

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Satchi & Satchi Loses in Sri Lanka

Among things that were connected with the Presidential election, yet may have escaped the attention of observers is the defeat of public relations magnates at the hand of the Sri Lankan voter.

As reported in the press, the election campaign of Ranil Wickremasinghe was planned and executed by the British public relations giant, Satchi and Satchi. A local advertising company assisted Satchi and Satchi. The UNP may have spent a massive sum of money for this election campaign run by advertising professionals. Indeed, there were reports that a number of public opinion surveys and pollings were conducted before Mr. Wickremasinghe's campaign strategy was mapped out.

From the very beginning of the Wickremasinghe campaign, it was very clear that an American-style effort was made to sell the UNP's presidential candidate. Of course, selling is the vocation of advertisers. Thus, the advertising attempt was to make Ranil Wickremasinghe a saleable commodity. This, in a way, demanded a great deal of political naivete from both the candidate and his advertiser. Hence the Clintonesque public appearance of Wickremasinghe in the first week of his campaign. Perhaps, the pollsters quickly learned that the majority of voters were not carried away by a minor version of Bill Clinton or Tony Blair. Then they changed Wickremasinghe's dress, hair-do and make-up. They got him to wear a white garment, a peculiar short-sleeved shirt which made him look like a character from a 1940s film. Then, they also got him to sing *baila* songs on stage and dance. Poor Ranil Wickremasinghe could not sing *baila* with any conviction in mixing with the masses. Nor could he shake his limbs to the rhythm of a song. The modernist image which Satchi and Satchi tried to impose on Wickremasinghe simply flopped.

Then, there was another advertising attempt to portray Mr. Wickremasinghe as an effective, efficient and managerial President. Wickremasinghe's choice of examples for well-managed governments and economies—Singapore, Malaysia and Japan—would have found sympathizers among Colombos' private-sector communities, but not among the rural voters. The failure of the UNP candidate to win the December Presidential election is a victory for the common sense of the Sri Lankan voters. They, in fact, defeated Satchi and Satchi, the PR company which goes all over the world selling to the voters, bad politicians in glossy wrapping.

Combative PA and the International Community

Watching Sri Lanka's Media Minister on television, or reading his long statements in the press is no easy exercise.

Because he generates and throws around a lot of strong emotions-political emotions of the most combative kind. Mangala Samaraweera is also PA governments chief spokesperson. He has replaced the soft-spoken Dharmasiri Senanayake and the cerebral G. L. Peiris. Minister Samaraweera has of late begun to challenge the media and media watch-dogs. His latest outbursts against Article XIX, the London-Based media watchdog body, is quite symptomatic of the PA government's intolerant stand on media freedom.

One of the things which the PA government does not seem to have understood is that the goodwill of the international community is not a *carte-blanche* given to PA politicians because they used to wear charming smiles. The PA in its first few years in office won overwhelming international support because of its commitment to ethnic peace, human rights, media freedom, democracy and free and fair elections. The PA government's credentials in all these areas are now in jeopardy. Little do Minister Samaraweera and President Kumaratunga appear to care about the inevitability of the quick erosion of the PA government's international support base.

But the government does not seem to bother about possible international unpopularity. Government leaders appear to be unaware of the fact that today, the process of the fall of a regime can begin with the erosion of international credibility and support. International civil society, which was earlier very enthusiastic about the PA government and its reform agenda is now both critical and sceptical about the PA's promise. There is no guarantee that the international state system too may become weary of the PA's anti-democratic and authoritarian potential.

Second-Term Regimes

One of the most paradoxical dilemmas of contemporary Sri Lankan politics is also implicitly present in the post-presidential election scenario. It concerns the question whether the same party should be in power for a second consecutive term. One of the negative lessons Sri Lanka has learned from the 17-year long UNP rule, from 1977 to 1994, is that when one political party is one power for more than one term, it tends to have a corroding effect on the entire system of governance. The distinction between the state and the regime tends to disappear with the regime behaving as if it is the state. Public institutions run the risk of being controlled by the ruling party, thereby leading to excessive politicization of the structures of governance. Abuse of power and corruption are inevitable consequences of such conditions. Of course, the long UNP rule is now remembered largely for these most negative consequences. The question now is whether a long PA rule, which may run till the year 2006, would have similar consequences for future Sri Lanka.

The decline of the PA government as an agency of democratic transformation lends a great deal of credence to such scepticism and

searching questioning about Sri Lanka's political future. The PA regime which will soon seek a second term for its parliamentary regime too, is not the same political entity that came to power in 1994 on the premise of democratic reforms. It is an entity which has been in power for five years and failed to be faithful to its own democratic mandate. It is an average regime which has all the marks of political decay. Even then, the question is whether the UNP is a suitable alternative to the PA. The UNP does not show any signs of democratic regeneration. It is the same old authoritarian entity which refuses to reform itself. This perhaps is to the advantage of the PA. The PA, however, is likely to continue to decay during its second term. It may not be surprising if a positively anti-democratic UNP regime replaces an unpopular and degenerated PA regime in its second term.

Millennium Hype

The excitement about the Millennium was perhaps understandable to those of the Christian tradition, where AD, (Anno Domini), the year of Our Lord, begins with the birth of Jesus Christ. But for all non-Christians in the world, the Christian calendar (one more imposition of imperialism) has no special significance, but is merely a convenient marker of time, which is used globally. For us in Sri Lanka, the Millennium was just another occasion for some to "put a party," to revel, celebrate, drink and dance all night, with the usual display of "cultural noise" in the form of fire works. Others, however, wondered what the fuss was about and why 31st December 1999, was different from 1st January 2000.

But the hype about who was Man or Woman of the Year, the Century and the Millennium revealed the true eurocentric ideological set-up behind Western practitioners of this type of speculation. Nowhere was this better seen than in *Time* magazine, which had several contenders for the Persons of each century since the 1st Millennium. Those chosen were (not surprisingly) mainly white and male, but the "non-whites" honoured were mainly male, "Oriental despots" of the worst type.

Thus, *Time* ticked off the "eminent persons" of the last millennium - Newton, Giotto, Guttenberg, Jefferson, Edison, Napoleon, Elizabeth I and William the Conqueror (all European). Among the Asians they choose were Genghis Khan, Saladin, Mahumud of Ghazna, Tamerlaine, Emperor Akbar and Zhu Yuanzhang - all aggressive kings, warlords and rulers. Feminists also noted that *Time* which was short on Women of the Millennium, mainly included queens and female warriors in their list - namely Queen

Victoria, Queen Liliuokalani (Hawaii), Joan of Arc, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and Lady Murasaki of the Japanese court. Since we cannot expect *Time* magazine to do any better, perhaps we ourselves should review the Millennium and pick out all those heroic and pioneering men and women around the world, whose fame was not based on monarchy, aristocracy, empire building and aggression - but on pathbreaking intellectual achievements, as well as leadership of movements to achieve social and political change.

Cassandra and Anoja - Trojan Women at the Wendt

And Zeus whose will has marked for man
the whole way where wisdom lies
ordered one eternal plan:
man must suffer to be wise

Aeschylus: Agamemnon

Thus spake Cassandra as she awaited self-prophesied death at the hands of Agamemnon's wife and her paramour, on arrival in Greece as captive after the 10 year Trojan war that laid waste the city of her birth - Troy in Asia Minor. Between the great debate as to whether fate or character determines the course of life's sufferings that runs through classical Greek tragedy, enacted recently at the Lionel Wendt, resonated the human dilemmas posed by much more than ten years war in Sri Lanka. This was skillfully brought out in Dharmasiri Bandaranayake's production of Trojan Women led by the fallen Trojan Queen Hecuba, played superbly by Anoja Weerasinghe, herself the subject of a "fate" or "character" debate following the politically motivated attack on her home in Monaragala. There is an eerie resonance between the debate: is fate character? or, is character fate? That runs through the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the founders of tragedy (which Aristotle considered to be the highest form of poetry): and contemporary arguments are about whether Ms. Weerasinghe is the author of her own destiny, rather than the victim of fateful political violence. Other resonances between Greek tragedy and Sri Lankan black comedy are our penchant for political lineage, that enable history as destiny, and women's resort to trance or possession at moments of great suffering, encapsulated in the figure of Cassandra, who unfortunately came across as an over excited Ophelia.

Who may presume to say where the great debate between fate of character, our stars or ourselves, might end? In the meantime we look forward to less elaborate props, more attention to language and diction, and more minimalism in Mr. Bandaranayake's next production.

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