



Civil War in Ceylon

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A MERICAN HELICOPTERS . . . Yugoslav artillery . . .
British light arms . . . ammunition brought from
Singapore . . . Soviet MIGs and helicopters . . .
Indian frigates, troops and aircraft . . . army,
navy, police security forces . . .

In an exceptional example of international cooperation, this massive force has descended onto a small island half the size of Alabama to rescue its 12¼ million inhabitants from a band of rebels variously described as Guevarists and Maoists, Marxists, CIA agents, fascists, bandits and hooligans. How is it that on its first anniversary, the Ceylon government of Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike draws up its

balance sheet in blood with nearly 3000 dead, as many wounded, and its prisons and camps full to overflowing? How is it that the forces of “law and order” have come down with all their ferocity upon the same people who had helped to bring to power a progressive “left-wing” United Front government?

When the ruling reactionary United National Party suffered a humiliating defeat in the election of May 27, 1970, and was replaced by an alliance between Mrs. Bandaranaike’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (which won 90 of the 151 seats in the House of Representatives) and two parties professing a Marxist allegiance (the so-called “Trotskyist” Lanka

by Tamara Deutscher

Wide World Photos

Sam Samaja Party with 19 seats and the pro-Moscow Communist Party with 6 seats), the country was jubilant and full of boundless hopes for the future. True, the economic situation was extremely precarious. The outgoing United National Party, representing mostly the pro-Western comprador bourgeoisie, left the national cashbox nearly empty. The new government, promising to march "left and forward," assumed power when unfavorable terms of trade took a turn for the worse: falling prices for tea and rubber—Ceylon's main exports—slumped sharply, while the prices of nearly all manufactured goods which Ceylon has to import rose rapidly in the wake of worldwide inflation.

Yet there were reasons for the optimism. By the standards of Southeast Asia, Ceylon is exceptionally well off and contrasts sharply with poverty-stricken India, from which it is separated by only a 20-mile stretch of water. Its land is extremely fertile and abounds in a variety of fruits and vegetables, with the ubiquitous palm trees providing all manner of goods, ranging from raw materials for the building of primitive homes, to sleeping mats, fishing nets and ropes, from heady *arrack* to coconut milk and cooking fat. The population is highly literate and—for that part of the world—exceptionally healthy: over 85 percent of the people can read and write and their life expectancy jumped from 30 years in 1920 to over 62 years in the 1960s. Its political elite is highly educated and most of the left wing acquired a more than superficial knowledge of Marxism in their student days at English universities during the very pinky 1930s.

MAY 1970 MARKED the "spring of the people." During the first two months of its existence, the government made a few demonstrative gestures mainly in the field of foreign policy: it gave its recognition to North Korea, to the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, to the German Democratic Republic; it unceremoniously asked the Peace Corps and other U.S. agencies to leave; it suspended its relations with Israel. As to internal affairs, there were perhaps more words than deeds. The promises of the United Front election Manifesto were repeated: the free measure of rice, halved by the previous administration, was to be restored; the plantation industry was to be controlled and "re-patterned" (whatever that might mean); the foreign banks nationalized; and, last but not least, a new Constitution was to make Ceylon "a free, independent, and sovereign socialist republic" in which, of course, nationalization, planned economy and a crash program were to absorb at least some of the 700,000 unemployed (one-fifth of the labor force), among whom the most vocal and frustrated were over 12,000 university-educated young people.

Before the first proverbial hundred days of Mrs. Bandaranaike's government were over, however, it became obvious that the government was stuck in the morass of a hopeless economic slump. It was afraid to "go left," as it had promised; it was powerless to move "forward" in the old groove of private initiative. It has remained dependent on foreign capitalist aid and tied hand and foot by its strings: the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were

exacting creditors, outraged by the most modest of welfare measures which the country "could not afford," and pressing for a drastic devaluation of the rupee. In Colombo's "city" the black market was flourishing and one could get as many as 20 rupees for a dollar while the official rate was only just above Rs. 5 (and the tourist rate about Rs. 8).

The possessing classes—which by American standards possessed very little indeed—tried to keep as much foreign currency abroad as possible. In his budget speech in October 1970, the Minister of Finance announced that Ceylon's short-term foreign debts alone reached \$122 million; that the country spends \$103 million more on imported goods than it earns from exports. If one added to the trade deficit figure the cost of servicing the debts and other payments, the total resources gap would amount to \$218 million.

The measure of subsidized rice, which had played a considerable role in the election campaign, was restored, but by that time the cost of living was already so high and unemployment so widespread that thousands of people could not afford to buy even subsidized rice. The austerity budget—with "demonetization" of big value notes, the imposition of a capital levy, compulsory saving for companies and individuals, a ceiling on incomes, and similar purely fiscal devices which are prescribed by orthodox capitalist economists—was introduced by the versatile and clever Minister N. M. Perera of the so-called "Trotskyist" LSSP. Needless to say, they had as much effect as an aspirin on cancer.

BY AUTUMN 1970 it was clear that the "spring of the people" was definitely over. Most of the 1,900,000 who had voted for the old right-wing United National Party were lying low, watching with relief as the threat of socialism receded. But those who had voted for the left, especially for the so-called Marxist parties—the LSSP and the Communists—were more and more loudly demanding that the country be taken on the promised road to a "free, independent, socialist republic" and out of the mire of neo-colonialism into which it was sliding.

The rumble of drums, warning the government that it was being outflanked on the left, was heard very early—in August 1970. To forestall the danger Finance Minister N. M. Perera fired (or rather misfired) the first shot against a youth movement quite wrongly nicknamed Guevarist, branding it as a CIA agency. This accusation was so ridiculous that it smacked of cheap sensationalism. The "Guevarists," in the glare of the spotlights turned on their organization, presented themselves to the public. They expounded their ideas and ideals, their aims and their political *desiderata* to anybody who wanted to listen.

What astonished both the members of the group as well as their opponents was the number of uncommitted people who did want to listen. The meetings of the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (the People's Liberation Front) were drawing bigger and bigger crowds in such disparate locales as Colombo's Hyde Park, in the industrial suburbs of the capital as well as in the provinces, in Ratnapura, the center of rubber plantations, in Runawella, Kegalla, and Galle. The JVP and their sympathizers marched, carrying pictures of Mao and Guevara, Castro and Lenin, Ho Chi Minh and

Trotsky. Their demands and slogans at that time were not much more revolutionary than the pre-election promises made by the left-wing "Marxist" parties: they wanted to push the government on "to the road of Marx and Engels," nationalize all foreign assets, take over foreign-owned plantations, develop all natural resources and end the country's dependence on the duo-culture of tea and rubber.

THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION FRONT, under one name or another, has been in existence since 1965 and conducted some semi-clandestine propaganda and educational work under the previous government. During the election campaign of 1970, in which its members supported the United Front, some of their militants were arrested under the all-too-familiar and well-worn pretext of "preparing a plot" allegedly meant to disrupt, with violence (of course), the peaceful processes of democracy. This accusation proved to be so illogical that it turned against the accusers. If anybody had an interest in "endangering the democratic process" it would surely have been the losing, not the winning, side.

Curiously enough, the doors of the jail were not opened immediately after the United Front's victory. An intriguing poster campaign, demanding the release of the prisoners, was needed before the leader of the movement, Rohan Wijeweera, was set free. Intelligent, educated, full of youthful energy, and an excellent speaker, Wijeweera at once acquired enormous popularity. Son of a pro-Moscow Communist, he had been a student at Lumumba University in Moscow. During the Sino-Soviet split he took a pro-Chinese position. When his political holiday in Ceylon was over, he found himself at the point of no return: his visa for Moscow was not renewed. His pro-Moscow line was at an end; his subsequent pro-Maoist period did not last long either. He appeared to give all his allegiance to the cause and to none of the leaders in power.

His group, which was quickly gaining in numbers and fame, consisted mainly of jobless students or ex-students who made it their business to conduct educational and propaganda work among the plantation workers and the Sinhalese peasantry. The "teachers of socialism" had an easy relationship with their "students." The Sinhalese masses view the intelligentsia with respect and without that sullen distrust which so often characterizes the attitude of the Western proletariat towards the educated. Also, the "educators" had retained close ties with the rural population; most of them had come from working-class homes or peasant huts and, probably encouraged by their elders, had taken full advantage of the university education provided free by the state.

Some genuine Marxists refrained from joining the Wijeweera organization because they could detect in it slight tones of Sinhalese nationalism, and in a country where the racial tension between the depressed Tamil minority (20 percent of the population) and the ruling Sinhalese majority (65 percent) is never far below the surface, the ear becomes especially attuned to such nuances. Another limiting factor in the Front's activities was the adherence to the theory of rural "foci" of the revolution: the JVP saw the peasant,

not the industrial worker, as the main agent of social change.

However, one should not imagine that because Rohan Wijeweera and his Front occupied a great deal of space in the bourgeois press there were no other groups and organizations which felt frustrated and betrayed by the timidity and incompetence of the government. There was the Fourth International of Bala Tampoe, which never expected anything from the United Front and had not even taken part in the electoral campaign; and there was the Young Socialist League, with strongholds among the mainly Tamil plantation workers. When in December 1970 the People's Liberation Front concluded some sort of alliance with the two groups which could be accused neither of Sinhalese chauvinism (Tampoe himself is a Tamil) nor of underestimating the role of the urban industrial worker, their influence spread rapidly over the country, from the Tamil tea pickers to the cotton weavers of Velona factory in Colombo.

HOW NUMEROUS is the People's Liberation Front? How strong? How well armed and by whom? How determined was it to seize power? Was it really prepared and ready to overthrow the existing system, was it really ready to seize power by an armed uprising? Is Wijeweera or Tampoe another Lenin, able to build a revolutionary party in just a few months, when it took Lenin himself well over 15 years? Perhaps there is a Ceylonese Castro among the leaders of the Front? Could he have been as dangerous to Mrs. Bandaranaike's mild parliamentary regime as the real Castro was to the rotten dictatorship of Batista?

Mrs. Bandaranaike said that the young guerrillas, "backed by big money, diabolic minds and criminal organizers," were being used by "a gang of power-hungry, bloodthirsty, and treacherous schemers." Her communist Minister of Housing, Pieter Keuneman, chimed in with the warning that the manipulators were trying to set up a fascist dictatorship. How did it come about that against these "manipulators" and "schemers" the otherwise inert government could mobilize so much energy, show such ferocity in battle, secure for shooting and bombing the cooperation of five governments—the American, the Russian, the British, the Yugoslav and the Indian—the same governments which it is so difficult to bring together for peaceful purposes?

Despite the strict censorship and the expulsion of some respectable bourgeois correspondents, a great deal of information comes out of the embattled country, but it seems contradictory, confused and confusing. A few days after Commander-in-Chief of the Ceylonese Army General Sepala Attygalle claimed that the security forces had successfully crushed the insurgents, heavy artillery was brought out against them. No sooner were we led to believe that only "rural pockets" in southern and central Ceylon were still in the hands of the rebels than five Russian helicopters and two MIG fighters, complete with 60 "instructors" and "technicians," were sent to help rout the guerrillas.

It is even difficult to make sure who—the civilian government or the army—is in control of the country. It is not the government but the army officers who "rule out a truce with the insurgents." While Mrs. Bandaranaike is on the defensive in the face of world opinion and accuses the

world press of unfair reporting, army officers boast that "once we are convinced prisoners are insurgents, we take them to the cemetery and dispose of them." "We have learned too many lessons from Vietnam and Malaysia. We must destroy them completely," Lieutenant Colonel Cyril Ranatunga was quoted as saying. These and similar statements were, of course, repeatedly denied by the government.

THE EVENTS WHICH culminated in bloody civil war and foreign intervention now seem far away and quite insignificant. During some skirmishes outside the American Embassy in Colombo on March 7, 1971, a policeman was stabbed. It was never made clear who demonstrated, and who killed the policeman. Were there some Maoist militants who wanted to show their solidarity with Hanoi? Or perhaps some ardent Buddhists, thinking with horror of the fate of their brethren in newly invaded Laos? To maintain law and order, Mrs. Bandaranaike brought out the army. Ten days later a state of emergency was declared and a 30,000-strong security force was mobilized. The People's Liberation Front was outlawed, its main leaders arrested, and a prolonged curfew imposed upon the entire country. Despite general nervousness, the situation did not seem to be fraught with too great danger.

The London Guardian saw Mrs. Bandaranaike "using a sledgehammer to crack a rather small nut," and challenged her to produce all available evidence of a "concerted plan for revolution." The Economist irreverently suspected that "Ceylon's accelerating economic difficulties may be the real reason behind the imposition of the emergency." In Colombo there was a frantic search to find out who was supporting and arming the guerrillas, whose numbers and strength seemed to be growing daily. As if to add a touch of the grotesque to what the conservative Daily Telegraph termed "a bizarre spy-thriller plot," it was revealed that at least 200 Chinese technicians were just then engaged in constructing, right in the heart of Ceylon, an elaborate building to the memory of Mrs. Bandaranaike's late husband, assassinated by a fanatical Buddhist monk in September 1959. "This has been Peking's Trojan horse," was the cryptic comment from a government official.

After a process of elimination, the North Koreans were alleged guilty of supporting the guerrillas and were expelled from the country. Would the Liberation Front now have to add to their banners the little-known portrait of Kim Il Sung?

Currently it is not so much the guerrillas and their bombs as foreign intervention that threatens to change the small island into a powder keg. The Russians have stepped in to support Mrs. Bandaranaike and her Communist and so-called "Trotskyist" LSSP Ministers, thereby forcing the Maoist "Trojan horse" to harness itself to the other, the revolutionary, chariot. But Mao has already proved that his revolutionary virtues are valid as long as there is no occasion to sin. The debacle visited upon the 500,000-strong Indonesian party which followed his advice should still weigh on his revolutionary conscience [see RAMPARTS, October 1970]. There was not much dogmatic purity in his relations with General De Gaulle, or in his friendship with the ultra-reactionary Ayub Khan, or, quite recently, in his calculated support for the Karachi government of Yahya

Khan against the East Pakistani secessionists [see RAMPARTS, June 1971].

To the rescue of Mrs. Bandaranaike rushed also India, her nearest neighbor. Although there is not much love lost between the two, Mrs. Gandhi was anxious to secure for herself some reciprocity in case her own Naxalite guerrillas became more active [see RAMPARTS, April 1970].

FOR THE WESTERN powers, the acquisition now of a "stepping stone" in the Indian Ocean is a real godsend. The building of the "limited naval communication facility," as the planned Anglo-American base on Diego Garcia (between Ceylon and Mauritius) is euphemistically called, may take at least three years. In this context it should probably be recalled that in Singapore in December it was precisely Mrs. Bandaranaike who invited the British and the Americans, as well as the Japanese and any other interested country, to form a joint naval force in the Indian Ocean. At the time it was thought that such a force could not be effectively organized for another decade.

Now, however, there are innumerable pretexts under which the "Pearl of the East" can easily be changed into an imperialist aircraft carrier: the much-talked-of danger of the Soviet fleet in the Indian Ocean may serve as one pretext. But the favorite one will probably be the competition between Russia and China, both wishing to extend their influence in Asia and perhaps driven to "fighting a proxy war with each other through their respective friends. . . ." The Economist, which reasons in this way, ends its article on a high moral note: "It would be a strange abandonment of what the West says it stands for if it left southern Asia to a two-sided competition between Russia and China."

How, in present circumstances, with 60 Soviet "instructors and technicians" in Colombo, Russia can accuse China of "meddling in the affairs of Ceylon . . ." and "betraying the communist world's interests" remains a puzzle which should be pondered deeply by both the pro-Moscow Communist P. Keuneman, who is in the government, and the pro-Peking Communist leader N. Shanmugathan, who is in jail.

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Ceylon, with her jungles, mountains and rocky redoubts, can be ideal guerrilla country. A glance at history may prove instructive: The West "discovered" Ceylon in 1505. The first to settle on her shores were the Portuguese; after 135 years they were ousted by the Dutch, who had gained control of the Maritime Provinces. Then in 1796 came the British, who opened up much of the interior of the country; but it took them nearly 20 years of hard fighting—two Kandyan wars—to conquer the independent Sinhalese kingdom perched high in the mountains covered by primeval forests and protected by boulders and rocks. What then does the future hold for guerrillas in Ceylon?

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