

PREMADASA AS PRESIDENT: A POSTHUMOUS ASSESSMENT

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The vacuum left by President Premadasa's demise has, ironically, opened up room for a critical assessment of his four year rule.¹ Ironically, because, when he was around as the Executive President, there was always a sense of reluctance even among his non-political critics to subject Mr. Premadasa's words and actions to scrutiny. Avoidance of 'trouble', reinforced by a sense of fear, motivated the 'correct line' preferred by many. On the other hand, those who praised the President and his policies ran the risk—or the easy privilege—of being sucked into the inner circles of Presidential officialdom.

The monopoly of criticism, meanwhile, went to the Opposition's politicians and the political press. Their critique invariably took an excessively partisan turn. The worthless polemics conducted by columnists in the state-controlled Lake House press and in the Opposition tabloids marked the ultimate degeneration of a political debate of which, the terms, the idiom, and the parameters were defined by inter-personal rivalries that permeated party politics as well.

Premadasa's death and the immediate public response to it carried many paradoxes that have colored both the substance and style of his reign as the Executive President of Sri Lanka. As many believe now, the suicide bomber who reportedly attempted to reach him while detonating the deadly explosive was a Tamil and an LTTE cadre. Ironically Premadasa was the only Sinhalese politician in whom the Tamils, and even the LTTE, had some confidence; In 1989, he made an attempt to bring about a settlement with the LTTE, by communicating directly with them. The Opposition, and even his own cabinet colleagues who later joined the Opposition, could never forgive Premadasa for this rather adventurous course of action with regard to the LTTE. When the LTTE unilaterally broke up the talks, and went back to the war in 1990, Premadasa may have felt thoroughly betrayed. Yet, he never abandoned his conciliatory rhetoric on the ethnic question. Probably, on the ethnic question, Premadasa had the best rhetoric, but not the substance. In fact, when some of his own cabinet colleagues attempted to oust Mr. Premadasa in 1991 by means of an impeachment motion, those who unreservedly came to his rescue were Tamil politicians and intellectuals. The esteem and respect Mr. Premadasa enjoyed among Colombo Tamils could be rivalled only by the leaders of the old Left, despite the fact that he did not offer anything concrete to Tamils other than conciliatory words.

Premadasa spent his last moments, directing crowds and traffic at the UNP's May Day procession. He was clad in the rather un-Presidential attire of a sarong and a shirt. On the surface, this signified the populist side of Premadasa's character and of his political career. And that populism was not a mere desire to be with the people, and to be seen by the people. It was a desire to be in control of every minute detail of things under his command and leadership—a reflection of the thoroughly activist and interventionist nature of his Presidency.

President Premadasa also died at the worst moment of his political career, as evidenced by the jubilant reaction of various segments of the public. In many parts of the country, in urban as well as rural areas, people celebrated the news of his tragic death by lighting fire crackers. The jubilant were not mere Opposition activists who in any case would have obviously felt joyous at the sudden departure of their main political adversary. There were lower middle class and proletarian people who, despite Mr. Premadasa's constant claims to represent their aspirations, appeared to have found in Mr. Premadasa's death a reason for spontaneous joy. The members of the urban bourgeoisie, who had benefitted immensely from his economic policy reforms, were, on the other hand, discreet in their reactions; they did not dance in the streets, but merely organized champagne parties. This was in sharp contrast to the disbelief, anger, and grief expressed by vast sections of the populace, just a week before, when Lalith Athulathmudali of the DUNF was assassinated. Obviously, four years of Executive Presidency had robbed Premadasa of much public support and sympathy, an elementary reward that any human being should enjoy at death. This alone should be an eye-opener not only to Premadasa's successors, but also to Opposition politicians who aspire to hold high political office.

Two posters that appeared side by side on Colombo walls a few months ago graphically illustrated the essence of Mr. Premadasa's recent politics. One poster carried a portrait of Mr. Premadasa while the other announced the arrival in Colombo of a Christian evangelist. In fact, Mr. Premadasa was the evangelist who had already arrived, set up camp and started preaching and faith healing: he created hopes and expected the country to live in the hope that only he could 'deliver.' The ethnic question is perhaps the issue that demonstrated in no uncertain terms the kind of political evangelism indulged in by Mr. Premadasa. Having kept mum at all those fora which he



himself had created as mechanisms to find solutions to the ethnic question—the All Party Conference, the Parliamentary Select Committee, negotiations with the LTTE—he sought a people's mandate, just a week before the death, to find a lasting solution to the self same ethnic question. This Mr. Premadasa did in the fifth year of his rule as the Executive President of the Republic. Not a great record for a President who had the support and goodwill of all minority ethnic groups.

Premadasa's political evangelism had two dimensions: (i) creation of hopes in order not to fulfill them, and (ii) doing positive things so that new hopes were generated. The first was reflected in his absolutely inexcusable dilly-dallying with the ethnic question and the second in his social engineering programs.

Social Engineering

It was through his social engineering that Premadasa probably left his unique mark on Sri Lankan politics. Although social welfarism has always been a major policy goal of all governments for many decades, Premadasa's welfare programmes, implemented after 1989, had a totally new political context. When he was elected to the office of Executive President in December 1988, Sri Lanka was in an acute state of instability. While the JVP's rebellion was spreading, all existing political parties in the South, including sections of the UNP, were slowly capitulating before the JVP. The JVP's persuasive as well as coercive tactics had been quite successful in creating a widening chasm between the state and the rural as well as urban masses. To his credit, Premadasa was the only politician who, on behalf of the *ancien regime* could offer to the electorate some hope that the state still cared. He did this by means of the *janasaviya* poverty alleviation program which envisaged direct financial support to the poorest of the poor. Quite understandably, bureaucrats and professional economists, not to mention opposition politicians, were highly skeptical, and even contemptuous, of Premadasa's committing the state to a vaguely defined and potentially costly election promise; yet, Premadasa's political instincts were so sharp at that time that he was the only politician to realize the importance of a social insurance policy against the JVP, however economically unsound it may have seemed. Within one year of his term Premadasa also created a program to provide mid-day meals for school children. In 1992, he further expanded his strategy of 'catching them young' with a program of providing free school uniforms to all school children in the country. One should perhaps recall that in 1988-89, school children—even primary school kids—were mobilized by the JVP very successfully in their protest demonstrations as well as in violent armed activities.

Premadasa's welfare policies, nonetheless, generated a set of contradictions that were quite unfavourable to him.

He probably thought that by spending massive amounts of public money on social welfare, he would be accepted by the people as a caring and benevolent ruler. The direct recipients of the state welfare support probably did, but not everybody else. Many reacted by viewing these policies as crude attempts by Premadasa to create a regime of personal glory and grandeur. Premadasa in fact did nothing to change this public perception; he probably thought of himself as a ruler who should be the supreme, if not sole, well-spring of social benevolence. Even if Premadasa genuinely wanted to conduct himself like a benevolent monarch, the actual impression he ultimately created was that of a pretender with erratic behavior.

The welfarist and social-engineering thrust of Premadasa's policies also highlighted another negative aspect of his administration—the highly interventionist role accorded to the state and to himself. The state under Premadasa took a rather unique character; at one level, the state was unprecedentedly violent and repressive, as demonstrated during the confrontation with the JVP; in its policies of social benevolence, it was arbitrary, selective and capricious. The state was also made ubiquitous when numerous Presidential programs and festivities—*Gam Udawa* (village re-awakening), Mobile Presidential Secretariat, *bodhi puja* rituals and opening of garment factories—were held in many corners of the country. The extremely unimaginative and crude manner in which the state-controlled television and radio media were utilized to propagandize Presidential programs and achievements, particularly in social welfare and development fields, aroused much public disdain. The state and the President were everywhere, mobile and everpresent. This arbitrary, oppressive and imperious presence of the state and the individual who occupied its highest seat at every level in public life, no doubt, created the exact opposite of what Premadasa expected—resentment and abhorrence towards the person and the office of the President.

Shifting UNP's Social Base.

Premadasa's highly interventionist tenure makes some sense in terms of the sociology of political power. An attempt to change the social bases of the UNP was a major element of Premadasa's project, once he became the President. The social core of the traditional UNP consisted of the urban-based landed gentry, professionals of upper caste or class families, and Anglicized sophisticates. As an electoral party, it also had a popular base which provided the UNP votes. It is also from this popular base that the upper class UNP leadership recruited its storm-troopers. Premadasa's entry to the UNP politics in the early fifties occurred primarily in his capacity as a strong-man in urban proletarian districts. Alongside his role as a labour activist by this time, he also organized, on behalf of UNP politicians and businessmen, urban gangs against left-wing unions. Premadasa's rapid

upward mobility in the UNP was largely due to the fact that he, with the support of urban lumpen elements, successfully managed to keep in check the Left electoral base in central Colombo's traditional proletarian belt.

In power as President, Premadasa brought in to the UNP and to the governmental machinery, people from his own social base in Colombo. These men without upper-class credentials or elite school education found their way to the cabinet, the directorates of public corporations, local government bodies and finally to the UNP's main policy-making body, the working committee. Many of them in fact were recruited to the UNP from Premadasa's own political movement, the *Sucharita Viyaparaya*. In a parallel development, Premadasa also created a new business stratum in Colombo. In this, Premadasa was farsighted than other politicians in the UNP; he knew how to distribute immense state resources, and even honours, among loyal businessmen as well as proletarian recruits in order to turn them into a solid and devout support base.

Under Premadasa, the UNP thus went through a crisis in terms of its class composition. Its social core was no longer the monopoly of the traditional Colombo bourgeoisie. Premadasa was acutely aware of this class dichotomy at the core of the party. He was sensitive to the possible backlash coming from the old guard. As a deterrent, he then embarked on building a rural mass base for the UNP, under his own personal leadership. The diversion of state resources into rural housing, rural infra-structural development, *janasaviya* and of late the re-location of industries in rural areas etc., constituted a systematic attempt to link the rural masses with the new power bloc. The UNP was thus changing its social character, becoming the party of the politically created new business class in a merger with the rural poor and the urban under class. And Premadasa himself mediated and presided-over this new alignment of class forces. In this sense, Premadasa was the true modern Bonapartist ruler in Sri Lanka.

Bonapartist Politics

Premadasa's politics was essentially one of attempting to maintain an equilibrium among the largest possible number of antagonistic forces, without alienating them. International capital may not perhaps find a better and more capable ally in Sri Lanka. He sold the IMF-World Bank economic prescriptions to the masses in a peculiarly innovative way. He even created a new political *lingua* to mask the essence of his policies with populist overtones. When he had no option but to privatize public corporations, he told the people that he was merely 'peoplizing' the wealth and property held by the state bureaucracy. With the help of an advertising company in Colombo, he introduced to the Sinhalese lexicon that amazingly evocative word, *obasathu-karanaya* ('peoplization'). While the totality of the industrial

economy in urban areas was being passed on to private capital, he went to rural areas carrying with him all the might and symbolism of the state. While negotiating with the LTTE leadership, he was also committing himself to the age-old tradition of the head of state consulting, and following the advise of, the supreme hierarchy of the Buddhist *sangha* who had, nonetheless, constantly opposed any political reconciliation with Tamils militants. He appointed himself the Minister of Buddhism, yet took a great pleasure and pride in worshipping Christian churches, Hindu temples and Islamic mosques. And this multi-religiosity of the President, though ridiculed by more sectarian Buddhist scholars, received plaudits from his non-Sinhala Buddhist admirers. In brief, Premadasa as the President sought to appeal to almost all forces in a divided and fragmented society.

Yet, there was an exception. Premadasa did not appeal to one particular segment of Sri Lankan society, the Colombo-based Sinhalese upper class with aristocratic origins as well as pretensions. This upper class, which cut across both the old guard of the UNP and the SLFP leadership, never accepted Premadasa's legitimacy as the head of the state and Premadasa knew it and reacted sharply. Premadasa called all of them *radalayas* (aristocrats), a term, although not sociologically correct, encapsulated social distance between the old and new ruling strata of Sri Lanka. Even in the last few months of his life, Premadasa liberally attacked them from public platforms, using the most invective expressions available in the Sinhalese language. He in fact thought these aristocratic elements were conspiring along with the DUNF and SLFP to oust him from power. The failed impeachment attempt of 1991, according to Premadasa, was an upper class conspiracy against him, and probably he was not very far from the truth in this particular prognosis.

Premadasa's Bonapartist strategy did not always work, although he and his advisors maintained the illusion that it did. What he managed to achieve was only a semblance of an equilibrium which had to be sustained by coercion, command and subterfuge. The Bonapartist dimension of Premadasa's rule had a very distinct process of evolution, the contours of which were perhaps defined by politico-structural as well as personal factors. In his first two years in office he resorted to a rhetoric of compromise, giving some indications of inaugurating an era of conciliatory politics. But that was merely an appeal to militant political forces in Sinhalese and Tamil societies to come forward for negotiations. Even there he did not offer them anything concrete; he merely wanted the outlawed rebels to trust him and his sincerity.

Once the JVP's threat was eliminated from the political equation, Premadasa began to demonstrate an aggressive kind of personalized political assertion, undermining his own claims to conciliatory politics. The inner-party



rebellion of 1991, which came to be known as the Impeachment, was partly a reaction to the highly personalized style of Premadasa's governance. Once Premadasa got over from the impeachment threat, his administration entered a new phase of 'command politics.' His response to impeachment crisis was not to initiate reforms in the party structure or in the administration in order to accommodate dissent or factions, but to tighten his own grip over the entire polity in a somewhat Stalin-esque style. Thus ended Premadasa's conciliatory Bonapartism. Accorded with public flattery *ad nauseam* by a group of clownish subordinates and vengeful political friends, Premadasa soon began to identify himself with the State.

Erasure of State-Regime Distinction

Premadasa's last two years as President demonstrated the culmination of one of the most negative trends in Sri Lanka's recent politics—the erasure of the distinction between the state and the regime. The credit of initiating this trend goes back to Mrs. Bandaranaike and her socialist allies who formed a coalition regime in 1970. Driven by the illusion that they had entered the path of establishing socialism in Sri Lanka, they brought the entire structure of the state under the control of their regime. Thus began a process under which state institutions—the public service, the judicial process, the state machinery, administrative institutions, the media, cultural institutions—were regime-ized. The Great Patriarch Jayewardene, although he resisted this process as the Leader of the Opposition, put to good use this control of state institutions by the regime, rather by the ruling party, to perpetuate his own tenure as the President. Mr. Premadasa continued with vigour what his two seniors did, and it was during his term (1988-93) that the cumulative effect of the process which started in 1970 could be seen with clarity.

From the point of view of democracy, one can now say in retrospect that the same political party—in this case the UNP—should never have ruled the country for such a

long, unbroken period of 15 years. But, it happened in Sri Lanka, and as a result the ruling party evolved itself into a monstrous institution of authority, domination and control, extending its tentacles over every institution of state power and public life. During President Premadasa's years, a powerful Presidential Secretariat, with its still unknown number of nondescript advisors, complemented the ruling party's role as the most powerful organization of state power. Even in distant villages, the ruling party's network of patronage and control could hardly be distinguished from the administrative machinery which traditionally enjoyed a relative autonomy vis a vis the regime.

Parallels in Death

Premadasa's tragic end in a way runs parallel to the fate of the late Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, which points to another cruel irony of Sri Lankan politics. Bandaranaike, who founded the SLFP and came to power in a massive popular upsurge, was assassinated in September 1959. Although the scion of a low-country landed-gentry clan, Bandaranaike was Premadasa's political predecessor; he changed the social bases of political power by bringing in rural and non-high caste social groups to the party as well as to the legislature. He also initiated a series of populist programs, to help the poor and the underprivileged segments of society. Both leaders could not live to the end of their full term in office. Bandaranaike was gunned down in three years and five months into his term, while Premadasa was blown to pieces within four years and three months in office. Post-independence Sri Lankan politics has devoured its two great populist leaders.

Notes:

1. Very little biographical information is available about President Premadasa. The only published work is Bradman Weerakoon, 1992, *Premadasa of Sri Lanka: A Political Biography*, New Delhi: Vikas. Written in the best tradition of bureaucratic hagiography, this text provides no significant insights into Mr. Premadasa's career as a politician.

“There we find the same attempt at a rule excessively centralised and intensely personal, the same strenuous purpose, the same overpowering consciousness of duty, the same marvellous capacity for work, the same sense of loneliness, the same persistence in a policy of distrust and repression.”

Gopal Krishna Gokhale, in a comparison of Aurangzeb, the last GrandMoghul and Curzon, the last British Moghul.