

GANGSTERISM : ITS POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

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Gangsterism has come to Sri Lanka's politics but still remains in the periphery of events. It may perhaps be a matter of a few months for the war-lords of gangsterism to be summoned by political lords, to be at their service more openly. Especially when electoral battles begin to be fought out by bitterly divided and mutually intolerant political parties.

The new phenomenon of gangsterism has a frightening dimension; underworld figures are ready to kill and be killed, at the behest of politicians. It is a new patron-client network that binds men in political power with those of gladiatorial habits. During a very brief span of two weeks in February-March, four gang battles in which eight were murdered were reported in Colombo. In the press reports, even police spokesmen—unnamed, of course—were quoted as saying that the armed gangsters were linked to powerful politicians. Hudson Samarasinghe, a UNP MP and a recent victim of politically-motivated gang attacks, has been more candid and forthcoming in denouncing 'powerful' politicians with gangster networks.

The key word here is not politicians, but the appellation 'powerful.' 'Power', at least in this country, does not fall from the sky; its emanates from the State.

While the state/regime use of gangsterism to achieve political goals is a relatively recent phenomenon in our society, the summoning of *thugs* (strong men) to political action has a fairly long history. Lumpen gangs of thugs were active during the religious riots at Kotahena in 1884, at Sinhala-Muslim riots in 1915 and more recently at anti-Tamil riots of 1983. In electoral politics too, gangsters were deployed to intimidate rivals, to scare away voters and to ensure victory at the polls. Gangsters have been gainfully employed to break strikes and working class protests, too. During the Jayewardene regime, names of some Ministers were often mentioned in the opposition press as patrons as well as clients of organized thuggery. And politically unleashed gangsters of the lumpen under-world were seen storming political meetings, beating up strikers, entering universities and dragging a renowned professor from the podium. In the late seventies and eighties, this version of gangsterism perfected the ideal of a *Dharmista Samajaya* (Righteous Society).

Gangsterism today is a reconstitution of the old phenomenon. The distinguishing characteristic of the new is that it constitutes the underground networks of quasi-state power. Gangster men in arms—these arms are reported to be automatic guns that are normally the proud possession of armed forces—are not mere *chandiyas* (strongmen) of the old school (Choppe and Podi Ralahami, for example), who used to roam urban and proletarian neighborhoods. They represent entirely new networks and structures of political patronage, capital accumulation, and means of coercion and repression. They have access to modern weapons and the state is aware of it; yet, they are not disarmed, although their actions run parallel to those of the formal and conven-

tional institutions of state power. That is precisely how they define themselves: as the subterranean agents of certain components of the state that are born and exist UG (underground). They also define the changing sociology of political power in Sri Lanka.

This way of looking at the phenomenon of political gangsterism raises some uncomfortable, yet real, questions about the political processes in our country. If there are underground coercive structures of power operating in society, and if they are autonomous from formal structures of state power, what is, and who are, the State? As some newspaper reports have recently suggested, the gangsters are politically protected and the law-enforcement agencies are mere onlookers of gangster crimes. Then, what is the state of the State in Sri Lanka? If gangsters' services are obtained by politicians to settle political scores, what will happen to the political culture of competition and bargaining?

Gangsterism raises serious questions about the judicial process as well. Gangsters are ready to take the law unto their own hands. Their revengeful killings are often informal methods of a judicial process which is unique to mob culture. Killings are sometimes carried out to obstruct criminal investigations that may implicate powerful personalities. A number of accused in gang-related murder cases have recently been killed inside or just outside courts. It is said that now, people tend to engage the services of gangsters, instead of going through the normal procedures of law, to seek instant and bloody justice. While all this is happening, we also make efforts to preserve the independence of the judiciary and to ensure the rule of law. Contradictions in a surrealist world, one might say.

'Criminalization of politics'—it is perhaps too early to use this formulation to describe the existing relationship between the worlds of crime and politics; but all signs are that before long we may well find these two words extremely evocative to describe events to come. Imagine a scenario of elections—parliamentary, Presidential or provincial—being fought out bitterly. The parameters of the scenario would be as follows: a party which has been in power for 16 years cannot afford to lose; an alliance which has been in the opposition for 16 years can no longer stay out of power; election tension will reach an unprecedentedly high pitch as 'State Power'—not just governmental power—will be at stake; even a slight chance of an opposition victory would mean total dismantling of power structures and patronage networks that are so closely embedded and inter-woven with state power. To use an expression of the urban lexicon, it is likely to be a 'do or die' scenario. Who would, and could, rule out the near certainty of quasi-state power structures being activated to secure the hold over state power?

Meanwhile, some gangsters are killing each other. The legal impunity which the killers appear to enjoy may encourage more gang battles. Should we then say that the society has strange habits and means of purifying itself.

(This essay was written in March 1993)

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As we go to press, the first political killing during the provincial councils election campaign has occurred. Lalith Athulathmudali, leader of the Democratic United National Front (DUNF) and its candidate for the Chief Ministership of the Western province, was gunned down, reportedly by a lone assailant, on April 23. When shot, Athulathmudali was addressing a campaign rally in Kirillapone, a suburb of Colombo known for mini mafiosos of all hues.

Although political tension was mounting as the election campaign gained momentum in the third week of April, the killing of a party leader of Athulathmudali's standing was a totally unforeseen event. Incidentally, this is the first instance in post-independence Sri Lanka of a prominent party leader being assassinated during an election campaign. Perhaps, the outcome of this particular election was to have decisive political ramifications. Hence a lone gunman, obviously not acting alone.

Meanwhile, the government propaganda machinery has, with stunning efficiency, identified the 'killer' of the DUNF leader, his political affiliations (LTTE), and even motives. Within a mere twenty-four hours, images of the suspected killer's corpse, found in a garbage dump close to the venue of shooting, were flashed on national television; an unconvinced public greeted the official version put out by the state media with scorn and skepticism. Rightly or wrongly, the public perception that emerged spontaneously pointed an accusing finger at the ruling party. The enormous political implications of Athulathmudali's assassination can primarily be read in this perception.

The ruling party too was mindful of the potential damage that it would suffer. As reported in the *Sunday Observer* of April 25, Athulathmudali's brother-in-law had stated at the magisterial inquiry that he "suspected the UNP leadership for the assassination." Given the immense bitterness—both personal and political—that existed between the leaders of the UNP and the DUNF, claims and counter-claims for culpability would be utterly rancorous. That is perhaps why Housing Minister Sirisena Cooray, the Secretary General of the UNP, issued a statement claiming innocence for his party, even before Athulathmudali's body was taken to his family's residence. 'Don't accuse us; you yourself are liable to be accused,' was the gist of UNP's communication to the DUNF and the SLFP.



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The assassination of Athulathmudali, who was emerging as the most prominent political figure in the entire Opposition, has changed the political equilibrium that was developing along with the provincial polls campaign. Some violence among contending parties was not unexpected, but not in the form of a cold-blooded assassination of a party leader with national standing. The relations between the ruling UNP and the opposition parties are never to be the same again. Not that they were any better before; but the mutual enmity generated in the aftermath of this death is so enormous that one can hardly visualise the return to normality of government-opposition relations.

Against this build up of government-opposition hatred, the rest of the election campaign, and even the post-election scenario, is likely to be bitterly violent, with UNP and opposition, particularly DUNF, supporters at open war with each other. A sense of public cynicism and despair about the peaceful electoral changes has already set in, as a spontaneous response to the killing of a man who, if allowed to live, could have been a formidable Presidential candidate at next year's elections.

With Athulathmudali's death, the ruling elites in Colombo are most likely to unite against the Premadasa leadership of the UNP. The assassin's bullet has suddenly widened, sharply and decisively, the gap between the present leadership of the UNP and the upper classes. Although Athulathmudali's own attempt to remove Premadasa from office in 1991 was greeted with cautious jubilation by Colombo's elite, they did not break away from Premadasa. Unless the LTTE's or any other wayward group's culpability of Athulathmudali's killing is established firmly and beyond an iota of doubt, the rupture between the Premadasa leadership of the UNP and the elite would grow irreparable.

It would perhaps not be easy for the regime to clear the public's suspicion that Athulathmudali is a victim of a political conspiracy. In Sri Lanka's contemporary political culture, assassination of prominent individuals is often shrouded in mystery; and the mysteries of political killings, further mystified by the less than exemplary behaviour of the law enforcement agencies, has invariably led the bewildered public to shed their confidence in the regime's leadership. A deepening credibility gap between the regime and the public is likely to be reflected at the voting on May 17, provided the polls are free, fair and violence-free. Similarly, sympathy in DUNF's favour is likely to add to the discomfiture of the Premadasa administration; if other things remain equal, the UNP's hold of the provincial councils will be seriously weakened.

If violence begets more violence, Sri Lanka's claim to relative political stability, touted especially among foreign investors and Western donors, is sure to suffer serious damage. Incidentally, Athulathmudali has been the opposition's most ardent advocate of free market capitalism.

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