
ENTER THE NEW RULING CLASS

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Sri Lanka's post-colonial state, says '*Polity*,' the publication of the Social Scientists' Association has a new ruling bloc at present. It has new ideologues too, it adds. Such a statement emanating from so eminent a think tank deserves grave attention. How different is the present ruling bloc from the old? What constitutes this difference? Is it only the shift in power within the ruling party from the Bandaranaiques to Mahinda Rajapakse?

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, founder and patriarch of the SLFP, was a westernized Oxford-educated liberal democrat who nevertheless identified himself with the teeming rural masses. On the political plane the SLFP was populist socialist and on the cultural plane Sinhala nationalist. During the Chandrika Kumaratunge years, however, she moved the party towards a more cosmopolitan centre eschewing the more strident nationalist rhetoric and emphasizing multiculturalism.

To her critics of the Jathika Chinthanaya persuasion this was a deracinating influence. Under Mahinda Rajapaksa however the party can be expected to return to its populist-nationalistic roots.

However when '*Polity*' speaks of a new ruling bloc one feels that it means a wider change. It also points to the incorporation of the nationalist ideology embodied by the JVP and the JHU in the world outlook of the new ruling bloc. Majority nationalism has been given political legitimacy.

The Buddhist monk is restored to his position in the councils of the state. The insistence on the unitary state, hostility to foreign intervention and a near cultural xenophobia are the articles of faith of this new creed.

And what of the new ideologues? In varying degrees the thinking and rhetoric of personalities as varied as Gunadasa Amarasekera, Ven. Athureliye Ratana and Dr. Nalin de Silva resonate through the regime. And there are Young Turks such as Malinda Seneviratne ever willing to proffer advice to the President (solicited or not) through newspaper columns.

The new ruling bloc is manifested also in the legal advisors to the Sri Lanka delegation for the Geneva talks with the LTTE. H. L. de Silva PC and Gomin Dayasiri, a son of former Permanent Secretary N.Q. Dias, a now forgotten Sinhala Buddhist stalwart of the 1960s, gave a pronounced nationalist outlook to the outwardly dispassionate posture expected of a legal team.

The point is how this new ruling bloc can come to grips with such a volatile and emotional issue as the National Question. Is unalloyed majoritarian nationalism the answer to unadulterated Tamil nationalism? Can these two nationalisms be reconciled? '*Polity*' says that the members of this new ruling bloc are yet to demonstrate that they belong to a mature ruling class.

That may be too premature a judgement. But there is no doubt that having arrived on centre stage, the new class will have to vindicate itself or go down in jocosity. ■

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