

Sri Lanka political machinations, (1986, November 15). *India Today*


INDIA TODAY
THE SOUTH ASIAN WEEKLY
ISSUED ON WEDNESDAYS
FOR THE WEEK END NOVEMBER 13-15, 1986

NEIGHBOURS

SRI LANKA

Political Machinations

President Jayewardene has once again set the cat among the ethnic pigeons. Addressing a Colombo rally last fortnight, the Sri Lankan President stated that




"the provincial councils proposal will not be presented in Parliament until the terrorists laid down their arms and accepted the concept of a unitary state". Since the acceptance of Sri Lanka's unitary constitution is common ground to all parties in the country, including the parliamentary representatives of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), as well as the Indian Government—the exceptions being the most hard-line militant groups—that demand cease as no surprise. What did mark a sharp shift in the negotiating stance was the call for a laying down of arms as a pre-condition to the introduction of the Provincial Councils Bill.

The Sri Lankan President further added: "The Indian Government and the state of Tamil Nadu should pledge their cooperation to end terrorism, with all terrorist weapons handed over to our Government, and the terrorist camps in the north dismantled." While most diplomats, many of whom represent important aid-giving countries, were dismayed over what seemed a serious setback to the already slow-moving negotiations, Indian concern became immediately evident when High Commissioner J.N. Dixit called on the President the next day. The "clarification", as it was tactfully termed, pinned the blame on the press and its natural predilection to over-dramatise the utterances of notabilities, often taking remarks out of context.

But the real context in which Jayewardene's remarks should be examined is within the increasingly aggres-

sive domestic political scene in Sri Lanka, more precisely, the newly-formed Movement for the Defence of the Nation (MUN), an unusual alliance of the influential Buddhist clergy and assorted opposition forces. Jayewardene's dramatic announcement at the Colombo



The bill needs a two-thirds majority. These MP's represent rural constituencies. Almost all of them are Sinhala-Buddhist. Not only are many of these MP's physically isolated but, in the prevailing climate of opinion, psychologically so. In December 1982, 48 per cent voted "no" in a referendum by which the UNP extended its six-year-term by another six. Now past its ninth year, it is clearly overstaying its welcome in an electorate long accustomed to regimes changing every five years. The rural MP is as vulnerable to electoral fatigue as he is to the worsening economic conditions.

Finance Minister Ronnie de Mel, engaged in his own painful negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for a massive loan, describes the situation as "grim". Next year's budget deficit is a record US \$1 billion (Sri Lankan Rupees 29 billion). Estimated revenue is just over Rupees 40 billion. Defence spending (Rupees 8.7 billion) could swallow income from tea, rubber and coconut, the three main exports. Today, 40 per cent of Sri Lanka's families live on food stamps valued at \$25 a month.

By adopting an anti-autonomy line, Bandaranaike—whose name is known far better internationally than that of any other Sri Lankan and who is far more respected traditionally by the Indian leadership—has alienated this important external constituency and thus thrown away her trump card as the only credible alternative to Jayewardene.

Behind this obvious lapse on the part of a shrewd and tested politician lies the same electoral fatigue factor that is now a problem for the ruling UNP's serrated ranks of cabinet ministers, ministers without portfolio (or not much), deputy ministers, district ministers, project ministers and plain ordinary MP's, all loaded with privileges and perks, some of which are liberally, if selectively, extended to the clergy by the state whose largesse is limitless.

Having issued a stern warning to the MUN, Jayewardene has now stiffened the

morale of his rank-and-file with his statement on pre-conditions for legislating on provincial autonomy. At the same time, he has turned his attention to the main source of external pressure and possible help, India.

The Sri Lankan Government wants Rajiv Gandhi to be more assertive and decisive in his dealings with the Madras-based Tamil moderates and militants. It was pleased to find the Indian prime minister describing its present proposals as "fairly good" at his Canberra press conference, a spectacular contrast from his Harare tirade, but was disappointed when he spoke of "direct negotiations" between Colombo and the Tamil representatives, with Delhi merely preparing the ground. Fearing that Delhi has conceded far too much to M.G. Ramachandran as the key middleman, Colombo would prefer Rajiv to assert himself in his own chosen role of mediator.

The Sri Lankan Government realises that "something extra" (at present unspecified) will have to be given to the militants in the final round of the diplomatic game, and that any deal with only the TULF, even if possible, would remain a piece of paper. This "extra" will depend largely on the Government's reading of the Opposition's effective capacity for mass mobilisation, its ability, in short, to create chronic instability in the south to make Sri Lanka ungovernable.

The militant's minimum demand is a north-east merger, a modified version of the traditional homeland concept using the Indian model, while the TULF speaks of a "single linguistic unit" with a re-drawing of provincial borders. The Government's best offer is a boundary commission within 18 months of the accord. Neither Sinhalese opinion nor the UNP's political will could support bold Nehruvian exercises of that type.

Colombo's case is that it has reached the limit which public opinion in a democracy will allow. The rest is up to India. To back up its case with diplomatic pressure, Sri Lanka made a strong but abortive bid to, have its view of "cross-border terrorism" and "separatist threats" endorsed at Harare.

Preoccupied with other, more immediate and pressing issues, Rajiv Gandhi's patience with Colombo could be soon exhausted. The primordial terrors of the Sinhalese and the worst fears of the Government will then be realised if an exhausted and exasperated Delhi makes the Tamil issue entirely a Tamil Nadu responsibility.

—MERVYN DE SILVA in Colombo

NOVEMBER 15, 1986 • INDIA TODAY