

Grenade attack on Sri Lankan music concert kills two

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Two people—a newspaper cameraman, Lanka Jayasundera, and Dilani Maheshika, a hotel receptionist—were killed in Colombo last Saturday when a grenade was lobbed into a packed audience at “Temptation 2004”, a musical extravaganza. Another 19 people were injured by the explosion, some critically. The events surrounding this vile attack underscore the reactionary character of communal politics in Sri Lanka, and point to the extreme tensions wracking the country.

“Temptation 2004” was organised by a private company and pitched at young people. It featured well-known Bollywood actor Sharukh Khan, who is popular among Sri Lankan youth. The event held at the Race Course grounds was widely publicised throughout the print and electronic media for weeks and, on the day, attracted a crowd of around 25,000.

In the lead-up to concert, however, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala chauvinist organisation represented in parliament by Buddhist monks, raised a great hue and cry. Outrage was expressed that the event would be held on the first anniversary of the death of the leading Buddhist monk, Gangodawila Soma.

The reason for the protest was spurious for several reasons. Firstly, the actual date on which Gangodawila Soma died was December 12, not December 11 when the concert took place. Secondly, the JHU raised no objections to a series of other events, including a cross-country bicycle race and several other musical concerts, which took place on the same day as “Temptation 2004”. These did not include an Indian movie star and therefore were not deemed offensive to national and religious sensibilities.

At a press conference on December 2, JHU parliamentarian Omalpe Sobhitha declared: “We will go on a fast unto death to compel the government to cancel the Sharukh Khan show and force the government to hasten the appointment of a commission of inquiry into the death of Reverend Soma Thera.”

When Gangodawila Soma died in Russia last year, various Sinhala chauvinist organisations alleged, without a shred of

evidence, that he had been murdered by Christian fundamentalists. They mounted a campaign not only to demand an investigation, but also for legislation aimed at banning the so-called unethical conversion of Buddhists, by various Christian organisations in particular. Since early last year there have been nearly 30 violent attacks on Christian churches and places of worship throughout the country.

The extreme right-wing outfit, Sihala Urumaya, which has since transformed into the JHU, was in the forefront of last year’s protests. In the April election, the JHU won nine seats by capitalising on widespread disaffection with the major political parties, making promises to end corruption and “clean up parliament”. Since then, however, the party has been embroiled in scandals and bitter internal struggles, which have led to declining support. There is no doubt that the protest against the concert was a cynical ploy aimed at trying to revive the party’s sagging fortunes.

A front organisation called Soma Himi Chinthana Padanama organised a fast by a group of Buddhist monks two days before the concert but it was clear that the JHU backed the provocative protest. The JHU parliament group leader Athuraliye Rathana joined JHU MP Sobhitha in negotiations with concert organisers to work out a “compromise”.

After the organisers issued a formal apology, the monks called off their fast but several hundred of their supporters engaged in an aggressive protest near the venue. Violent clashes with police erupted after demonstrators attempted to storm into the concert. Only at that point did Rathana and Sobhitha, who were both present, reportedly attempt to get the crowd to disperse.

Twelve people were arrested. The protesters joined a second group at a nearby park to commemorate the death of Gangodawila Soma. Prompted by JHU leader Rathana, the crowd demanded the release of the 12 and, several hours later, the police obliged.

It was in these circumstances that the grenade was thrown into the crowd at about 11.30 p.m. Who threw it is still under investigation and no one has been arrested.

New Delhi immediately expressed its displeasure at the attack, which endangered the lives of several prominent Indian citizens who were present, including the Indian high commissioner to Sri Lanka. The Indian government indicated that it would carefully follow the progress of the police inquiry.

The reaction in the Colombo political establishment and the media, however, is just as revealing about the state of Sri Lankan politics as the attack itself.

The *Island* was preoccupied with the economic impact. “It is unfortunate that a show that would otherwise have given the country’s tourist industry a boost and a grand treat to millions of Sharukh Khan lovers had to end in disaster,” the newspaper lamented. In a similar vein, in an article entitled “A sorry day for Sri Lanka”, the *Daily Mirror* wrote: “Temptation 2004 was billed as a showpiece event that would propel Colombo as an emerging entertainment hub luring tourists.”

The United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government attempted to blame the opposition United National Front (UNF). Addressing a gathering on Sunday, President Chandrika Kumaratunga declared: “The UNF has now taken over the role of the LTTE [the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] to explode bombs in the South after failing to get [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran to do so.”

Without offering any evidence, Kumaratunga categorically asserted: “A UNF MP from Kotte was behind the bomb attack at the musical show featuring Indian artists in Colombo. The UNF was doing this because they have realised that they cannot come to power through democratic means.” A statement from the presidential secretariat warned that the incident would strengthen “the resolve of the government to root out the lawless elements in society.”

The Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—the second largest UPFA partner—took a slightly different tack. In its press statement, the JVP blamed the attack on the LTTE, claiming the LTTE leadership wanted to undermine relations between Colombo and New Delhi. The JVP alleged that the grenade attack could have been organised by “some defeated political elements who were trying to placate the LTTE”—a thinly-veiled reference to the UNF.

The government has immediately seized on the bombing to tighten security throughout the capital. Armed police and army personnel have been stationed at key points in the city and vehicles are being checked at random. There is little doubt, however, that these repressive measures will not be directed at Buddhist monks but at “LTTE suspects” and the country’s Tamil minority.

For its part, the UNF has accused the government of having a hand in the attack and being responsible for lax

security at the concert.

No one wants to point the finger in the direction of the most obvious suspects—the JHU, sections of the Buddhist hierarchy and connected Sinhala communalist groups. Even if they did not actually organise the grenade thrower, these fascistic layers are certainly responsible for creating the political conditions for such an attack.

Following widespread public revulsion over the bombing, the JHU has disclaimed any responsibility. In a statement released to the press, the JHU declared: “We have no connection whatsoever with this bomb attack or the monks who staged the fast. Some conspire to blame us but we are innocent. Sharukh Khan is a popular character in India as well as Asia. We have no interest in opposing him.” All the evidence, however, points in the opposite direction.

Just as significant is the fact that the major political parties and the media have not criticised, let alone denounced, the actions of the JHU and its associates. As far as the UPFA and the UNF are concerned, there is an immediate consideration: both are seeking to woo the JHU monks to bolster the numbers of their highly unstable alliances in parliament.

More fundamentally, the entire political establishment is deeply mired in the Sinhala chauvinism, which finds its most extreme expression in outfits such as the JHU. For more than half a century, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has exploited anti-Tamil chauvinism as the ideological cement for the state apparatus and to divide the working class. The result has been a devastating civil war that has cost the lives of more than 60,000 people.

It is only in such a political climate, thoroughly poisoned by communalism, that the JHU and its cronies could escape any serious criticism in official circles in Colombo, and, in all likelihood, any serious police investigation of its connection to the grenade attack.



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