

# NOTES AND COMMENTS

## Secularization of the State?

A recent news item in the *Sunday Times* reported that Colombo's BMICH authorities have refused permission to the National Joint Committee (NJC) to hold a conference at the BMICH auditorium. This conference was to be on the proposed constitutional reforms. According to NJCs secretary Piyasena Dissanayake, this conference "was to be presided over by the Mahanayakes [Chief Buddhist monks] and attended by several members of the Maha Sangha [Buddhist monks] to discuss the position of the Sinhala people regarding the proposed reforms". Dissanayake is also quoted as saying: "This is an insult to the Mahanayakas and the Sangha. This is politically motivated. We are planning to take legal action for the violation of fundamental rights."

This news report also says that when the NJC approached the Director of BMICH, he had told them that since the conference was of political nature, he had to consult President Chandrika Kumaratunga, chairperson of the board of management. The report implies that the NJCs application was turned down after BMICH Director consulted President Kumaratunga.

Assuming that the *Sunday Times* report and its implications are true, we may find behind this story some interesting changes in contemporary Sri Lanka's politics. The changes refer to a definite alteration of state-Sangha relationship under President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Those who know Sri Lanka's politics also know that the NJC is an umbrella body of some disparate Sinhalese-Buddhist organizations. The defining character of the NJC is its unrelenting opposition to devolution and negotiated settlement to the ethnic question. The NJC is also opposed to the PA-UNP consensus on devolution. It has always been the practice of the NJC to invite Buddhist *Mahanayakas* to be front spokespersons. And the *Mahanayakas*, with their reactionary and pre-modern ideology of the world of politics, have been playing the role of a stumbling bloc in the path to devolutionary constitutional reforms. If the President had actually refused permission for the use of BMICH for a meeting to be attended by these political monks, it demonstrates that at last the President has had the courage to gradually de-link the state from the pressures of the Buddhist clerical hierarchy.

One element of Sri Lankan politics, which is totally incongruous with any notion of political modernity is the capacity demonstrated by the so-called liberal political leadership to capitulate before religio-clerical elements with reactionary economic, political and social agendas. This has been particularly evident in the sphere of majority-minority relations. Although many progressive Buddhist monks have attempted to provide a modernist, forward-looking and democratic ideological orientation to Sri Lankan Sangha community, the hierarchy has not been responsive to reform. Perhaps, there is a material basis to the political conservatism of the Sangha hierarchy. Most of the politically powerful Buddhist temples still have feudal property relations. They are large agrarian landholders still practicing archaic tenurial relations with the poor peasantry. Similarly, they are also dependent on the surplus generated by the propertied and wealthy classes of Sinhalese society. One aspect of their political conservatism has been the expectation that the Sri Lankan state, the Sinhalese ruling class and the ruling families should be subservient to them. Former Presidents Jayewardene and Premadasa understood this political weakness of the

*Sangha* leadership and cleverly exploited it for their own advantage. But they did virtually nothing to de-link *Sangha*-state relations.

## Negotiations and Prerequisites

For students of conflict resolution, political events in Sri Lanka in the past several months offer a rare body of material for analysis, reflection and theorization. Two parallel processes of negotiations have been under way for nearly six months. The first is the constitutional reform talks between the ruling PA and the opposition UNP. After years of acrimonious politics and a number of failed attempts to bring the two sides to constructive engagement, at last a process of dialogue began early this year. This exercise can be interpreted in a number of ways. At one level, it appears to be a movement towards the crucial need of a Sinhalese ruling class consensus on the ethnic conflict resolution. At another level, it can also be seen as a ruling class consensus-building exercise as a prelude to negotiations with the Tamil parties. The question whether a Sinhalese ruling class consensus is necessary as a prelude to negotiations with Tamil parties is an issue that warrants some theoretical treatment.

Meanwhile, the Norwegian initiative has opened up huge space for analysis and theorization. To begin with, the question of -mediation is at the center of the issue. It is quite interesting that the Sri Lankan government has not taken kindly to the term 'mediation.' Colombo's preferred terminology is 'facilitation.' The Colombo government's present agenda is for Norway to play the role of a 'go between,' and not that of a mediator. But the LTTE appears to suggest a direct, mediatory role for the Norwegian third party. The role of a third party in a negotiated settlement in Sri Lanka is one of the most unexplored issues in the whole area of conflict resolution.

Will direct talks between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE take place in the foreseeable future? There is no direct answer to this question at all. The military campaign launched by the LTTE in April-May in fact, it really began last December can be interpreted as an attempt made by the LTTE to gain military advantage on the ground anticipating negotiations. It can also be understood as a firm rejection by the LTTE of any move towards negotiations. But the fact that the intense phase of war in April-May has led to a state of military stalemate between the two sides may give credence to the argument that the time is now ripe for resumption of talks. The conflict resolution theory suggests that a condition of "hurting stalemate" has the potential of creating conditions for negotiations.

How credible is the PA-UNP consensus for negotiations with the Tamil parties and the LTTE? The answer to this question is also a complex one. Assuming that the PA-UNP consensus contains the maximum which the Sinhalese polity can offer to the minorities as a constitutional package, there is always the risk of that 'maximum' being rejected as inadequate by the Tamil parties. In such an event, the PA-UNP dialogue will have to start afresh, stretching their political imagination far beyond where it is now. What are the contours of a new consensus that the Sinhalese political leadership will have to work on? The think tanks of the PA and UNP should begin to reflect on this question without much delay.

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