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COMMENTARY

SPRING CLEAN OF DICTATORS

A democratic revolution is sweeping North Africa and the Middle-East. It began in Tunisia last December and quickly spread to Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and now to Syria. Protests for democratic reforms have begun to take shape in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as well. It is clear that a fourth wave of democratization has begun, even though not all these countries are likely to be transformed into multi-party democracies. Some of these struggles might not succeed, even massive amidst popular revolts. Even then, one thing is clear: the Arab world is in a new historical phase of democratic transition.

In a chronological sense, it all began with post-election crisis in Ivory Coast in West Africa where an authoritarian President refused to leave office even after he lost the Presidential election. Instead of handing over power to the winner of the election, Laurent Gbagbo got the country's Constitutional Court declare himself the victor. Meanwhile, Alassane Quattara, the winner of the election, who happened to be the leader of the opposition, was sworn in as the President and he was immediately recognized by the international community. But that did not bring the standoff to an end. Even after mediatory efforts by neighboring countries,

Gbagbo refuses to leave office and stays in power by force. An authoritarian ruler in power for thirty years is defying the popular electoral

verdict, as if there is no life for him outside Presidential office and palace. Ivory Coast is in the brink of a civil war.

In contrast, Tunisia and Egypt have succeeded in getting rid of their long-time dictatorial Presidents with relatively less political and human cost. When Ben Ali in Tunisia went on exile on his own amidst a mass protest movement, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was forced to leave office after weeks of popular protests. However, the Egyptian success was not easy. Mubarak and his bureaucratic and military cronies were making plans to stay in power by any means necessary. There was even the likelihood of martial law being declared to protect the unpopular Mubarak regime. Amidst growing and determined popular opposition campaign for democracy and regime change, the US and Western allies appeared to have decided to dump their long standing ally. That perhaps was the decisive immediate factor that ultimately facilitated the relatively painless departure of Mubarak and his family from power. The post-Mubarak Egypt is now in a phase of democratic transformation. A process of constitutional and political change in place, creating space for political freedom, multi-party democracy, human rights and media freedom, and free and fair elections.

The way in which events are unfolding in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria

seem to be quite different from both Tunisia and Egypt. There, authoritarian rulers are refusing to step down and have even been using the armed forces and the police to unleash a massive crackdown on pro-democracy protest movements. Repression has worked in

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these countries in the past as well. The authoritarian ruling cliques are obviously counting on the efficacy of brutal repression for survival. Will the popular movements for democratic change in these countries have the will, capacity and energy to survive and eventually force their dictators out of power?

Meanwhile, the international military involvement in the Libyan crisis has altered the nature of the on-going crisis in North Africa and the Middle East dramatically. The UN Security Council endorsement and some support from a few Arab countries have given legality and some political legitimacy to the US, British and French -led military campaign in Libya. The Western military might crush Gaddafi's military machine within a few weeks. Yet, a West-led regime change is not likely to accord any political legitimacy to either the fledgling democracy movement in Libya or the post-Gaddafi political order. A client regime of the West in Libya will hardly be a model for democratic movements in other African and Middle Eastern countries. Another Iraq in the region can actually be not in the interest of the newly-emerged and unprecedented historical opportunity for democratization in Africa and the Middle East.

The Western military involvement in Libya occurred against a fast moving chain of events in Libya where the democracy movement was running the imminent risk of being crushed by Gaddafi's ruthless military machine. Even then, a fundamental question, which the West has not yet recognized, remains. It is about democratization of a set of authoritarian states which, except Syria, has so far enjoyed the status of clienthood of the West, enjoying its political, military and economic support, despite decades of continuing repression of their own citizens. These are also corrupt and tyrannical regimes which the West tolerated for its own strategic reasons. The remaining modern dictators are not likely to

leave power in the way Ben Ali and Mubarak did. With the threat of external military intervention, they might even gain new support and legitimacy to stay in. More tragically, democracy movements might even run the risk of losing internal popular support.

What would be the option for democracy movements, now under threat by a strange combination of their internal adversaries and external allies? The option perhaps is for them to tell Barak Obama, Ban Ki-moon, David Cameron, Nicolas Sarkozy and Abu Musa to address the issue politically and at an international level. What they should tell big powers and Ban-ki Moon is to summon a UN Security Council meeting to discuss not strategies of military intervention on their behalf, but how to strategize appropriate political interventions to weaken the dictators and strengthen the democracy movements. Democratization of North Africa and the Middle East is a global issue and promoting it through Western military power might spell disaster to the fourth wave of democratization...

Turning spontaneous democratic mass movements seeking political change into armed conflicts with authoritarian regimes, as the example of Libya now shows, is not the best way to facilitate democratic transition that of course involves regime change and retirement of dictators and their cronies. These are also regimes quite used to brutal repression of opposition and resistance. They have powerful armies which they will not hesitate to use against their own citizens. But, as developments in all these countries also show, there are serious cracks in the regimes. Non-military strategies to deepen those cracks into political crisis along with people's peaceful uprisings are what President Obama and his European allies should now explore, before it is too late. Handing over the Libyan operation to NATO would hardly be a sane policy. ■

Forthcoming from the SSA

Beyond the Sacred Journey: Varieties of Pilgrimage Practices at the Sri Pada Temple

RANAWEERA LESLIE GUNAWARDANA

1938-2010

Amaradasa Liyanagamage

Ranaweera Leslie Gunawardana (Leslie to his friends), one of the bright lights of the University of Peradeniya, is no more. It would take quite some time for us, - indeed he was my friend and colleague for over 50 years - to reconcile ourselves to the fact that this great scholar, probably one of the brightest of contemporary Sri Lanka, has departed for good. Being the most outstanding student at the University Entrance Examination (1956), he was awarded a scholarship apart from a government scholarship, to finance his undergraduate studies. At the B.A. Final Examination, Leslie gained first class honours in history and carried away as many as four awards in a row, consisting of the much coveted scholarships and prizes. What is indeed the more remarkable and noteworthy, is the fact that he never allowed the brilliant start to loosen its momentum and fizzle out into a lack-luster pale trudge. The contributions made by the emeritus professor to unravel Sri Lanka's past, including, on occasion, that of the adjacent Asian lands, stand out in bold relief. He was at once a highly respected historian both in Sri Lanka and abroad.

Leslie began his academic career in 1960 as an assistant lecturer in the Department of History, University of Ceylon (Peradeniya), and in due course in 1982, on the basis of a merit promotion, he was appointed to a personal chair in history. Subsequently he was elevated to the position of Dean of the Faculty of Arts (1991), before he reached the pinnacle as Vice Chancellor (1997-2000) of the University from which he had graduated. Right through he had an interest in left-leaning politics. He was appointed the minister of Science and Technology in the administration of President Chandrika Kumaratunge. I should, however, note that at no time did he allow political discourse to dilute the rigour of academic discipline.

The life and work of Leslie present a range of achievements, which cannot possibly be compressed into a brief statement such as this. His publications, in the form of books and research papers, add up to a total of well over 100. Similarly, the seminars and conferences which he had addressed over the years are amazingly extensive. Very many of were at indeed

prestigious international centres of learning such as London, Cambridge and Oxford, Chicago, New Delhi and Tokyo. His research deals with a variety of complex issues, such as the structure of the state, ancient and medieval science and technology of Sri Lanka, ethnic issues, historiography, Buddhist monastic organization of Sri Lanka with special reference to economic interest, and so on. His work is of lasting value, in the sense that, despite the intricate problems arising from precolonial sources of information, he finds his way into the deepest nooks and corners of the past, with the aid of his powerful searchlight. His work is meticulously thorough and reliable.

Heading the list of publications as a major item is his book, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* which is his doctoral thesis accepted by the University of London (1965). In this book, the author examines with amazing skill, the intricacies of the management of extensive monastic estates which belonged to the Sangha, the proceeds of which were utilized for the maintenance of vast communities of the Buddhist order and its monastic properties. Anyone who would like to know more about it may read the detailed review in my book, *Society State and Religion in Premodern Sri Lanka*, which I consider a fitting tribute to this great scholar. As remarkable as his scientific approach to the study of history, is the significance of the choice of research themes. Most impressive, indeed, is the work he had begun on a promising scale on the development of science and technology in ancient and early medieval Sri Lanka. He has to his credit five excellent research papers in this field: 1. Hydraulic Engineering in Ancient Sri Lanka: the Cistern Sluice 2. Inter-Societal Transfer of Hydraulic Technology in Pre-colonial South Asia: Some Reflections based on a Preliminary Investigation, 3. Craftsman as Artist and Innovator in Early Medieval Sri Lanka: Two Lamps with Hydrostatically Controlled Oil Reservoirs from Dedigama 3. Immersion as Therapy: Archaeological and Literacy Evidence on an Aspect of Medical Practice in Pre-colonial Sri Lanka and 5. Obstetrics and Theories of Reproduction in Ancient and Early Medieval

Sri Lanka. These studies, notably those on hydraulic technology, medicine and medical practice, are distinct and original contributions to the study of science and technology in precolonial Sri Lanka.

Equally important are Leslie's contributions to the study of Sri Lanka's pre-colonial social organization and Buddhist institutions. *Robe and Plough*, cited above, is an outstanding work, a model for research in the history of Buddhist Monasticism, with special reference to economic interest. Again, he draws our attention to the oldest extant Sinhala manuscript, (12th century, *Karma-Vibhagaya*, discovered by Rahula Sankritya-yana) in a Tibetan monastery. It rises to great importance, when one admits how little is known of the chronology of the hundreds of old leaf manuscripts, written in Sinhala and Pali, found deposited in our monastic and non-monastic libraries.

Quite early in my own career, as a student at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya (1954-58), I had planned a book on the Anuradhapura period of Sri Lankan history (*Anuradhapura Yugaya*), to meet the need for reading material in Sinhala, with the transition of the media of instruction from English into Sinhala and Tamil in the mid-fifties of the past century. I am pleased to record, in retrospect, how Leslie who arrived in Peradeniya two years later in 1956, happily joined me as a collaborator in this project. It was published by the Vidyalandara University of Kelaniya in 1961, where I was a member of its academic staff from 1959. He contributed two chapters on political developments and South Indian Invasions respectively, to its enlarged and revised edition of 1965 (reprinted 1987), filling a gap in the original text. This was the beginning of a lifelong link as friend and colleague.

It needs to be stated that Leslie has to his credit publications, both in English and Sinhala, while, understandably, most research papers are in English. Apart from the joint venture referred to above, and *Sivura saha Nangula*, among Sinhalese works, perhaps less-noted but immensely valuable is his work on the evolution of the historical discipline,

(*Itihasaye Atitaya*), placed in its widest spectrum. It is a substantial volume dealing with a theme, on which no noteworthy publication had appeared previously. One other item which calls for inclusion is *Reflections on a Heritage: Historical Scholarship on Premodern Sri Lanka*, Vol. I, Part 1 (2000), a symposium of selected writings of past and present scholars, brought out by a dedicated committee of senior scholars, of which he was a member. A Sinhalese translation of this work is available, too. Before proceeding further, let me hasten to add that, I have picked up only a few of the more noteworthy and representative items of writing out of a long list, with a view to highlighting the caliber of his scholarship, taking into account the limited space available to me.

When I conclude this note of appreciation, it occurs to me that, while little or nothing is said of the men and women who had served their community with such distinction and devotion when they are alive, the loss is highlighted and songs of praise are sung when they are dead and gone! Personally, I am relieved that my tributes to this great scholar were paid when he was alive and well, and they are available in print, both in English and Sinhala. Still on a personal note, even more assuaging is the fact that I had visited Leslie and spoken to him at his bedside, weeks before his condition deteriorated irretrievably. One more comment: personal idiosyncrasies, if he had any, are his own. Of this there can be no dispute; he was every inch a great scholar.

Our condolences go out to his beloved wife, Viru Gunawardana, herself a senior professor in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science in the same university, who obviously shared his joys and sorrows all the way, caring for him during his illness in the final weeks, as well as to his beloved son, Asela, and his wife. I stated at the beginning of this note of appreciation that it would be very difficult for us to reconcile ourselves to the fact of the death of this great scholar. Perhaps the only way out is to reflect upon the eternal reality that 'Life is uncertain, death is certain' *jivitam aniyatam, maranam niyatam!* ■

Amaradasa Liyanagamage, Emeritus Professor of History, is the author of *Society, State and Religion: In Premodern Sri Lanka*

CONVERSATIONS WITH LESLIE GUNAWARDANA

Romila Thapar

I was fortunate to have had many long conversations with Leslie Gunawardana on my visits to Sri Lanka, as well as in distant places such as Kyoto and Seattle where we happened to be at the same time. He was one of those rare historians for whom history was what E.H Carr described as a dialogue between the past and the present. His mind scanned the world around him and sought connections and contexts, as is characteristic of the best of historians.

But his curiosity did not stop at explaining the past. He was sensitive to the present and more so to its inequities and concerned about where our kinds of societies were heading. And as part of this he was interested in his friends and their lives and thoughts. I remember an evening of talking about the cantonment culture of the British Raj (which is what I grew up in) and his questions and comments which led to my thinking about nuances that had earlier passed me by. For him it was getting to know a friend.

Conversations with Leslie, and a few others, during the term I spent at Peradeniya in 1978, made me realize that historians writing on early Buddhism in the sub-continent, would find the work done on the same in Sri Lanka, quite illuminating. The structure of the Sangha, the monasteries and the political relationship with royal power, provided insights into the same relationship elsewhere in South and South-East Asia.

Leslie's magisterial work was on what Max Weber has called 'monastic landlordism'. In *Robe and Plough*, Leslie extended the meaning of the term by relating it to the socio-economic context that was its crucible. This he did by creatively using

Marxist methods of analysis, without in any way reducing the argument to a mechanical causation. It became an intensive study of the political relationship of the Sangha and royal authority as well as the economic base of the authority of monastic establishments. These were aspects that had

received less attention from historians but the work of scholars such as Leslie has now resulted in more studies along these lines.

The dichotomy between the householder and the renouncer, so central to early Buddhism and Jainism, became blurred in situations where monasteries began to function as social institutions – holding property and employing labour.

Many Marxist historians discarded the Asiatic Mode of Production and Oriental Despotism on theoretical grounds. But Leslie delved deeper and carried out a technical survey of the hydraulic network crucial to agriculture. The evidence he unearthed did not support the theory. He was able to disprove it on both theoretical and technical grounds. This was no mean achievement.

He wrote extensively on the Sinhala-Tamil inter-face. By analyzing the texts from early to later times he was able to show that cultural articulation was plural; and that there was no consistent hostility of the one towards the other. Situations of accommodation or of conflict varied and were determined by multiple factors. It was important for historical writing to reflect this multiplicity. This became a particularly significant study not only in itself but also as a contribution to the dialogue between the past and the present. ■

Romila Thapar is Emerita Professor of Ancient Indian History.

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