

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Peaceful Transition

But for the killer and his accomplices, no one, not even Mr. Premadasa, would have anticipated that Sri Lanka's President was to meet a bloody and violent death in broad daylight, on May 1. It was one of those most unforeseen and unpredictable events. The assassination of a Head of State would normally send massive shock waves across the entire governmental machinery, perhaps even crippling it for a while. However, the immediate aftermath of President Premadasa's killing was not marked by any 'power vacuum' or governmental dislocation. According to reports, Ranil Wickramasinghe, who a few days later found himself in the Prime Ministerial chair, handled the situation ably and professionally. Within hours of the Presidency falling vacant, the Prime Minister, Wijetunga, was sworn in as Acting President. Within three days, the Acting President's nomination was before the Parliament, to be unanimously approved. By the time of the ex-President's cremation on the sixth day of his death, the governmental structure was in place and share prices were rising again in Colombo. A smooth transition, as goes the gleeful cliché shared by investors, diplomats and the media.

Our pre-occupation with this constitutional transition of Presidential power, so smooth and orderly, should not obscure another important transition which has taken place, peacefully and without much resistance: the reversal of political power to the social group which Mr. Premadasa, as President, loved to hate and wished to disempower. In the last few months of his life, Mr. Premadasa spoke of a "class struggle". Some of the late President's propagandists characterized Mr. Premadasa as the personification of the class struggle which would not stop until the *govigama* upper class ruling elite was overthrown, lock, stock, and barrel. They even went to the extent of elevating the Premadasa project to the status of a specifically Sri Lankan version of a 'bourgeois democratic revolution.'

With the Wijetunga, Wickramasinghe, Harold Herath troika in the forefront, and perhaps the Grand Patriarch JRJ behind the back drop, the *ancien regime* has struck back in no time. Neither in the SLFP nor the DUNF are there 'bourgeois democratic revolutionists' of the Premadasa type. In terms of the sociology of political power in post-colonial Sri Lanka, Mr.

Premadasa perhaps represented a brief break, if not an aberration.

Widows' Rites and Widows' Rights

Mrs. Hema Premadasa's vote of thanks oration at her late husband's funeral has generated much public reaction, not always complementary. The most common criticism levelled against her is based on the premise that she violated the code of conduct that governs Sri Lankan widows; she should not have spoken at the funeral ceremony. Worse still, she should not have made her political ambitions public before her husband's mortal remains. And many Sri Lankans appear to be aghast at the prospect of Mrs. Premadasa entering politics. A scurrilous letter, that made its rounds through Colombo's tele-fax machines just before the Provincial polls, even textualized all these anti-Hema Premadasa prejudices.

In the appallingly conservative Colombo society, no eyebrows were raised when other prominent widows came into politics, solely on the grounds of matrimonial inheritance. We have a fairly long list of such political widows, from Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike to Mrs. Srimani Athulathmudali. After all, these other widows are endowed with one important common factor—they were upper class women, who behaved 'properly' at their husbands' funerals. This 'proper' conduct of a widow suggests silent mourning, subdued behavior, and perhaps stepping out of the homefront only after the seventh day alms giving in memory of the dead spouse. Even in widowhood, class prejudices reign supreme.

Mrs. Premadasa's somewhat inappropriate political thanksgiving speech at the funeral was obviously the product of a group of politically ambitious men who thought it urgently necessary to use the widow for their political ends. Mrs. Premadasa too exercised the Presidential widow's right to be ambitious and impatient. And that clashed with the rite of mourning which the conservative gender culture had defined as 'right'.

Private Grief and Public Gaze

'Turn grief into gain'—an old political device which both the DUNF and the UNP made use of after their respective party leaders were assassinated. The



deceased leaders were immortalised, facilitating their continued presence in the election campaign.

The UNP did it on a grand scale, using state - controlled television in its inimitably inept way. Six days of national mourning made the Rupavahini's TV cameras exceedingly active, with interviews of mourners who lined up at Mr. Premadasa's private and official residences flashed across national television. However, DUNFers, who were quite active in the free media movement, did not permit state television crews entry to Mr. Athulathmudali's residence where his remains were lying in state.

The culmination of this serialised 'Death of the President' by overzealous media wizards at Colombo's Torrington Square, was the live telecasting of the grieving Premadasa family during the last few hours before the late President's coffin was removed from the Presidential House for cremation. For the immediate family members of any dead person, the moment of removing the remains from the residence for final funeral rites is the high point of their emotions. Except for certain members of sophisticated, urban bourgeois families, Sri Lankans are known for the uncontrollable display of their intense grief. And, of course, it is a private moment where the family members should be allowed to give vent to their grief in their privacy. But Mrs. Premadasa and her children were denied that right by the ubiquitous television camera.

Or is it a case of private grief for public gaze in this age of manipulatory mass politics?

New UNP: A Worker-Peasant Alliance?

A rare privilege which President Premadasa of the United National Party enjoyed was the presence in his officialdom of a couple of young 'Marxists' who found the Marxist theory so innovatively flexible as to provide his project a Marxist theoretical grounding. The poor man was once equated to Gorbachev. After Gorbachev messed up his Perestroika and then the Soviet Union, there were Stalin, Mao and Castro to be inspired by.

Should the post-Premadasa UNP team need a Marxist theory (Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe has no record of being inspired by any variety of Marxism), here is one. As the recent Provincial Councils election results testify, the UNP's main electoral support base consists of two segments of Sri Lankan society, the rural peasantry and the plantation proletariat. The UNP has ultimately fulfilled the hitherto unrealized dream of all

Sri Lankan Marxists, Leninists, Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, Stalinists, Maoists, Castroists, and Hoxaists—it has successfully forged a Worker-Peasant Alliance.

The credit for forging this revisionist Marxist theory goes to a young Social Democrat — a civil society type — in Colombo.

Being Genuinely Revisionist

Long live the Wijetunga-Wickramasinghe revisionist clique!

Reading the statements made by President Wijetunga and Prime Minister Wickramasinghe, outlining the policies of the *nouveau regime*, is a delightful intellectual exercise. Some memorable quotes:

"My policies are pragmatic, not dogmatic." - President Wijetunga.

"We hope to move towards a more open society." - Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe.

These statements make more sense when they are read with stories about 'stable-cleaning' exercises undertaken by the new President. Most sensational of all of them is the disbanding of the special police unit, maintained, under his personal command, by the ex-President. According to press reports which have not been denied by the Presidential Secretariat—that most powerful place of official power—the officers attached to this special unit were engaging themselves in activities that borders criminality and/or violation of constitutional rights of citizens. Harassment of actual and potential political opponents of the ex-President, telephone tapping, surveillance of a political nature and many more activities of this exceedingly resourceful 'squad' have been reported in the press. The highly publicized disbanding of this unit, just a few days after the ex-President was buried—not exactly, cremated—provides fascinating data for political imagination.

Well, after the dissolution of this unit, the officers have been transferred to the regular police department. It is not yet clear whether the government is contemplating any further action on this matter. In fact, further action is necessary on the part of Human Rights and legal communities to prevent the creation of such private police squads, in the future, to suit the whims and fancies of the powers that be. When secret cloak-and-dagger units are created, no government will acknowledge their existence, just like Mr. Wijetunga did, in his capacity as the Prime Minister, when queries were made about the same police unit which he has now disbanded.

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