10). Welikada developed as an entrepot on the Dutch canal system, being a processing centre for plumbago barged up from the Kalutara district. Kotte proper and Nugegoda-Gangodawila developed more strictly as spillovers for the expanding population of the western megapolis. The difference is made clear by the concentration of minority ethnic groups (Catholic, Indian Tamil and Moor) in the Welikada area. Unlike these industry/trade specific ethnic groups, the other more professional/middle class ethnic minorities (Jaffna Tamil, Burger, Malay) are spread more evenly throughout the Urban Council area.

The preponderant portion of the population is made up of the Sinhalese of *Matara*, who have overwhelmed the indigenous inhabitants (the Pereras, Botejus, Gomes' and Coorays). They are mainly Buddhist, and caste is not a particularly important political factor: it is as if the *Matara* identity overcomes all other barriers. Equally, the civic identity of Kotte is confined to a few, the indigenous inhabitants: for the rest it is merely an *ambalama* on the road from Matara to success.

From 1947 until 1977 the Kotte electorate (which included the UCK area) was a 'Left' area. Except for a few months in 1960 when J. Niyathapala of the UNP was MP, it was represented in Parliament by the immortal 'Lion of Boralugoda', Robert Gunawardena of the LSSP and by Stanley Tillakaratne of the CP and the SLFP. However, in the UCK area proper, the 'Left' was unable to gain office until 1966 when the SLFP, in coalition with the Marxist parties, won the urban elections. From 1979 to 1991, the UNP held power.

Vinod Moonesinghe is a Member of the Sri Jayawardanapura Kotte Urban Council and a Vice President of the SLFP Kotte Balamandalaya.

The first crack in the UNP stranglehold in the post-1977 era occurred during the Provincial Council election of 1988. In spite of the boycott, there was a fairly large turnout, the UNP only winning the constituency by a few hundred votes. Subsequently, the SLFP was criticised for boycotting this election, as it left room for the UNP victory. At the Presidential election, the UNP was defeated in the area, although it regained lost ground at the parliamentary poll.

In 1991, the SLFP, in alliance with the CP and the MEP, gained an absolute majority of the vote, while obtaining a plurality in every single ward. The UNP came second and an independent list of LSSP, dissident CP and BNP candidates came third, while the SLMP and NSSP came in at the tail end.

It was at this point that J.R. Jayewardene's system began to assert itself: under the old first-past-the-post system, the SLFP should have had all 20 seats in the council. Under PR, it was reduced to 11. The UNP obtained 8 seats, and the LSSP, one. The Communist Party also gained representation, with their candidate getting elected on the SLFP list.

The SLFP victory was based on three vital factors: organisation, programme and disgust with the administration. The SLFP has often been accused of being unable to organise a tea party, let alone a political party. However, in Kotte it was led by J. Niyathapala, a superb organiser who had, in his previous incarnation as UNP chief organiser, helped build up the UNP as a modern party. His electoral method by-passed the ponderous branch organisation, reaching down to the activists and their chosen candidate. Thus, the SLFP candidates were forced to undergo a Darwinian process of *natural selection* in order to be elected.

The programme of the Kotte SLFP would have done the social-democratic parties of the West proud. It combined traditionalist pride with modern urban thinking, in the best tradition of the Communist Party of Italy. Kotte was to become a veritable 'Blue Bologna'. The image used by the SLFP was not so much its electoral symbol, the hand, as the dread mosquito, the symbol of bad sanitation, ill health and maladministration.

The previous Chairman of the UCK was not even selected as a candidate, an acknowledgement by the UNP of the degree of misrule in Kotte. That popular disgust with the UCK was not confined to the UNP alone was emphasised by the election of only three of the previous Council members, all from the UNP.

The new Council took office in mid-year. Then the Jayewardene system began to intrude with a vengeance. Local government legislation grants dictatorial powers to the Chairman of the Council. The SLFP in Kotte had decided to circumvent this by a system of committees of administration. However, the members elected were all novices, so the committees that were set up were more-or-less the same as those existing under the previous administration, the exception being the Works Committee, which was established at the insistence of the members.

The effect of this deviation from the set course was that the Chairman had concentrated in his hands not merely the bulk of the powers but also the bulk of the responsibilities of the Council. This added to his workload, and made

BLUE MONTHS.....

him more dependent on the bureaucracy. Thus, the SLFP, which was elected on a programme of democratisation and de-bureaucratisation, found itself adapting to the centralising tendencies of the Jayewardene system.

The new administration was constrained in its first six months by the budget of the previous regime. It was therefore forced to adopt a policy of working within a framework not set by itself. It was also constrained by having to work with a central and a provincial government controlled by the UNP. These restrictions tended to confirm the trend towards the Jayewardene system, away from the path laid out by the SLFP.

Nevertheless, the first six months of SLFP rule in Kotte showed dramatic changes. The very fact that the SLFP was in opposition nationally (with no representation on the Provincial Council) forced the administration to fight for survival. Early action by the council showed the bureaucracy that the previous lackadaisical attitude, reinforced by the UNP's apparent impregnability, would not be tolerated. The bureaucracy tested the water initially but found it advisable to fall in line with the new philosophy.

The primary measure of the UCK's efficiency is rubbish disposal. Under the previous administration, rubbish collection was barely carried out. Hence, the enforcement by the new council of the existing rules on garbage disposal made for a considerable improvement. Paradoxically, the number of complaints regarding rubbish increased, as the public found a greater responsiveness from the local authority.

The other major service which affects the popular conception of the UCK is street lighting. In this area, as well, there was considerable work done, with several hundred new street lamps being fixed and the replacement of faulty lighting being expedited.

One of the main problems of the UCK area, that of flooding, is outside the Council's ambit. However, the existing drainage in several areas that are prone to flooding was desilted which should tend to reduce the damage done.

The new Council put forward its first budget at the end of its first five months in office. This envisages a large number of improvements, including the renovation of the derelict drainage system. With the completion of its new workshop, the council expects to save funds by doing 'in house' what was previously contracted out.

The budget also includes several new construction projects, such as a new library at Welikada, a town auditorium at Nugegoda and a shopping centre at Welikada. These are in fulfillment of the promises in the SLFP manifesto, to provide edifices suitable for the capital of the island.

The main thrust of the UCK's programme for the next four years, however, is towards providing better services to the residents, rather than in engaging in prestige construction projects. Thus, the capital expenditure items in the budget include creches, montessori schools, community centres, dispensaries, a cemetery and crematoria.

Thus, the effectiveness of the new Council can only be gauged correctly by its efficiency in implementing its programme over the next few years. Its first six months in office, operating under the budget of the previous administration, do not provide a true measure. However, they do give an indication.

There is no doubt that the UCK has shown a marked improvement since the new administration took over. For example, a survey of rubbish collection and disposal, carried out by the Western Provincial Council (WPC), compared the UCK favourably with the other Municipal and Urban Councils in the Colombo District, which are controlled by the UNP.

The difference is most marked in Obeysekerapura, which lies on the border with the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC). Previously, the Obeysekerapura slums compared unfavourably with the slums of Borella and Wanathamulla, just across the border, whereas the former have now outstripped the latter in services and amenities. This does not, of course, reflect to the credit of the CMC.

Such visible changes have aroused ire and envy in certain quarters. This has manifested itself in a number of attempts to discredit the UCK. A large number of petitions against the council have wended their way to Sri Kotha and to the WPC; it is to the credit of the WPC that it has dealt with the UCK on a non-partisan basis. The other anti-council actions have mainly targetted the rubbish disposal the UCK has had to move its dumping ground several times, particularly after it was targetted on Rupavahini as a destroyer of the environment. There was even an attempt to set fire to the dumping ground, which resulted in a fracas between the arsonists and UCK employees.

Thus, the Council has felt itself greatly constrained by the presence in Government of a hostile regime. It has been affected by its lack of control over water, electricity and major roads, which leads to unwarranted criticism of the UCK.

From the conventional viewpoint, given all the constraints under which it operates, the new Council can look back on its first six months with satisfaction. Nevertheless, from the point of view of the aims of the parties which won the election in Kotte, there are severe deficiencies.

The biggest deficiency in performance is in the lack of participatory democracy. The elected representatives have very little power since, under the Jayewardene system, power is concentrated in the person of the executive head of the council, the Chairman. Differences between the members and the Chairman can be resolved through consultation, compromise and consensus, but there is nothing that can force a Chairman to accept a consensus. Indeed, the removal of the Chairman required a process almost as arduous as the removal of the President! Furthermore, the Chairman can only be removed with the consent of the Minister.

There is no mechanism whereby the organs of grass-roots representation, the Gramodaya Councils, can affect the workings of the Council. Hence, the wishes of a community can be overridden by the Minister and by the President. On at least one occasion, the power of the central Government has been used to ignore a resolution of the Council (sponsored by the Chairman). This is the key to the Gaullist system introduced by Jayewardene.

The experience of the new Council in its first six months in office has revealed limitations of democracy in local government under the Jayewardene system. Theoretically, the UNP's Grama Rajaya (Village State/Kingdom) concept involved the devolution of power from the centre to the grass-roots. In practice, it works in reverse. Power within the Council is concentrated in the hands of one person, which power cannot be over-ruled from below but may be over-ruled from above.

Of the major concerns of local government, water supply and drainage, electricity and land use have been taken away from the local councils and handed over to companies and to corporations (which are due to be privatised) which are totally outside popular control. Thus, an anti-systemic democratic revolt like, for example, that carried out by the Labour-controlled Merseyside and Greater-London councils in Britain, are made impossible.

The Sri Jayawardanapura Kotte Urban Council has managed to operate close to the limits of the Jayewardene system. However, the internal logic of the system has tended to deviate the administration from its laudable aims. The democratic representatives of the people are forced to accede to a bureaucratization they swore to fight. ■