

War clouds on the horizon in Sri Lanka

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

On the surface, the constitutional crisis in Sri Lanka, brought about by a group of renegade members of Parliament belonging to the ruling United National Party (UNP), is the product of a continuing conflict between the Oxbridge-educated upper crust Sinhala elites and the lower strata of the Sinhala community, represented by President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

Beneath the surface, things are considerably more murky. There is certainly a concerted move to topple President Premadasa, on the charge of usurpation of power, which is being led by two protégés of former President Junius Jayewardene, Gamini Dissanayake and Lalith Athulathmudali. Premadasa, for his part, has reacted like a street-fighter and is pulling out all stops, including the charge that his ouster is being orchestrated by India, to beat back the assault.

But it isn't exactly a straight fight. There is a curiously coincidental series of moves under a "human rights" banner to revive the Sinhala terrorist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), all but extinguished by Premadasa, and an overlapping web of international intrigue in which the British hand is already clear.

It is impossible to predict the outcome of the battle at this writing, or to foretell just what it will mean for this weary little island nation, torn by ethnic strife for the past eight years. But it is safe to assume that with the collapse of Soviet power and the resurgence of the Anglo-Americans following the Persian Gulf war, Sri Lanka's strategic significance has not been overlooked by those busy mapping a "new world order."

Impeachment demanded

In a quiet coup of a sort, Dissanayake and Athulathmudali and their followers got together with the main opposition party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), whose political influence has been in decline since the early 1980s, and produced a list of charges against their own President, which was then quietly handed over to the Speaker of the Parliament on Aug. 28. The charges concluded with the demand to start impeachment proceedings against President Premadasa. The crux of the indictment is that "the President has assumed for himself powers which are not vested in the office of the

President by the Constitution."

Subsequently, Athulathmudali revealed that in fact the group sought abolition of the country's presidential system, in favor of "restoring the sovereignty of the Parliament"—i.e., reintroduction of British-style parliamentary democracy. Ironically, it was the dissidents' mentor, Jayewardene, who had supported establishment of the "executive presidential system" in 1978, and who reaped benefits from it throughout the 1980s, when he was President.

As it stands at this writing, Premadasa has convincingly demonstrated that the dissidents do not have sufficient votes to bring him down, and has withdrawn his objection to a referendum on the executive presidency. His fiery charge that the impeachment move was inspired by India promptly brought the Buddhist clergy, otherwise suspicious of his efforts to resolve the Tamil ethnic problem, to his side for the time being.

But as the dispute drags on, the charges and counter-charges are becoming more ugly. At the outset, President Premadasa, who banned casino gambling a year ago, accused the dissidents of having taken money from casino owners to stage the rebellion. Now the dissidents have produced a photo of one Joe Sim, a Singapore-based casino owner who was deported from Sri Lanka, meeting with the President's wife and ministers loyal to Premadasa.

In another exposé, the dissidents charged that the Premadasa government had armed the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). "The late Ranjan Wijeratne [then minister of defense] complained to me that he was unhappy at the decision to give arms to the LTTE to fight the IPKF," Athulathmudali, who resigned recently as Premadasa's education minister and who had been Jayewardene's security chief, told a press conference Sept. 3. He said the cabinet had not been informed of the decision to arm the LTTE, and added that in the event of an inquiry, many Army people would testify to this.

Dissanayake, who was never taken into the Premadasa cabinet, went a step further, charging that the LTTE was given arms even after New Delhi announced the withdrawal of the IPKF. Premadasa had opposed the 1987 accord signed by President Jayewardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, which had provided for Indian military intervention as part of a phased plan to resolve the ethnic strife between Tamil and Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka. It was Premadasa who oversaw its termination and the end of the Indian mediation efforts. Indian officials had earlier accused the Premadasa administration of such duplicity.

Move to revive JVP terrorists

Curiously, the move to oust Premadasa was preceded by a series of moves over the past six months to revive the JVP, the Sinhala terrorist group with Maoist ideology that came into its own during the tenure of Mr. Jayewardene, when the

civil war between the Tamils in the north and the Sinhala community took a violent form. The 1983 riot in the capital of Colombo—when indiscriminate killings of Tamils and looting and arson of Tamil property set the stage for an all-out war between the two communities—was allegedly carried out by the JVP.

Although the allegation, that President Jayewardene had used the JVP to execute that riot, was never substantiated, it is nonetheless a fact that it was during his tenure that the JVP grew from its localized southern stronghold to menace the entire country. During 1986-88 the JVP killed thousands, many of them members and leaders of the ruling National Party. From the outset of his presidency, by contrast, Premadasa made destruction of the JVP's influence a priority. His defense minister, Ranjan Wijeratne, sacrificed his own life in a ruthless annihilation campaign against the terrorist group that was by and large a success.

On Feb. 19 of this year, a bid was made, with international backing, to revive the JVP. A meeting of women from different parts of Sri Lanka in Colombo was declared illegal by the Premadasa government. The women formed the "Mothers Front" as a rallying point for the JVP—to the applause of diplomats from Britain, the United States, Germany, Canada, and Australia, whose governments had begun a campaign against the Premadasa government for alleged human rights violations.

Soon after, in early March, a delegation from Amnesty International visited Sri Lanka. Conveniently, Defense Minister Wijeratne, who had described Amnesty International as "a terrorist organization," was dead by then. Amnesty's representatives held discussions with presidential adviser Bradman Weerakoon, Defense Secretary Cyril Ranatunge, and Inspector General of Police E.B. Pereira.

Aristocrats and international intrigue

One local weekly has charged that Athulathmudali has been in contact with a "Western embassy" since he resigned from the Premadasa cabinet to lead the attack against his boss. Athulathmudali has issued a routine denial, but the charge itself can hardly be considered earthshaking.

The Sinhala elite—in particular the aristocratic *goigama* community to which Jayewardene, Dissanayake and Athulathmudali all belong—has always been close to its former British rulers. Its members are educated in Britain and, like Gamini Dissanayake when he was dropped from the Premadasa cabinet, run to London on "sabbatical" at the drop of a hat. "The fact remains," an Indian analyst commented, "that Sri Lanka's elite, which had taken on the mantle of authority from the British, has never reconciled itself to Mr. Premadasa's humble origins." Furthermore, he had almost completely marginalized them politically.

The other side to it is the well-known fact that British diplomats in Sri Lanka publicly claim that, since the country is a former British colony, it is in their sphere of influence.

The British government's involvement in Sri Lanka reached an all-time high in the mid-1980s, with the growth of the JVP and the war with Tamil secessionists. Ironically, Haim Divon, the head of the Israeli interest section based in the American embassy in Colombo, complained to a *Hindustan Times* reporter that although the Israelis were being cursed internationally for their involvement in Sri Lanka, the British were giving "much more assistance" in the war to contain the Tamils.

It was during this time that Athulathmudali, as Jayewardene's National Security Minister, brought British "ex-Special Air Services people and Israeli Mossad experts into Sri Lanka to train commandos.

The case of David Gladstone

Against this backdrop, the peculiar case of David Arthur Gladstone is of more than passing interest. On May 30, a little more than a week after former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated, the Sri Lankan government declared British High Commissioner Gladstone *persona non grata*. The Premadasa government wanted to expel the envoy on charges of "unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka," but gave in to pressure from London to let Gladstone depart under his own steam.

According to reports, Gladstone, who masquerades as a human rights activist, created a sensation when he visited some polling booths in Matara district on May 11 and lodged a report with police that malpractices were being carried out by ruling UNP supporters on behalf of the local member of Parliament, H.R. Piyasiri. President Premadasa lashed out at Gladstone, without naming him, at a function with foreign diplomats. "There are those who still think they are our colonial masters," he fumed, accusing such types of interfering with the country's sovereignty.

Indeed, Gladstone's activity was highly improper for a well-trained diplomat, who is the great-grandson of the late British prime minister and a blueblood at that. Gladstone's diplomatic career included a stint at the Middle East College for Arabic Studies and a long tour of duty in various Arab countries. Gladstone's praise by Lord Taylor of Gryfe in the House of Lords in January underscores his value to the service.

There are several more elements to the case. It seems that Member of Parliament Piyasiri had drawn Gladstone's ire with the accusation that he had held meetings with drug traffickers. Significantly, Gladstone had been posted earlier as consul general in Marseilles, France—the prime heroin export outlet, when the French started dealing with Southeast Asian opium. Marseilles became an important heroin-refining and exporting point—thanks in part to the takeover of the dockworkers union by the international wing of the AFL-CIO in the 1960s—and remains so to this day.

It is a fact that both the JVP and the LTTE deal with drugs to buy guns and explosives.