

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Sri Lanka's Widows in Politics

The entry of Mrs. Srma Dissanayake into the Presidential race, after her husband's assassination, has once again revived the talk about political widows in Sri Lanka. Many foreign news agencies, obviously baffled by this peculiarly Sri Lankan phenomenon, commented on it when they reported Sri Lankan events after the blast that killed Gamini Dissanayake. The BBC world service news in fact sub-titled its report of the UNP's selection of Srma Dissanayake as the Presidential candidate as "the battle of the widows", which is a reference to her impending electoral battle with another famed widow, Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga of the PA.

The question which many people continue to ask is: what is it that has made it possible, and necessary, for widows to occupy prominent positions in Sri Lankan politics? Is there anything uniquely Sri Lankan about this phenomenon?

Before we attempt to answer these questions, it is important to clear one major misconception about one widow in politics, Chandrika Kumaratunga. Chandrika stands in sharp contrast to her own mother Sirimavo, Srimani Athulathmudali and Srma Dissanayake in one fundamental respect. She was active in politics much before her politician husband was killed. In her case, it was not her widowhood that made her a politician. One may even say that it is her and her husband's politics that made Chandrika a widow.

In the political careers of Sirimavo, Srimani and now Srma, the common thread, of course, is that the sudden death of their prominent politician husbands created conditions for their being 'invited' to politics. And the common background which made their being invited necessary was that the three political parties which their husbands respectively led were acutely faction ridden at the time of their unexpected demise.

Take the SLFP of 1959-60, for example. When Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was assassinated in 1959, the SLFP, which had led the MEP coalition into power, was internally factionalized. Mr. Bandaranaike's departure only intensified the internal struggle for leadership. W. Dahanayaka and C. P. de Silva led two different factions while some elements of the party were even suspected of having conspired to kill the Prime Minister. Added to this factionalism was the belief within the Bandaranaike camp of the SLFP that since the party was formed and led from its inception by Mr. Bandaranaike, only a member of the Bandaranaike family could hold the party together by claiming 'political ownership' of the party. And the family name of the party's founder of course had the same effect as a familiar brand name of a popular commodity.

A parallel can be seen in the entry of Srimani and Srma to politics. After Lalith Athulathmudali left the scene, the DUNF plunged into a factional struggle, with Gamini Dissanayake

manipulating the party in such a way as to sideline the 'Lalith faction.' And some DUNFers who were earlier known as Lalith loyalists were won over by Dissanayake on his way to ultimately leaving the DUNF altogether and wresting the leadership of the UNP. For the Lalith faction to survive, his widow in white had to be brought in. She in turn played the classic role of the politician widow at the August parliamentary elections and ended up as a minister in the PA cabinet.

In Srma Dissanayake's case too, it is the bitter internecine struggle within the UNP that necessitated the virtual dragging of the widow of Dissanayake to the Presidential race. Unlike the other widows, she was not even allowed a chance to get over the deep shock of her husband's tragic death. The men behind the coffin of Gamini appeared to have forced Srma to stand in front of the coffin, in a blatant desire to transform tears into votes. And that move was also aimed at sustaining the claim of the Dissanayake family to the UNP leadership.

Votes for the Dead

One interesting feature of the recent Presidential election campaign is the appeal for votes on behalf of the dead, or more accurately, the appeal for votes for the living on the strength of their connections with the dead.

Srma Dissanayake is the most obvious in this respect. Having come into politics just ten days before the election, she has no recourse but to ask for votes on the strength of her husband's record and policies. All her speeches over radio and television harped on this one fact; she did not appear to be a candidate in her own right nor the candidate of a political party; she was only a surrogate for an absent figure.

She emphasized this by referring to a traditional religious belief. In one of her Sinhalese television speeches, she said that Gamini, from whichever heaven he is in now, would be guiding her and blessing her activities. The votes were being canvassed for a dead Gamini, who was however still the guiding spirit.

The references to the dead in Chandrika Kumaratunga's campaign were subtler. She was a political figure in her own right and was the acknowledged leader of a powerful political grouping. Yet even she had to have recourse to the dead but revered figures. Her campaign harked back to S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, her father who was assassinated in 1958, and to her husband Vijaya Kumaratunga, assassinated in 1988. Their ghostly presence, in sepia or in black and white, in the background of coloured posters of the enchanting Chandrika Kumaratunga was always a fact of her campaign.

Why is it that the dead still occupy such an important place in our politics? The feeling for heritage and tradition is understandable, but not the fact that the dead, recent as well as not so recent, continue to dominate the present.

UNP's Federalist Package

The sudden demise of Gamini Dissanayake, the UNP's presidential candidate, in the run up to the election left the field wide open for all the UNP's racist demagogues. Some of them, in fact, had a field day by attempting to provoke Sinhalese people into retaliatory action against the Tamil people. All their attempts failed miserably.

Little noticed in the chaos that was, of course, was a four page document published in the newspapers, described as Gamini's Vision for the 21st century'. One of the most interesting areas in this 'vision document' is Gamini Dissanayake's proposals for 'Devolution and the Resolution of the North-East conflict'. Reiterating his belief that "every ethnic and religious group living in Sri Lanka should have its identity respected and secured", Dissanayake goes on to say that "lack of political will and inadequacy of the powers under the 13th Amendment have frustrated the people of the North-East... who are now dissatisfied with the Provincial Councils system". Accordingly, Gamini Dissanayake's devolution proposals, which are contained in a separate Appendix to the main text of the manifesto, go far beyond the existing Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which established the PC system in 1987.

Some salient features of the Dissanayake proposals, which require Constitutional amendments, are worth bringing back to the political debate. The following is a summary of the package:

- i. Provincial Councils will share along with Parliament the legislative power of the people.
- ii. PCs will also share the executive power of the people.
- iii. Judges of the Provincial Councils shall be appointed by the Governor, in consultation with the President of the High Court.
- iv. New Constitutional proposals will be introduced to establish "a clear-cut division between the centre and the provinces". Parliament shall not enact legislation on subjects on the provincial list.
- v. There will be a system of "co-ordinate powers of the centre and provinces where powers devolved to provinces cannot be exercised by the Central Government".
- vi. Powers conferred to PCs "will not be able to be reduced or withdrawn without the consent of the provinces".
- vii. Powers of the Executive President to control PCs through the Governor will be curtailed. The President shall appoint a Governor "with the concurrence of the Chief Minister".
- viii. To safeguard the proper functioning of the proposed devolution package, a comprehensive system of checks-and-balances will be introduced. This will include a bi-cameral national legislature, judicial review of legislation and the recognition of the supremacy of the Constitution.

One of the most far reaching changes proposed by Mr. Dissanayake is the re-definition of the powers between the Centre and Provinces in favour of the latter by abolishing the existing Concurrent List. His package has only two lists: Reserved List and the Provincial List. Interestingly, land, broadcasting and television,

provincial planning and finance, and provincial police force are included in the Provincial List. He has also proposed a Devolution Commission to resolve conflicts between the Central Government and Provincial Councils.

The cumulative effect of this devolution package is the creation of a Federalist Constitution for Sri Lanka. And, it has come from the UNP. Ironically, Chandrika Kumaratunga, the PA candidate, won the overwhelming support of the Tamil and Muslim communities at the Presidential election, without any concrete proposal to resolve the ethnic conflict. Now the UNP has formulated a fairly advanced devolution package; will President Kumaratunga hesitate anymore to put forward the PA's proposals? Well, President Kumaratunga ought to thank Gamini Dissanayake and his advisors for doing all the home-work and breaking the ice, in Sri Lanka's much awaited march towards federalism, without calling it by that name.

PA's New Media Commissars

Among many victims of the Thotalanga blast is the PA government's declared policy of media democracy. The confusion that characterized the government's handling of the events immediately after the assassination of Gamini Dissanayake is in a way understandable. A cabinet, which has not had much experience in either the business of governance or handling delicate crisis situations, obviously found itself subjected to a severe test of its own capabilities. The suspicion of the LTTE's culpability in the assassination could not have come at a worse moment when the Kumaratunga administration was riding high on its peace moves with the rebels. To make the circumstances more delicate, all this happened just two weeks before the Presidential election, the outcome of which was extremely crucial for the life and death of the two month old PA government.

All this would however not provide any excuse for the appallingly autocratic manner in which the state-owned media institutions are reported to have been handled by a handful of media commissars, with direct access to the highest seats of power. Rupavahini, the state-owned television corporation, was blatantly used for the election propaganda of the PA, thereby grossly violating all the canons of the government's much declared principles of civility, fairplay and media democracy. It was reported that the proof copies of some Lake House news papers were brought for vetting to Temple Trees, the official residence of the Prime Minister who happened to be the PA's Presidential candidate.

Worse still, there was no official of the government—either the Prime Minister, Minister of Information or Justice — to either explain or bear accountability for this gross transgression of the government's own declared policy and principles. Judging by the statements made by the Minister of Information at subsequent press conferences, one can hardly resist the conclusion that either the Minister was naively ignorant of the newly emerged media commissariats, or he was just bluffing and evasive. So much for a government which has promised media democracy, transparency and accountability in governance.

There is, however, a fundamental lesson to be learnt, even from a democracy-friendly government: media freedom is not the property of a political party or a government; it is the property of a democratic society.