

The Hard Road Back to Recovery

Gamini Navaratne writes from Colombo

A Role for AL

A political party whose performance at a national election falls short of its own expectation is certain to face an assessment of the factors which might have contributed to the poll results.

It seems that the Awami League (AL) which is trailing behind the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the seats captured at the last month's parliamentary election is caught in a dilemma as to how it should face up to the new realities.

To independent observers, the AL's performance at the polls has been perfectly respectable. After all, it has emerged as a solid opposition party, under a strong leadership, with its grass-root support spread from one corner of the country to another.

Significantly enough, for at least 48 hours after the announcement of the unofficial results, it seemed that an important section of the AL's leadership was ready to treat the party's performance at the polls graciously, willing to learn from its mistakes and setting the stage for a cool dispassionate study of the situation.

Then, the mood changed. Or it seemed that a somewhat negative approach to the situation that had been lying underneath the surface suddenly gained upperhand.

At a crucial meeting held on Monday with the Acting President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, a high-level AL delegation has threatened to launch a mass movement to oppose the formation of a BNP government at this stage, since, as the delegation put it, it has not yet got absolute majority in the parliament whose formation too has not yet been completed.

Meanwhile, the firmness shown by the Acting President in dealing with the AL's opposition has won much-needed support from members elected from the smaller parties which have urged upon Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed not to delay the process of transition to a democratic system of government.

It is not necessary for this paper or for the media as a whole to find new reasons in support of the position taken by the Acting President. But it is important to urge upon AL, especially its leader, Sheikh Hasina, that it will be doing the country a grave disservice if it adheres to its present negative approach.

Sino-VN Ties

While China has made steady moves towards strengthening its relations with most of its neighbours, it continues to be somewhat cool in responding to overtures from its old friend-turned-adversary, Vietnam.

It is said that Beijing's response to all these moves from Hanoi has been somewhat indifferent. However, this interpretation may not be entirely correct.

Among all the socialist countries, North Korea, Albania and Vietnam are the only three which are yet to join the mainstream of economic and social reforms. Compared to Vietnam, even Laos and Mongolia have moved forward.

QUOTES

We are not just fighting for ourselves. Maybe here the fate of the world will be decided.

- Vytautas Landsbergis, President of Lithuania at Parliament in Vilnius.

Under President Ranasinghe Premadasa the Asian island of Sri Lanka is making a valiant effort to achieve national integrity and economic viability.

Forty-three years after independence from the British, the nation is in a sorry state. Countries which gained independence 10 years later, like Singapore and Malaysia, have forged ahead economically.

Politicians of every hue and their divisive policies are to blame. Sri Lanka has nearly 25 recognised political parties for a population of 17 million.

In a sense this situation is inevitable in a country that is multi-ethnic (Sinhalese 74 per cent, Tamils (Indigenous) 13 per cent, Tamils (of comparatively recent Indian origin) five per cent, Moors eight per cent, and multi-religious (Buddhists, Hindus, Christian and Muslim whose proportions approximate to the racial divide, with the Christians coming from both Sinhalese and Tamil communities), numbering about eight per cent.

Many attempts at national integration have failed. At the root of it all is the fact that there has been no equitable sharing of state power and all that flows from it especially the fair sharing of the national cake.

The Sinhalese, who have lorded over the national scene since independence, tend to look at themselves as a super-race brought into being especially to preserve their religion, Buddhism.

Critics have called it the Mahawamsa tradition, based on the great historical chronicle by that name.

This work actually states that the arrival of the north Indian Prince Vijaya and his followers in the island in BC543 and the founding of the Sinhalese race coincided with the death of the Buddha at Kusinara in north India.

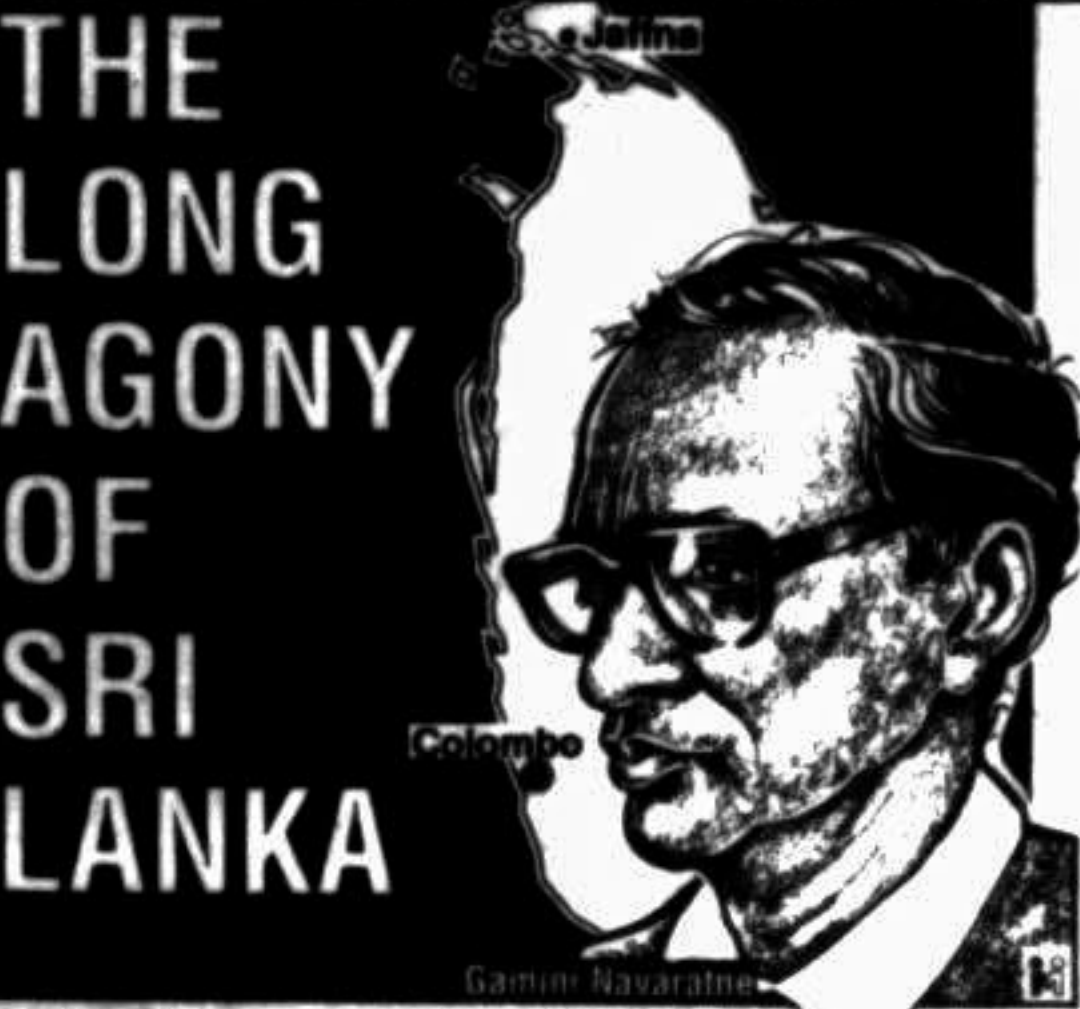
Since independence the other communities, especially the Tamils, have been treated as second class citizens—particularly with the declaration of Sinhalese as the sole official language replacing English in 1956.

Their resentment several times led to riots. The worst was in 1983 when those living amid the Sinhalese in the South were killed by the thousand and their property destroyed.

Casualties on both sides were heavy until India intervened in 1987 and pushed through a settlement offering the Tamils regional autonomy in the north-east in lieu of a separate state.

The accord signed by then President Junius Jayewardene and Indian ex-prime minister Rajiv Gandhi was unacceptable to the LTTE, which took on the 50,000-strong Indian Peace Keeping Force sent to implement the

For years now the island of Sri Lanka has been torn by inter-communal strife. Time and again efforts at national integration have failed. Thousands have died in fighting with the Tamils in the north and with Sinhalese nationalists in the south.



THE LONG AGONY OF SRI LANKA

accord by disarming the militants and helping set up a governing council for the Tamil region.

Opposition to the accord was nearly total among the Sinhalese. The Muslims, who inhabit the east, feared that they would be reduced to a minority within another (Tamil) minority.

The ultra-left and nationalist JVP-Janathá Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front)—whipped up Sinhalese-Buddhist sentiment against the accord and the presence of alien troops on Sri Lankan soil.

The JVP, led by Moscow-trained Rohana Wijeweera, paralysed the economy by calling for repeated work stoppages.

The Indian troops suffered heavy casualties at the hands of the LTTE and left in March 1989 with their mission unfulfilled. Fighting

between the LTTE headed by its supreme Prabhakaran Velupillai government forces resumed until Premadasa became president in 1988.

He offered direct dialogue with the LTTE and talks were held for 18 months until they down last June 11. The LTTE again went on the offensive.

Nearly 100,000 people have been rendered to the status of refugees, mostly Tamils. About 200,000 have taken refuge in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Their rehabilitation poses a big problem to the government, but work cannot start until the fighting ceases.

The biggest casualty in all this is the national economy and national unity. Premadasa has called for an all party-conference. The main opposition party, ex-prime minister Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike's Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the LTTE refuse to cooperate.

Bandaranaike alleges that the 1988 presidential elections won by Premadasa and the subsequent elections to parliament were not free or fair.

A five-judge bench of the Supreme Court, headed by Chief Justice Parinda Ranasinghe, is inquiring into her petition asking for the presidential election to be declared null and void.

The Gulf crisis has made matters worse for Sri Lanka. Nearly 500,000 nationals have been working in Middle East countries, about one-fifth of them in Iraq and Kuwait.

Their remittances, totalling nearly Rs5 billion a year, were a great source of strength to the economy and eased the acute unemployment problem at

home. United Nations sanctions have deprived Sri Lanka of one of its most lucrative tea markets.

Oil prices had their effect. The cost of living index which stood at 203 points in 1977 when the rightwing United National Party led by Jayewardene took power now stands at 3,100 points.

Unemployment is put at nearly 1.3 million, most of them under 30. This situation has fuelled the Tamil insurgency in the North and the Sinhalese in insurgency in the South.

The government, at the behest of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has been "restructuring" the economy, with liberalisation of import policies, privatisation of public sector enterprises and devaluation of the rupee, now 40 to the US dollar against 16 a decade ago.

Sri Lanka has borrowed heavily from the World Bank and IMF, leading to an external debt of nearly Rs175 billion. The internal debt stands at around Rs125 billion, consisting mostly of treasury bonds or, to put it more simply, by printing currency. The stark truth is that the government is broke.

Premadasa has launched poverty elimination programmes. One involves building modern villages in backward areas. About 2,000 have been completed so far.

Another-known as strength to the people aims to tackle a situation under which half the population are said to be below the poverty line, with a per capita income of only Rs11,000. A third objective is to build a million houses by 2000, giving everyone a shelter of their own.

These programmes ambitious by Third World standards, have been slowed because of the storage of funds. The defence budget is now up to Rs15 billion, nearly eight per cent of the national budget. Troop strength is up to 125,000, and the police up to 25,000.

To ensure that foreign aid flows do not dry up the government has allowed the US-led anti-Iraq alliance refuelling facilities for its ships and planes. This has compromised its renounced foreign policy and is likely to sour relations with the Arab countries backing Iraq.

One hopeful sign is that with suppression of the insurgency in the South, tourists are back in increasing numbers. Last year nearly 200,000 came half the peak figure in 1982, which was 407,230. If peace could be restored in the north-east, tourism could eclipse tea as Sri Lanka's top foreign exchange spinner.

Some politicians suggest a national government. Bandaranaike says she will settle for nothing less than fresh elections to both presidency and parliament. — GEMINI NEWS

[Exchange Rate: \$1 = Rs40.1]

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Child Labour Increasing Despite Concern

by Abdur Rahman Khan

In almost every town of Bangladesh, not to speak of the metropolis Dhaka, hundreds of children are working to support themselves or to help support their families.

According to the country's factory law, none under 16 years of age can be employed in a mill or factory. But in fact, so many of them are pulling rickshaws on the streets, working as helpers in welding or automobile workshops, carrying loads at market places or railway and steamer stations, moving dishes from table to table as waiters at hotels and restaurants, crushing stones and breaking bricks at construction sites.

Over the past and also through recent years the number of child labourers has increased manifold due to the twin problem of acute economic hardship and just ill-balanced population growth.

A number of children working in the capital city have been interrogated and many of them opined at one point that they have a large number of family members and that the father has no cultivable land on which he can depend to bear the expenses of a big family.

Jashim is one such desperate child labourer. He is about 14 years old and pulls rickshaw on the streets of the capital. He came from Jamalpur where his father is a landless farmer and has four sons and three daughters to feed.

Owner of a tea-stall on road side pavement Malek says he ran away from home to work as a restaurant waiter when he was 13 years old. Now he is about 36 but earns only 50-60 taka daily from his make-shift tea stall.

Mostafa, a boy of 12 years, working hard in an automobile workshop dreams of opening a workshop himself in future.

There are, of course, some exceptions and Alamgir, a 12-year-old boy, is a case in point. He carries tiffin-carriers for the office-goes and earns 20 taka per day. His father is a vegetable vendor and mother teaches Arabic to girls in the slums.

Dulal, 13 years old, works in the canteen of a Dhaka University students hall. He goes to a school run by Under Privileged Children's Educational Programs (UCEP) with a longing for a better job in future.

But notably, only a few child workers get or can avail of the opportunity to go to school. As a result, whatever vocations they are in now are likely to continue as permanent occupations for most of them.

Child labour of quite a different type is also in vogue with its roots firmly fixed in the caste system of the sub-continent. Niran, a 12-year-old boy from Tangal, does the job of a shoe-mender in this city.

Father of a child labourer who has seven children and sends his 14-year-old son to work, says "if the children do not work to support the family how will a poor family survive?"

Now-a-days juvenile crimes are often committed in the city as well as district towns of Bangladesh. Many are of the opinion that increase in number of these crimes has a link to the increase in child labour force.

Mrs. Khaleida Khanam, headmistress of Shahid Lt. Selim Sikhalaya as well as a committee member of a free night school at Maghbazar in the city stresses that although there is a law in the country banning child labour but it is useless. Because, the poor parents of child workers have no capacity to support their children's subsistence and education, rather they feel that if their children do not work, they will have to die by starving.

Questioned how far is it possible to check this child labour under the prevailing socio-economic conditions in the country, she replied if primary education could really be made compulsory, there might come a possibility, because of attending the schools by the children at day time. But that also confronts the possibility of immediate income for the family.

However she also opines that permanent solution to this problem is intimately linked with the development of economic condition of the people as well as stabilisation of population at a level consistent with national economy.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Lincoln sent a message to his people: "you have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy this nation while I have the most solemn one to preserve, protect and defend it." God works in mysterious ways. Lincoln's prayers were finally accepted, and peace returned to the United States of America which has grown from strength to strength ever since.

We in Bangladesh who have to day voted in the free-est possible polls, have now a unique opportunity to be on our way as a self-reliant and self-respecting nation of the world. We have already achieved near self-sufficiency in food grains. We already have basic infrastructure in place. We have primary energy resources. We have more educated men today than this country ever had. All we need is an item which does not come with PL-480 or other types of foreign aid-Patriotism!

The age of great men is gone. Now we live in the age of the anonymous patriot. If we in Bangladesh can have a larger crop of such patriots we will surely make much significant progress quickly.

The Spanish have a saying: God said take what you like out of this world; just pay the price for it! This is a profound truth. When you will be on your way after casting away shyness, timidity and fear your path will not be roses all the way. It may be fearfully difficult but the Living God will give you courage to overcome all hurdles. Work is worship. God answers everybody's prayer. A burning desire to achieve, by definition, means a high capacity for tolerating discomfort.

Men without ambition equate good life with absence of discomfort. If we love our country enough we realise that there are un-

dreamt-of opportunities for service in today's Bangladesh. Our young population is eager and willing to accept new ideas-which-work. If we exploit our natural gas, coal, crop land with our home made fertilizer and abundant water and sunshine we can bring about an age of abundance.

Let us now embark on a new way of life. Let us vow to make each one of us a good son of Bangladesh. As Lincoln said: "I like to see a man proud of his country and I like to see him so live that his country is proud of him!"

Patriot anonymous.

Intercity bus parking Sir, Dhaka city has become a virtual jungle of manoeuvring trucks, rickshaws, cars, carts, tempos and buses. The cre-

Of life and longevity Sir, This refers to the letter "Death and world record" published in these columns. We all would like to make it to the Guinness Book of Records, for whatever reason might it be. It could be for making a record for the longest hours in running swimming, singing etc. —anything.

Recently, there was a news item stating that a man, Libyan by nationality, made it to the big book, by being the tallest man.

He died of heart failure at the age of 48, a relatively young age to die, even by the standard of our country.

His height was 8ft 2 inches, so much above the

average! But sadly, he could not do so in matter of longevity. However, in his not so very long life, he did manage to achieve something i.e. entry into the big book.

He was listed as the tallest living man before his death. However, the tallest man now alive is Gabriel Monjane of Mozambique.

Life is indeed full of variety and things unusual, let us muster some remarkable in ours.

Tanveer Ahmed, Banani, Dhaka

Needed: Patriotism Sir, During the darkest period of the Civil War,

dreamt-of opportunities for service in today's Bangladesh. Our young population is eager and willing to accept new ideas-which-work. If we exploit our natural gas, coal, crop land with our home made fertilizer and abundant water and sunshine we can bring about an age of abundance.

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Reaj Ali, Dhaka