

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The UNP in Crisis

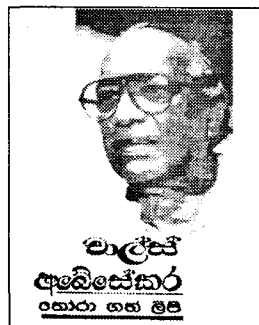
The United National Party is in deep crisis. This time around, it is about the party's leader. Ranil Wickremasinghe is confronted with an open rebellion against his leadership. The dissidents are powerful top and second level leaders of the party. Party Deputy Leader Karu Jayasuriya, General Secretary Gamini Athukorala, Chief opposition Whip W. J. M. Lokubandara are among the leading dissidents who argue that the present leader should step down. In late April, they made an unsuccessful attempt to force Wickremasinghe to resign. Although Wickremasinghe managed to survive the 'coup,' the challenge to his leadership still remains unabated. Unless he gives up power and becomes the party's nominal head, he might, sooner or later, face the prospect of being ousted.

The main reason why so much resentment against Ranil Wickremasinghe has been built up at practically every level of the party is his inability to transform the UNP into a 'winning party.' The UNP under his leadership has not been able to win a single election – presidential, parliamentary, provincial or local – since 1994 and many UNPers accuse him of being ineffective, arrogant and lacking in charisma. They find in Karu Jayasuriya, the present deputy leader – an alternative leader with close links with party branches and networks. During the last provincial and parliamentary elections, Jayasuriya emerged as a popular figure as well as the UNP's electoral mainstay in the Western Province. The anti-Ranil faction believes that Jayasuriya could unify and reorganize the weakened UNP, even bringing back those UNPers who defected to the PA.

The UNP's leadership crisis also has some other significant political dimensions. The UNP has a fairly stable electoral support base in urban as well as rural areas that provide a sound basis for winnable electoral campaigns. But one of the party's main problems today is that it has been compelled to sit in the opposition for far too long, till the end of the present term of the PA government and even longer. Ruling power in the central government or at least in the provincial councils is crucially important for Sri Lanka's national parties to successfully function, because political power provides material resources necessary to maintain party organizations and patronage networks. Party politics is no longer a voluntary vocation. Political parties today are complex organizations similar to private corporations with large-scale capital investment. Political power is absolutely essential for these corporate entities to do the business of politics. Hence the tremendous sense of impatience of being in the opposition, as openly demonstrated by the senior as well as middle level leaders of the UNP. They appear to see the 'weak leader' Wickremasinghe as an obstacle to the party's functioning as a corporate entity that should without delay topple the PA government by means of a parliamentary coup. They are also impatient to wait till the next parliamentary and presidential elections that are due in four years.

In terms of class bases of the UNP's leadership, a shift away from Ranil Wickremasinghe will mark an ending of the UNP's control by a single extended family throughout its existence. When the UNP was formed in 1946, its leadership was in the hands of Senanayake-Kotelawala and Jayewardene families all of whom belonged to a single kin group. R. Premadasa and D. B. Wijetunga, who led the UNP for a few years in the late eighties and early

We dedicate this issue of Pravada to the memory of the late Charles Abeysekera. He was this journal's founder co-editor. At the time of his demise three years ago, Charlie, as he was affectionately known, was Sri Lanka's leading campaigner for human rights and ethnic reconciliation. He worked tirelessly for inter-ethnic peace and a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict, utilizing all the space available in the public sphere. After retiring from the public service, he dedicated himself to the politics of democratization. He helped build civil society institutions and worked closely with a variety of activist bodies in the sphere of democracy, freedom, media, art and culture. Charlie believed in, and constantly fought for the



**Charles
Abeysekera
1926-1998**

autonomy of civil society, because for him, the autonomy of non-state spheres of public life was a cardinal feature of modern democracy. He assisted the state to strengthen its democratic and accountability monitoring bodies, because he envisioned a reformed and reconstructed state for Sri Lanka. Championing and working with the alternative media, he also involved himself in the dissemination of democratic knowledge among the popular masses. Charlie symbolized the perfection in a human being the values and virtues of tolerance, humanism and pluralism in modernity.

-Editors and staff, Pravada and SSA

nineties were exceptions, rather than the rule. While Premadasa came from a Colombo-based plebian family, Wijetunga belonged to the Kandyan middle peasantry. In contrast, Ranil Wickramasinghe is a scion of the Jayewardene clan which has kinship ties with the founder leaders of the UNP. Ranil Wickramasinghe is also the last politician in the UNP from that clan. All the present aspirants and contenders to the UNP's top post – Karu Jayasuriya, Ravi Karunanayake, Mahinda Samarasinghe, Jayawickrama Perera—come from class and family backgrounds not linked to the ruling clan of the Senanayakes and the Jayewardenes. Karu Jayasuriya, a wealthy businessman with no aristocratic or bourgeois family links, may very well mark the beginning of a permanent shift of the UNP leadership's class base.

Negotiations

It appears that the negotiations between the Colombo government and the LTTE are set to begin in late May or early June. After months of backstage bickering, rhetorical outpourings and battlefield maneuvers, the two sides seem to be ready to sit down at the negotiation table. For the Norwegian government and its emissary, Eric Solheim, this might mark the first round of success in their mediation exercise. According to reports, the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding concerning future talks have been worked out.

Conflict negotiations are by nature complex and their trajectories unpredictable. There is no guarantee that negotiations between the government and LTTE will produce any tangible, positive results. In the past negotiations in Sri Lanka, there has always been the unrealistic anticipation that talks would result in the termination of the war, signing an agreement and return of peaceful conditions. Even the parties that negotiated entertained hopes of early breakthroughs, leading to conflict settlement. Unrealistic and excessive hopes of the outcome of negotiations in a way reflect the urgency of conflict resolution. What is most useful for the government and the LTTE to discuss this time is the modalities of future talks and the terms of a ceasefire leading to the de-escalation of the war.

The Norwegian facilitator will have to be aware of the fact that the first round of talks might consist of quite a lot of rhetoric and posturing deployed in equal measure by the government and the LTTE. Obviously, Mr. Solheim is already exposed to the rhetorical side of conflicting claims made in Colombo, London and Vanni jungles. The most positive outcome of talks, if they take place at all, would be an agreement on a cease-fire. For the past several months, the LTTE has been pressing for a cease-fire agreement while the government has responded to it with great caution. An earnestly discussed cease-fire agreement is always better than unilateral declarations of cease-fire. Once the war is de-escalated, political issues involved in the conflict could be brought into the agenda of talks.

Meanwhile, to ensure the success of talks with the LTTE, the government should initiate work in another front. It should engage in building coalitions, nationally and internationally, to support negotiations and a possible settlement through negotiations. Building support bases among Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim masses in Sri Lanka as well as diasporic communities, winning over the support of opposition and minority parties and obtaining the assistance of civil society bodies would certainly strengthen the negotiation process. To succeed, negotiation exercise needs public support as well as political legitimacy. The government should trust and depend on allies for peace and conflict resolution.

Dr. SA Wickremasinghe's Birth Centenary

This year April 13th marked the birth centenary of Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe, the founder leader of Sri Lanka's Communist Party. He also belonged to the first generation of Sri Lanka's, or even South Asia's, socialists. He was initially with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party. In the early forties, the LSSP split and the Stalinist group formed the CP, under Wickremasinghe's leadership.

An interesting facet of Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe's political career was his contribution to egalitarian social change in the Southern province, particularly its Matara district. Wickremasinghe hailed from a family of rural gentry in Athureliya, a village in the interior of Matara district. His socialist politics was interspersed with what may be called 'helping the poor.' The mainstay of his social service was the provision of free medical care to poor in the Matara district. A British qualified physician, he had his dispensary in one of the old Dutch buildings in Matara town. At a time when universal franchise brought the poor and uneducated rural masses to the centre of political reckoning, Dr. Wickremasinghe emerged a legendary figure, as 'a friend of the poor.' Respectfully called *dostara mahattaya*, Wickremasinghe in his election campaigns visited the homes of all the voters, particularly those of the poor and extremely marginalized caste communities.

His political rivals were mostly his own relations, or men from the rural gentry who were both class and caste conscious. Elderly men among Matara's 'depressed' castes still talk about Dr. Wickremasinghe with gratitude, for "it is because of *dostara mahattaya* that we could begin to walk on the road with our backs and heads straight." Even in the so-called progressive Matara district, until about the 1950s, caste oppression remained severe. Upon seeing gentlemen and ladies of higher castes, men and women of low castes had to make way for them, usually getting to a side of the road. Men had to take off the cloth that they kept over their shoulders and bow down. Women of some depressed castes were not allowed to even wear jackets to cover their chests. On election days, candidates of high castes often used violence to prevent voters of depressed castes and rural poor from voting, because they constituted the electoral support base of the CP candidates.

Those at the receiving end were poor communities belonging to *durawa, karawa, wahumpura* and *nekathi* communities in the district.

This is also where the history of Sri Lanka's Left movement needs to be looked at afresh. Some Sinhalese nationalist critics argue that the Sri Lankan Left parties never made an attempt to understand the soul of the Sinhalese villager and therefore preached an alien doctrine of socialism. On the contrary, the Left understood and responded to the conditions of oppression and discrimination that

kept the soul of the Sinhalese villager in misery. From the 1930s the Left raised anti-feudal issues. They worked in the Kegalle district during the malaria epidemic and campaigned against feudal oppression; and they contested and won seats in rural areas from the 1930s onwards. The Left indeed succeeded where Buddhism failed in Sinhalese society. Sinhalese Buddhism embraced caste hierarchies, incorporated caste distinctions to the Sangha organization and legitimized caste regimentation. The Left introduced to the Sinhalese village the praxis of social egalitarianism.

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The tension between Sinhalese and Muslim trading communities in Mawanella in April 2001, has some parallels to the 1915 riots which of course had a greater spread and intensity. The conditions that produce ethnic riots are often similar. We reproduce below excerpts from Chapter 7 of Kumari Jayawardena's The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon (1972: Duke University Press).

SINHALESE-MUSLIM RIOTS OF 1915

The Economic Background

According to the usual viewpoint, the riots of 1915 were sparked by religious fanaticism as the Buddhists saw in the "intolerance and aggressiveness of the Muslims, a permanent danger to their religious practices and celebration of their national festivals." This interpretation of the riots ignores several important economic factors which had led to the development of resentment against a section of the Muslim population. In the 1911 Census, the Muslims in Ceylon consisted of 234,000 Ceylon Moors, 13,000 Muslims of Malay descent, and 33,000 Coast Moors (or Indian Moors) who had migrated to Ceylon to trade, and who frequently returned to South India. The Coast Moors were mainly engaged in petty trade throughout the country and their small shops provided the foodstuffs and other necessities of life for the urban and rural poor. In the towns, there were many teashops owned by Coast Moors and patronised by urban workers. Since Coast Moor shopkeepers were often pawnbrokers and moneylenders as well, allegations were frequently made of usury and rapacious business dealings.

The feeling against the Moor petty traders increased a great deal after the outbreak of the war in 1914. Restrictions on trade and a shortage of freight caused a decline in imports and exports in the first year of the war. Ceylon's main products were affected by the slump; there was a fall in coconut prices and the depression in graphite and rubber resulted in a reduction of wages and the retrenchment of labour in these industries. There was, in addition, an increase in unemployment among skilled workers in the towns.

The shortages caused by the war led to a sharp and sudden rise in the price of foodstuffs and other necessities, which was most keenly felt by the poor. The Governor, describing the rise in prices, and the tendency of retail traders "to exact exorbitant prices from poor people," wrote, "In a peasant country where retail prices are expressed in cents and half cents, even a slight rise in prices is both felt and resented by the customer."

The Political Factors

The riots of 1915 should also be viewed against the political climate of the time because political motives were invariably linked with religious unrest. During the years preceding the riots there was considerable political agitation connected with constitutional reforms, the temperance movement, and the salaries scheme. There had also been an increase in communal tension and an outburst of nationalist feeling.

The animosity directed against the Muslims was a result of the growth of communal and religious awareness on the part of the Sinhalese press, and the preachings of Anagarika Dharmapala. One of the aspects of the increase of national feeling was the hostility that developed against 'foreigners,' especially Europeans and Indians resident in Ceylon. The 'decline' of the Sinhalese race and the Buddhist religion was blamed not only on the European conquests, but also on other minority groups in Ceylon, and the Sinhalese newspapers and Buddhist journals led this campaign.