

Sri Lanka: the life and legacy of Sirima Bandaranaike

The Editorial Board
26 October 2000

To review the life of former Sri Lankan prime minister Sirima Bandaranaike, who died on October 10, is to undertake an examination of the central political issues which have shaped the island nation since it obtained formal independence from Britain in 1948. This is doubly necessary because, of the 52 years since independence, one or another member of her family has been head of state for 22 and leader of the opposition for 20.

As the current president Chandrika Kumaratunga, second daughter of Sirima, once remarked, running the state in Sri Lanka is a bit like entering a family business—a comment which might well be echoed by her estranged brother Anura Bandaranaike, a leading UNP figure who now occupies the position of Speaker in the newly elected parliament, from where he is no doubt contemplating a move to a higher position.

But the historical significance of Sirima Bandaranaike does not lie merely in the establishment of a political dynasty. Rather, it is to be found in the crucial role played by the ideology of “Bandaranaikeism”—a crude mixture of nationalist economic policies and Sinhala chauvinism—which proved so useful to the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie in combating the working class and peasant masses, and in the legacy it has left in the bloody civil war which continues to dominate the politics, economics and culture of the island.

Sirima Bandaranaike, nee Ratwatte, was born in 1916 to an aristocratic Sinhalese Buddhist family which had collaborated in the British conquest and consolidation of the Kandy Kingdom in the high country. In 1940 she married S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the scion of an equally aristocratic Christian family in the low country.

Though little of her early political views are known—she was educated at the exclusive St. Bridget's convent in Colombo and displayed an interest in social work—she cannot have been unaffected by the plantation workers struggles of the 1930s, led by the newly-formed Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which were of considerable concern both to the British colonialists and the native feudal landowners.

Her future husband, born in 1899, had a political career marked out from an early age. He entered Oxford University in 1921 and became secretary of the Oxford Union in 1923. Called to the Bar in 1924, he entered Sri Lankan politics in 1927 when he was elected to the Colombo Municipal Council. In 1931 he was elected to the First State Council, established under the British, and was returned to the Second State Council where he held the post of Minister of Local Administration.

While other members of his class, mostly English educated and contemptuous of the vernacular, were content to integrate themselves into the framework of the British Empire, Bandaranaike was making a certain reorientation, which was to have far-reaching consequences. In 1932 he formed the Sinhala Maha Sabha (Great Sinhala Council). It was based on an appeal to the “common man” and sought to revive traditional Sinhala culture. This combination of populism and Sinhala chauvinism had a definite political orientation, prompting the LSSP to warn that under certain conditions it could become a version of “brown fascism”.

The Sri Lankan elites had no particular desire for independence from British rule. Indeed they viewed the Empire as the foundation for the preservation of their own class interests and privileges. Had it been up to them, it would have continued after World War II. But across the Palk Strait, the “jewel in the Crown” had been convulsed by the struggles which accompanied the launching of the Quit India movement in 1942 and the consequences could not be avoided in the colony of Ceylon.

Moreover, the situation in the island colony was regarded as presenting particular political problems. Whereas in India the independence movement was under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie in the Indian National Congress, there was no comparable organisation in Sri Lanka. The struggle against British rule was being led by the working class under the leadership of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India, of which the LSSP had become the Ceylonese unit.

In the corridors of power in Whitehall it was understood that should colonial rule be brought to an end through a struggle led by the working class this would have dangerous implications not only for Ceylon but the entire subcontinent. It was necessary to make a rapid transition before such an eventuality.

Accordingly, Lord Soulbury was dispatched to Colombo to draft a constitution and power was formally handed over to an “independent” Ceylon in 1948. The extreme weakness of the bourgeoisie was well demonstrated by the fact that it did not even have an organised party to take the reins of government—and the United National Party had to be hastily cobbled together in 1946 for this purpose.

The Manifesto of the BLPI issued on Independence Day exposed the new political arrangements.

“The Fourth of February,” it declared, “is being ushered in with Magul Bera [a Sinhalese feast]. The festivities to follow will conclude with a fireworks display. In the interval the Governor will become a Governor-General, a Duke will have come and gone, several lakhs of our money will have been frittered away, and Ceylon will have achieved ‘fully responsible status with the British Commonwealth of Nations’. Will there be anything for the masses of this country to hail in it all?”

“The answer of the BLPI to the above question is a clear and unequivocal ‘No!’ There is nothing for the masses to enthuse over in the ‘new status’ which the Senanayake-Monck-Mason Moore combination has brought us. There is nothing for the people to ‘rejoice’ about in the ‘independence’ they proclaim. For the new status of their obtaining is not only *not* independence but also actually a *refashioning of the chains of Ceylon’s slavery to British imperialism*. It is a *continuation of British imperialism’s method of exercising that rule.*”

The manifesto, drafted by BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva, pointed to the real interests of the new rulers:

“The bourgeoisie of Ceylon have never asked for independence of Ceylon. They have asked only that they be entrusted with the full responsibility of running Ceylon as part of British imperialism’s state and estate. *And now they have got it!*”

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was a prominent member of the UNP government. Appointed to the position of Leader of the House in the new parliament, he was widely regarded as second-in-charge in the new regime. But he was aware of the hostility with which the UNP was regarded by broad masses of the population who considered it to be little more than an appendage of the former British colonialists.

Bandaranaike sought to cultivate a political base among the traditional Sinhala layers—hostile to the English-speaking elites—dissatisfied local business interests and among those who felt that independence had failed to meet their aspirations.

Conscious of the fact that the LSSP was the only party which enjoyed genuine mass support, he recognised that any party formed to counter its growth had to strive to win support from the rural masses and even sections of the working class.

As the euphoria of “independence” rapidly wore off, the UNP was becoming increasingly discredited while the LSSP was growing in influence. In July 1951 Bandaranaike announced in parliament that he was quitting the UNP to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Ceylon, he declared, had only gained “independence by name” and it was necessary to form a new party with the participation of the maha sanga (Buddhist clergy), indigenous physicians, teachers, farmers and workers. The socially deprived masses, he claimed, had to be able to play a part in political life and there had to be economic and social improvement for the “common man”.

Bandaranaike's fears about the fragility of bourgeois rule should it continue to be based exclusively on the UNP were dramatically confirmed in the “hartal” of August 1953. A one-day general stoppage, called to protest against the UNP's decision to cut the rice ration, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Korean War boom, assumed insurrectionary proportions, forcing the cabinet to meet on a British warship anchored in the Colombo harbour.

As Colvin R. de Silva explained in a pamphlet issued in September 1953, the significance of the hartal lay in the fact that it was the “first mass uprising in Ceylon's history against Ceylonese capitalist rule” bearing “the imprint of the worker-peasant alliance, the instrument of Ceylon's national liberation and social emancipation” pointing the way “to the mass seizure of power and the emergence of a workers' and peasants' government”...

“The August 1953 struggle was not primarily a strike struggle, although strikes were an important part of the struggle. The August 1953 struggle drew in and was carried on by a much wider mass than the working class. It drew in the predominantly rural masses who further gave it the character of an actual uprising in the most thickly populated and politically advanced region of the island, namely, the western and southwestern seaboard and a portion of its hinterland.”

In the aftermath of the hartal, Bandaranaike and his newly established party sought to channel the pent-up tensions of the masses in a new direction. This was the origin of the “Sinhala only” movement. Previously both the UNP and the SLFP had supported parity of status for both Sinhala and Tamil when English was replaced as the official language. But in the immediate aftermath of the hartal, the SLFP adopted the “Sinhala only” policy and made it the central plank of its campaign for the 1956 elections. Bandaranaike pledged to introduce it “within 24 hours” of coming to power.

Speaking in parliament in October 1955, LSSP MP N.M. Perera issued a prophetic warning as to the consequences of a “Sinhala only” policy. The alternative for the northern and eastern provinces if this policy were adopted would be to break away and look to India or other powers for support. It was possible, he continued, to “send an army from the South to the northern and eastern provinces, and compel them by force of arms to accept Sinhalese as the official language and Tamil as the regional language and be within Ceylon. Does any person in his sense seriously

contemplate that possibility of sending an army of occupation? If you compel these people in the northern and eastern Provinces to accept Sinhalese only as the state language and Tamil as a regional language, it will lead to so much rioting, bloodshed and civil war.”

Bandaranaike won the election in 1956 and brought the State Languages Bill into parliament on June 25, making Sinhala the state language. For the first time in the history of the country there were anti-Tamil pogroms in which scores were killed and thousands displaced.

Bandaranaike's communalist politics were combined with a series of nationalist economic measures, advanced under the banner of anti-imperialism, national economic development and at times even socialism. These included the nationalisation of some essential services such as transport and the port of Colombo and the imposition of tariffs on most imported goods. In another attempt to politically counter the LSSP, Bandaranaike moved to adopt the so-called non-aligned international policy enunciated by Indian leader Nehru and other “Third World” leaders following the Bandung (Indonesia) conference of 1955.

But having stoked the fires of communalism at home, Bandaranaike, like others before and since, was to become a victim himself, when he was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in September 1959.

The loss of its founder plunged the SLFP into a crisis. Faced with the possibility of the party disintegrating, its leaders called upon Bandaranaike's widow, Sirima, to assume the leadership—a position she was to retain for more than three decades. Summing up her role following her death, Anura Bandaranaike pointed to the pivotal role she undertook. “My mother took the decision to take to politics reluctantly,” he said. “But once she did she was far more deeply involved than the father ever was.”

Elected as leader of the SLFP in May 1960, Sirima Bandaranaike became prime minister when her party was returned to office in July 1960 with a two-thirds majority. Although sympathy for the widow is often given as a reason for the sweeping SLFP victory, Bandaranaike herself admitted that the “no contest” pact with the LSSP and the Communist Party played a decisive role.

The decision of the LSSP to undertake a “no contest” pact was a sure sign that the party, whose leaders a little more than a decade before had denounced the formation of the Sri Lankan state, were now making themselves ready to enter its service. The degeneration of the LSSP was encouraged by the development of the opportunist theories of Ernest Mandel and Michel Pablo in the leadership of the Fourth International to which the party was affiliated. Repudiating the fundamental premises of Marxism on the necessity for the revolutionary party to strive for the independence of the working class, Pablo and Mandel maintained that socialism could come about through a leftward movement of Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist forces. These conceptions were encapsulated in the slogan developed by the LSSP in the 1960s: “If Castro could be pushed to the left, why not Sirima.”

The return of the SLFP at the July elections saw Bandaranaike take up the program of Sinhala chauvinism begun under her husband. In December 1960, she introduced regulations to use Sinhala as the language of the courts to the exclusion of Tamil. New Tamil-speaking recruits to the civil service were forced to quit if they did not qualify in the Sinhala language. The movement of Sinhala settlers into Tamil-speaking areas was intensified and when the Tamil-based Federal Party organised a civil disobedience campaign to protest against these measures, the SLFP government imposed emergency laws to break it up and imprison the FP leaders.

Throughout this period, Bandaranaike maintained an anti-imperialist rhetoric and implemented nationalist economic policies, including price controls and currency regulation as well as the nationalisation of insurance, petroleum import and distribution.

But reality did not match the rhetoric and the early 1960s saw a rapid

development of the struggles of the working class to which the SLFP government responded with the use of the force of the state. The army was brought in against the transport workers strike of 1962 and Bandaranaike attacked workers' struggles as conspiracies hatched by the Federal Party, allied to subversive elements trying to overthrow the lawfully established government. Emergency rule became a normal feature of political life. Assisted by her deputy Felix Dias Bandaranaike, who has gone down in history for his remark on the need for a "little bit of totalitarianism", Bandaranaike brought in legislation to use the military in strike-breaking and to conscript qualified people for emergency work.

Emboldened by the measures being implemented by the SLFP government, elements of the civil service, the military and the police tried to organise a coup in January 1962 with the aim of ousting the SLFP government and annihilating the LSSP leadership. Although the coup failed, the repression continued and the government tried to confiscate the head office of the Government Clerical Services Union (GCSU), which had played a major role in the workers' struggles.

The increasing attacks of the SLFP government were met with a growing combativeness in the working class. On September 29, 1963 some 800 delegates, representing a million workers, ratified a charter of 21 demands, encompassing workers from the towns and plantations for the first time in the history of the island.

Confronted with the failure of repressive state measures to halt the movement of the working class, Bandaranaike embarked on a new turn. In a clear grasp of the political meaning of the LSSP's decision to undertake a "no contest" pact in the 1960 elections and its increasing adaptation to the Sinhala chauvinism of the SLFP, she decided that the way to head off the growing 21 demands movement—and the frightening prospect for the bourgeoisie of a combined struggle of Sinhala and Tamil workers—was to invite the LSSP leaders to join her government.

Explaining the decision to the executive meeting of the SLFP on May 12, 1964 she declared: "The Leftists who worked with us began a series of strikes because they did not get a place in the government. In the North ... there were communal issues flaring up. Some people have various ideas on these subjects, some feel that these workers can be made to work at the point of a gun and bayonet. Still others maintain that a national government should be formed to solve these problems. I have considered these ideas separately and in the context of world events. My conclusion is that none of these solutions will take us where we want to go. Therefore, gentlemen, I decided to initiate talks with the leaders of the working class, particularly Mr. Philip Gunawardene and Dr. N.M. [Perera]."

The entry of the LSSP into the SLFP government has gone down in history as the Great Betrayal. It was the first time that a so-called Trotskyist party had entered a coalition government with the bourgeoisie. It signified not only the bankruptcy and decay of the LSSP but, above all, of the opportunist leadership of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. Headed by Ernest Mandel, the USec had covered up all the warning signs of what was to take place, hailing the LSSP as "the largest Trotskyist party in the world".

The betrayal of the LSSP and the derailing of the 21 demands movement had immediate consequences. The position of the working class deteriorated rapidly. Having joined the government, the LSSP abandoned the defence of the rural poor as well as the Tamil minority. Other forces stepped in to fill the vacuum. In the rural areas of the South, petty-bourgeois radicals espousing the peasant-based theories of Maoism began to win increasing support. And among the Tamil communities, separatist forces, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, won a growing audience for their program of separatism as the only answer to the national oppression directed by the Colombo regime.

With the LSSP now in the government, Bandaranaike wasted no time in pursuing the Sinhala chauvinist program of her party. In October 1964 she signed a pact with Indian Prime Minister Shastri (the Sirima-Shastri pact,

as it became known) which forced 525,000 out of over 975,000 plantation workers, descended from workers brought to the island by British planters, to go to India.

Outlining the basis of her decision a year later she wrote: "The Upcountry people lost their political rights as a result of the election of Indian MPs to the seats where the Indian plantation workers predominated. These Indian plantation workers are a group of people who have received more wages and ... great privileges. The Indian workers got this better treatment from the very start; they are now enhancing it through their trade unions to an extent far exceeding what they have produced. The peasantry of the Upcountry areas is at present subjected to this foreign exploitation."

Some 16 years earlier the LSSP had opposed one of the first acts of the government of "independent" Sri Lanka—the Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949, which had rendered the plantation workers stateless. Now it was participating in a government which was forcibly deporting them.

The coalition government of 1964 lasted less than six months. Bandaranaike lost office when a group of MPs who had opposed it left to join the UNP. But Bandaranaike had not finished with the services of the LSSP. In January 1966, now in opposition, she worked with the LSSP and Communist Party leaders to organise a strike against an accord between the UNP and the Federal Party, which sought to establish a compromise with the Tamil bourgeoisie.

The late 1960s saw growing movements of the working class and Sri Lanka was no exception. In 1970, Bandaranaike's SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition was returned to power with a large majority on a wave of opposition against the UNP. Internationally, the situation was marked by the breakdown of the international monetary system established at the Bretton Woods conference of 1944. In 1967 sterling was devalued against the dollar, but the monetary crisis deepened. On August 15, 1971 President Richard Nixon ended the system of fixed exchange rates when he removed the gold backing from the US dollar. The rising inflation and oil price increases, which rapidly followed, brought new instability to Sri Lanka.

In April 1971 the growing frustration and anger—produced by unemployment, lack of educational opportunities and landlessness—which had been steadily building up in the rural areas exploded in the form of a rebellion led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The coalition government responded with the full force of the state.

Bandaranaike called in international support. The United States, the Soviet Union, China, Britain, France, India and Pakistan rallied to provide assistance in one form or another. More than 17,000 people, mainly youth, were killed and another 20,000 jailed. Two members of the Revolutionary Communist League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, were killed by police.

The repression of the JVP marked the beginning of a period of emergency rule, lasting until 1976, which was used to suppress the struggles of the working class and the poor.

One of the most far-reaching measures of the coalition government was the enactment in 1972 of a new constitution. Drawn up by LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva, who had once so powerfully denounced the "Sinhala only" campaign, the constitution enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and made Sinhala the sole official state language, nullifying the special regulations introduced by the previous UNP government in 1965, together with the Federal Party, to use the Tamil language in the courts. The Federal Party withdrew from the constituent assembly and passed a resolution calling for a separate state and in combination with other Tamil-based organisations set up the Tamil United Liberation Front. The processes which were to lead to the eruption of civil war in 1983 had well and truly been set in motion—exactly as the LSSP leaders had once warned.

Unable to meet the basic needs of the masses, the government sought

support among the most reactionary elements. The coalition regime introduced standard entry to the universities, effectively cutting the number of Tamil students. In the Northern and Eastern provinces an increased military-police presence stepped up the repression of the Tamil population.

The impact of the growing world economic crisis saw mounting attacks on the living standards of the working class and rural masses. In the aftermath of the “oil shock” of 1973-74 the government brought down austerity measures, even imposing conditions on what people could and could not eat. The cost of living rose to unprecedented heights and severe restrictions on imports led to shortages and a growth of unemployment. The government's only answer was to use its emergency powers to outlaw workers' struggles.

With the government increasingly restricting all activity by the workers organisations, LSSP leader N.M. Perera, fearful of losing all that remained of his support, criticised the government in a speech on August 12, 1975, the anniversary of the hartal. Bandaranaike announced she was removing him from the post of finance minister, compelling Perera and the other LSSP ministers to resign from the government and withdraw from the coalition. The Communist Party, the other coalition partner, stayed on until 1977.

The deepening attacks of the Bandaranaike government led to an upsurge of the working class, culminating in a general strike in 1976. The government's emergency rule began to break down. A general strike, Leon Trotsky once wrote, poses the question of power point-blank. But such a struggle for political power was anathema to the leaders of the workers organisations. Without a perspective, the general strike movement was crushed by the government.

In the general elections of 1977 the working class and rural masses registered their hostility to the SLFP, reducing it to just 8 seats out of a 168-seat parliament. While the struggles of the working class had in effect brought down the Bandaranaike regime, the absence of an independent political perspective meant that the beneficiary was the UNP, which was swept to power under the leadership of J.R. Jayewardene.

The coming to power of the UNP government took place at the start of a sharp turn in world politics. The economic crisis that rocked world capitalism in the first half of the 1970s marked the end of the post-war boom. In the advanced capitalist countries it signified the end of the program of Keynesian national regulation and social welfare concessions and, in the countries of the so-called “Third World”, the breakdown of the programs of national economic development which had been pursued over the previous quarter century.

Almost immediately upon assuming office, Jayewardene started to systematically open up the Sri Lankan economy to foreign investment and began dismantling the large state-owned sector. New policies required new forms of rule. In 1978, using his massive majority in parliament, Jayewardene brought in a new constitution to create an executive presidency, thereby concentrating power in his own hands.

And as if to underscore the fact a break had been made with the previous economic program of national economic regulation, Jayewardene brought corruption charges against one of its chief proponents, Sirima Bandaranaike, depriving her of all civil rights for some six years while the new program was set in place.

But the new regime retained one crucial strand of “Bandaranaikism”: the racist attacks against the Tamil population were intensified. In “Black July” of 1983, UNP-sponsored thugs were unleashed in a series of attacks which killed hundreds and made hundreds of thousands homeless. The July pogroms led to the civil war that has consumed Sri Lanka for the past 17 years, resulting in more than 60,000 deaths.

While Sirima Bandaranaike remained leader of the SLFP during the 1980s, her political power was much diminished with the collapse of the economic programs on which she based herself in the post-war boom. A

struggle now erupted in the SLFP for succession to the leadership, taking the form of a family conflict between daughter Chandrika and son Anura—the issue only finally being settled with the formation of the People's Alliance (PA) under the leadership of Chandrika and the departure of Anura for the UNP.

The PA regime, in which Bandaranaike functioned as prime minister until being forced to step aside last August, came to power on a wave of opposition to the UNP. But in its six years of rule it has intensified the war in the North and the East and advanced even further the pro-free market and privatisation policies initiated under the UNP.

It was somewhat symbolic that Bandaranaike should die within hours of casting her vote on October 10 in a general election marked by violence and corruption, with a large section of the country under military occupation, and with Buddhist racist and fascist organisations dominating the political agenda. It amounted to a kind of summation of her political legacy.

It would, of course, be completely wrong to see these conditions as the product of one individual. Bandaranaike was representative of a whole generation of bourgeois nationalist politicians in the former colonial countries who dominated the political stage in the last half of the twentieth century.

Her particular significance lies in the fact that, in the case of Sri Lanka, the policies she advanced were consciously developed in opposition to a socialist and internationalist perspective. Bandaranaike's death is a physical expression of the fact that the era in which representatives of the national bourgeoisie were able to present themselves as anti-imperialists, defenders of the oppressed masses and even socialists is well and truly gone. But it cannot be simply dismissed. On the contrary, the working class will have to work over and consciously assimilate its political lessons in order to meet the challenges of the new century.



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