

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## Kobbekaduwa: Man and Myth

The sudden death of Major General Denzil Kobbekaduwa, Northern Commander of the Sri Lankan army, in an explosion at the battlefield has led to a major political controversy. The Opposition and the tabloid press have been raising many questions about the circumstances under which the explosion occurred, suggesting what may be termed a conspiracy behind the incident.

In times of utter political confusion and a genuine credibility crisis faced by the government, official versions of events are seldom accepted; they are often treated by people with scorn and disdain. The enormity of the credibility gap is exemplified by the general reluctance to even accept LTTE claims that it was responsible for the explosion. Ever since General Kobbekaduwa and eight of his colleagues lost their lives, the Premadasa administration has thus been engaged in a massive damage-control operation.

While the controversy is fueled by claims and counter-claims about the explosion—a landmine buried by the LTTE or an explosive device attached to the vehicle—it has also laid bare some interesting dimensions of Sinhalese society's search for a national hero. Paradoxically, the ethnic war took almost ten years and thousands of military deaths before it produced a folk hero in the popular imagination.

It is quite revealing that the Sinhala language does not have an accepted or standard word for the concept of 'martyr.' Not even the JVP, thousands of whose members sacrificed their lives for a 'noble cause,' could invent a word to express the idea of martyrdom. *Mavu bima venuwen divi pidu viruwa*—'the hero who sacrificed his life for the Motherland'—was the expression popularized by the JVP rebels. To refer to Kobbekaduwa and the others who died in similar circumstances, the Sinhalese nationalist press invented a new expression, *rana viruwan*, meaning 'the war heroes.' The Tamil political vocabulary, in contrast, has a single-word expression for martyr, *tyaki*. So does Bengali; *Sahid* which is derived from Urdu.

To come back to the theme of hero myth, General Kobbekaduwa's martyrdom was imagined by the populace under a specific set of political circumstances. The non-acceptance of the official version of his death and the tendency to link it to a political conspiracy originating in the South, gave a particular political coloring to the General's new life after death. Rumors abound connect-

ing his name to a political career he was supposed to have considered. Some rumors even went to the extent of inventing in him a would-have-been Presidential candidate. It may very well be the case that Kobbekaduwa did not have any plans to enter politics; yet, the Sinhalese nationalist imagination certainly had ample space for a political leader, with unimpeachable military credentials.

The establishment of the social credentials of the 'national hero' was perhaps considered important by the Sinhalese nationalist press. *Divayina*, accordingly, carried a series of articles on General Kobbekaduwa, emphasizing primarily his and his wife's *Govigama* aristocratic pedigree. A newspaper under the ideological influence of Sinhalese Bhumiputras perhaps thought it necessary to tell its readers that their hero was not just a social climber who had come from nowhere, but an authentic 'son of the soil' with a correct and impeccable caste genealogy. To put in context this new nationalist emphasis on caste, family and birth-status, one should recall the social snobbery constantly demonstrated by critics of the Premadasa administration.

## LSSP and CP—Merger or non-Merger?

To merge or not to merge, is a theme being debated among the leaders of the oldest Left parties in Sri Lanka, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL). Latest reports indicate that different approaches to the question of future political relations with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) are delaying their union.

Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the two Left parties were talking about the unification of Left parties. LSSP's claim to be Trotskyite and the CP's pro-Moscow heritage are now things of the past, particularly in view of the events in the Soviet Union. However, the obstacle to unification is apparently political; the LSSP takes up the position that while the Left may enter into joint opposition alliances with the SLFP against the UNP, the 'common enemy,' there should not be future coalition governments. The CPSL, in contrast, appears to favor the old strategy of forming governments in collaboration with the SLFP.

Both the LSSP and CPSL are no longer the mass working class parties that they were until a couple of decades ago. The rapid decline of the Left occurred in the early and mid seventies when they were coalition partners in an



SLFP-led United Front government. Having lost their youth constituency to the JVP, and the working class membership to the SLFP and the UNP, these once militant Left parties had to contend with an ever-eroding trade union base and occasional representation in Parliament. An attempt to form a United Socialist Alliance, along with a few other Left formations, was made in 1987-88 with a considerable degree of popular support and expectations; but the JVP's assassination of Vijaya Kumaranatunga of the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP), who had already emerged as the charismatic leader of the incipient Alliance, weakened the whole project. With the subsequent fragmentation of the SLMP, one faction supporting Mr. Premadasa's UNP and the other returning to where it originally came from—the SLFP—the socialist alliance was reduced to a mere party name registered with the Commissioner of Elections.

Even assuming that LSSP-CPSL unification does take place, it is highly unlikely that it would generate much public enthusiasm leading to a re-generation of Sri Lanka's Left. The Left has already damaged itself by being in a state of fragmentation for too long.

The Left does not seem capable of generating new ideas either, enabling it to re-gain the intellectual leadership which it earlier enjoyed in Sri Lanka's politics. Its lack of intellectual energy and interventionist capacity are mostly visible in the inability to articulate concrete reform projects concerning the ethnic question, democratic reforms and economic development. Tragically, Left political imagination too remains far behind the new imperatives of a socialist agenda today. And indeed, the need for a re-generated Left is acutely felt at a time when the demand for socialist ideas is steadily expanding among the youth, the young intelligentsia and the new layers of the working class. For a new socialist agenda,

there certainly exist the infra-structures of a powerful Left-socialist political culture, built by the traditional Left.

### Select Committee: a Footnote

As we go to press, we learn with dismay that the Parliamentary Select Committee has failed to arrive at a consensus. It has voted in favor of a political framework similar to that which exists in India. The Tamil parties have opposed it. So, for all practical purposes, consensus building between Sinhala and Tamil political forces has failed to produce anything substantial or lasting.

During the past year, Sinhalese politicians were heard proclaiming that the Select Committee was the last chance for peace in Sri Lanka. Tamil and Muslim parties who took part in the Select Committee process were also seen as firmly committed to the working out of a political solution. Yet, on the way to a final agreement, differences surfaced and resolution faltered.

The focal point of disagreement among Sinhala and Tamil parties concerned the question of merger. The position of Tamil parties that no solution that did not include the North-East merger was unacceptable was constantly resisted by others. And indeed, there was still some room for a compromise, perhaps synthesizing the federalist proposal with the framework of the previous option paper. No such final compromise attempt seems to have been made. And what we have now is a rather vague undertaking by Sinhalese parties to emulate the Indian system and angry denunciations of the entire Select Committee effort by Tamil parties. **P**

## Prophecy Forgotten

The Minorities looked with mistrust at one another. It was wrong to think that the differences were not fundamental. A hundred years ago, there were no such differences. They did not appear because the Englishman sat on the heads of the Tamils, the low-country Sinhalese and the Kandyan Sinhalese. The moment they began to speak of taking the government into their hands, then the differences that were lying dormant smoldered forth.

If they consider past history, they would see that these communities, the Tamils, the low country Sinhalese and the Kandyan Sinhalese have lived for over 1,000 years and have not shown any tendency to merge. They preserved their customs, their language and their religion. He would be a very rash man who would pin his faith on the gradual disappearance of these differences.

In a Federal Government each Federal unit had complete powers over themselves. Yet they united and had one or two assemblies to discuss matters affecting the whole country. That was the form of government in the U. S. A. All self-governing Dominions like Canada, Australia, and South Africa had the same system. Switzerland afforded a better example for Ceylon. It was a small country, but three races lived there, the French, the Germans and the Italians. Yet, Switzerland was a country where the Federal form of Government was very successful.

In Ceylon, each province should have complete autonomy. There should be one or two assemblies to deal with Special revenues of the Island. A thousand and one objections could be raised against this system, but when objections were dissipated, some form of Federal Government would be the only solution.

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike on Federalism, reported in the *Ceylon Morning Leader*, July 17, 1926.