

# MOB-VIOLENCE IN POLITICS

August, usually, is the month of religious rituals and mass spectacles in Sinhalese society. This year's August was different; the spectacle was that of mob violence re-entering the political conduct of pro- and anti-government forces in the South.

Traditionally, politically-motivated mob violence on a large scale has occurred in three main areas; in ethnic relations, electoral mobilization and against student and working class struggles. Anti-Tamil violence in 1958, 1978, 1979 and 1983 and the anti-Accord riots in 1987 are examples of the mob entering the arena of ethnic relations, even succeeding in orienting the political agenda of the country in an exceedingly disastrous direction. Election-related mob behaviour, meanwhile, had demonstrated how partisan political passions and enmities, exacerbated in a context of regime manipulation of the election process, could turn civilized political competition into revengeful hatred. Targeting of student and trade union struggles by regime-affiliated storm-troopers had at the same time highlighted the sheer intolerance displayed by governments towards unorthodox centres of dissent and opposition.

The mob-violence this August is qualitatively different from its previous manifestations. Although still not assuming the character of a mass phenomenon—so far it has been sporadic—it appears to enjoy the blessings of all major political parties in that it is presently resorted to by both the ruling party and opposition groups to harass, to assault and to intimidate their opponents.

Media individuals appear to be a prime target of recent mob attacks. Dayan Jayatilake, an unrepentant Premadasa propagandist, and *Aththa's* Jeffrey Yoonus, the foremost political cartoonist of the opposition, suffered injuries at the hand of mobs within the space of two weeks. When these attacks took place, another major mob assault on a group of foreign correspondents had already aroused public anger. It occurred in front of the Fort Railway station while these journalists were covering an anti-UNP signature campaign, launched by the DUNF of Messrs. Athulathmudali and Dissanayake. Beating up of a *Divaina* journalist at an SLFP rally held in Attanagalla, reportedly by a section of the opposition SLFP itself, also signalled this dangerous trend of violent intolerance towards dissenting journalism.

While all these mob attacks in themselves are truly reprehensible and do warrant unqualified condemnation, still more appalling is the way in which political

responses to them have become partisan, selective and in the last analysis vindictive. The Prime Minister's reply in Parliament to the question raised by an opposition MP about the violence against foreign correspondents at the Fort railway station is eminently representative of the arrogance and stupidity, if not complicit of the government's stand on this issue. According to the PM, some railway commuters, angered by an obstructing crowd, had merely reacted spontaneously. This highly surrealistic explanation—if the prime Minister's explanation was true, the workers travelling by train have had the bizarre habit of carrying knives and pistols hidden in their lunch packets!—was given by the Prime Minister despite statements made to the police by DUNF leaders identifying the assailants. It was only after a lot of pressure was mounted on the government that an inquiry was instituted and suspects arrested. Still, if the Prime Minister's initial statement is a clue to anything, it amply demonstrates the political will of the regime—all regimes are generously endowed with that will—to camouflage culpability, to distort events and to ride on self-delusions.

The opposition too, meanwhile, has not fared well on this front. Take the Dayan Jayatilake episode. Jayatilake was mercilessly beaten up by a gang at the funeral of General Kobbekaduwa. Not satisfied with letting his blood out, he was subjected to the ultimate humiliation of being stripped. True enough, Dayan Jayatilake has been an ardent propagandist for Mr. Premadasa and a venomous critic of the entire opposition. One may even think that the pen identified with him carries more poison than ink. Jayatilake too is a politically motivated propagandist journalist in the same way as Yoonus, the political cartoonist of *Aththa*. The point is that opposition politicians as well as the press did not hide their glee over Jayatilake's predicament while Yoonus, quite understandably, became overnight a symbol of press freedom. Incidentally, a leader of Sinhala chauvinist chinthanaya is reported to have even expressed his dismay over Jayatilake's not being killed on the spot.

A juxtaposition of political responses to the Jayatilake-Yoonus episodes would point to an alarming trend in the tension-ridden political debate in the South today. 'It is o.k. to beat up the guy in my rival camp' seems to be a governing principal of the current debate on violence against media individuals. This is nothing but partisan monopolization of the freedom of expression in political journalism. Incidentally, one peculiarity of po-



litical journalism as it is practiced in Sri Lanka, in both pro- and anti-government varieties, is that there is in it a lot of half-truths, innuendos, hatred and even malice intended for the glorification and/or vilification of personalities. Consequently, concerns over political issues have become subsumed by excessive personalization of politics. Collision of ideas is then substituted by cracking of heads.

To return to the question of mob-violence, it also occurs in the context of a decline in the efficacy of our party system to channel the political energies of the people in a constructive direction. One does not have to be an expert in politics to realise that there is tremendous accumulated political anger among the people, particularly against the UNP government. The sheer arrogance and hypocrisy of politicians of the ruling party, coupled with their dreadful will to stay in power, has made fifteen years of UNP rule the target of acute public resentment. Meanwhile, the Sinhala chauvinistic hysteria, propagated by some opposition parties and the press alike, has also created in the Southern mind a state of frenzy. Take, for example, the anti-Tamil mobilization in Hikkaduwa last year when a foreign film crew started shooting a film called 'Ganesh.' Amidst the Sinhalese chauvinistic delirium created against Thondaman and his proposals, Sinhalese mobs, incidentally supported by a self-proclaimed Marxist party too, are reported to have threatened the film crew with harm unless the filming was immediately stopped. The argument of the politically organized mob was that turning Hikkaduwa into a Tamil village, even as a film location, was a part of a larger Tamil expansionist conspiracy. Intimidated by the mob, the film crew withdrew. This is a classic example of non-state censorship and control of art by means of deploying politically-(mis)guided mobs.

Political hysteria, deliberately built by the Sinhalese political press and some opposition groups, is in a way symptomatic of the intellectual bankruptcy of today's opposition politics. A case in point is the furor spread by the press, including that of the Left, about so-called abductions of virgin women for sacrificial rituals. For several weeks in July-August, rumors and stories about 'virgin-abductions', attributed to the demonic desires of Mr. Premadasa, had gripped the imagination of the public. It had created tremendous confusion in society and the opposition press generously contributed to this state of turmoil by publishing as news stories highly exaggerated and often-unverified rumor. Determined to utilise any opportunity to discredit Premadasa and his ministerial cohorts—to be fair by the UNP politicians, one must note that there is very little credit that these men and women in power have earned for themselves—and unable to formulate an effective political alternative

to the UNP rule, some opposition groups may even opt for political mayhem.

The UNP too has shown in the past its capacity to mobilize under-world elements against political opponents. The beating up of workers and students, and critics of the regime in the late seventies and early eighties was the handy work of suspected criminal elements who, as the public perception goes, enjoyed the patronage of powerful politicians. Even the chief spokesperson of the present regime is now admitting to this practice of political thuggery in the pre-88 years of the UNP rule. It is a public secret in Sri Lanka that certain individual UNP politicians have their own storm troopers, recruited from urban lumpen elements. Maintaining mini-private armies, ready to be deployed against opponents, would not be all that strange for many a man in power, particularly against the backdrop of subterranean politics the spread of which we have watched during the past few years with horrendous concern. The recent attack, in broad daylight, on Lalith Athulathmudali and his supporters is hopefully not a pointer to the things to come.

There is another major reason why mob violence in politics should be abhorred and condemned; that it can give rise to the criminalization of competitive party politics. At a time like today when the political temperature is rising quite high, if mobs are unleashed by one group, the others are very likely to respond in kind, thereby creating a chain reaction from all sides. Mr. Ossie Abeygunasekera of the SLMP, the leader of a previously opposition group which is now aligned with the Premadasa regime, has been candid enough to state in public that those who throw stones at others should expect stones thrown back at them. If competitive stone-throwing—stone can be the metaphor for many a deadly instrument of death—becomes a shared political practice among political opponents, then, the summoning of mobs to settle political accounts and to administer instant political justice would invariably open the doors for a new political under-world. From Third world standards, Sri Lankan politics still remains relatively un-criminalized. In the Philippines, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, to cite just a few examples, criminalization of intra-party competition has already reached frightful proportions. In those countries, there are petty war-lords ready to serve any political patron. There are also politicians who are by themselves war lords. The danger in competitive political mob-violence is that it generates political-war lordism as well. As a *Ravaya* editorial recently warned, there is still time for Sri Lankan political parties to prevent the degeneration of democratic party politics into mayhem governed by criminal elements.

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