Enduring Legacy of Former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga

Authors: Srimal Fernando and Pooja Singh*

A long and difficult election journey for uncountable numbers of Sri Lankan politicians and for party supporters of Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP) had proceeded in June 1994. That year was a turning point in Sri Lanka’s politics as well as for the SLFP led by Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (CBK) the daughter of two Sri Lankan Prime Ministers. Chandrika won the presidential elections by 62.28 percent and where the People’s Alliance (PA), a coalition with SLFP won electorates winning the race in 159 constituencies out of the 160. Immediately, after her swearing in as President, Chandrika seized the initiative and formed a coalition government with leftist parties led by the People’s Alliance (PA). She thus became the Chairperson of the SLFP. Concerns about Sri Lanka’s international legitimacy played an integral role in Chandrika’s policy priorities as soon she became President. At that time, the ethnic conflict and socio-economic well-being of the Sri Lankan multi-cultural society were the fundamental underlying questions the country was facing. Former Sri Lankan President was always grateful for any ideas to solve the ethnic problem no matter where the suggestion came from. Given these features and trends, former Sri Lankan President immediately aspired to solidify the Sri Lankan Foreign Policy. In this context, the Bandaranaike – Nehru and Gandhi relations has been one of the main features in Indo – Lanka relations for the past seventy years.

In all of this, President Chandrika appeared to have reflected both perspectives of the rural masses in which she had lived during much of her time in the Island nation and Bandaranaike’s family legacy which she had grown up. In Sri Lanka, within the political traditions, the cultural values of majoritarianism are embedded deeply especially within the Sinhalese society. At the same time, Chandrika was aware about the high level of popular political situation about the national question among the Sri Lankan voters. Chandrika persuaded mainly the Sinhalese voters to go for a peaceful settlement with the Tamil community mainly living in the North and Eastern provinces. Her government held several rounds of peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also known as Tamil Tigers which lasted for a short time.

The Sri Lankan government feared about stumbling into a full scale confrontation after the fragile peace talks collapsed. In 1995, Sri Lankan forces captured the strategically important Jaffna Peninsula. Hence, this topic among Sri Lankan politicians were bitterly debated. Despite the enormous challenges, Former President Kumaratunga took on her two term Presidency and gracefully transferred her presidential powers to the next leader. Even today, this democratic transition of presidency is still considered an overwhelming
success for Sri Lanka. However, her Presidency has been slow to respond to new realities due to various reasons.

During the December 1999 presidential election, an unanticipated event played a critical role for the first time since 1994 with a bomb blast and assassination attempt on the former president by the Tamil Tigers. The Presidential election process was severally damaged in the final stages of People’s Alliance (PA) election campaign even before a new President was sworn in. Few days later, amidst emotional support Chandrika won the second term. The issue of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka above all topped the list of voter’s concerns. Nevertheless, the major efforts of Chandrika to solve the ethnic problem encountered immovable opposition mainly from UNP. The Parliament’s reaction to the peaceful settlement towards the ethnic question split along predictable ethno geographic and party lines especially with SLFP and UNP Parliamentarians.

When Mangala Moonesinghe chaired a parliamentary Select Committee on the ethnic conflict, the proposal to solve the national problem was rejected mainly by the opposition, the United National Party (UNP). The UNP’s rhetoric strategy to solve the national question was a fiasco at that time. In addition, Chandrika’s government was having difficulties in bringing a peaceful solution to the country’s security situation due to constant attacks by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In 2001, former president’s popularity continued to sour. The UNP leadership under Premier Ranil Wickramsinghe came into power in 2001. President Kumaratunga could not escape the association with the new Prime Minister Wickramsinghe’s UNP government from 2001 to 2003. For the first time in Sri Lanka’s Parliamentary history, sharing power between two opposing parties was therefore an unfamiliar experience. During this period, a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) was signed between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE with the facilitation of the Norwegians. Three years later, a realignment with PA- Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) formed the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) in 2004. In the general election of April 2004, the former president’s party regained power and Mahinda Rajapaksha was appointed as Prime Minister. Despite the enormous challenges during Chandrika Kumaratunga’s presidency was still considered an overwhelming democratic success.

Over the years, these strong linkages have proved most enduring and have taken several forms. Under the leadership of president Kumaratunga after signing the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and Indo-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA) set the stage for Sri Lanka to increase the bilateral trade figures to US$ 5.2 billion in the coming decades. It seems probably that Sri Lanka under the leadership of Chandrika Bandanaraike Kumaratunga prepared the ground for stable Indo-Sri Lanka relations and a conducive environment for a possible trading bloc. Hence, one could argue that her presidency represents Bandanaraike and Gandhi’s legacy. In late years of her presidential era the SLFP’s interparty unity was weakened. Her immediate successor was Mahinda Rajapaksha.

Looking back at her path to presidency was not very easy. In 1959, Premier S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the father of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga was assassinated by Taldewe Somarma Thero, a Buddhist monk. This attempt on her father reinforced the
socialist democratic forces to bring her mother, Sirimavo Bandaranaike into politics. She was a close family friend of the then Indian Prime Minister Nehru and Indira Gandhi. After the defeat of Sirimavo Bandaranaike and SLFP in 1978, the party returned to power in 1994 after a gap of seventeen years. Unfortunately, history repeats itself after the assassination of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1988, her film star husband Vijaya Kumaratunga was assassinated by the Marxist rebels. This day was called as the black Thursday in Sri Lanka’s political history. On the day of the Vijay Kumaratunga’s funeral, over 200,000 people came to express their grief in solidarity with Kumaratunga’s legacy. The emotional situation catapulted her to be a suitable alternative political leader and a force to break the deadlock of UNP’s autocratic rule. Mrs. Kumaratunga’s road to greater prominence in Sri Lanka’s politics began as the Chief Minister of Western Provincial council.

The decisions of yesterday Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga took or implemented during her presidency from 1995 to 2005 are only the starting points of Sri Lanka getting adjusted to a new trend in executive presidency to unite the nation under a democratic system. If one is to analyze these three Presidents SLFP had produced so far, Chandrika Kumaratunga was one of the most pragmatic political visionaries who was able to influence Sri Lanka’s democratic transition foreign policy and uplift the well-being of the rural masses in the South Asian island nation.

In the general election of August 2015, this relatively stable party system changed dramatically and new trend in parties arose. One of the major consequences of the fragmented party system in Sri Lanka and declining UNP-SLFP main stream national party hegemony has been the growing concerns to produce stable governance system within a democratic system for the island nation. Today, there is further subdivision with the main national level parties. The consequence was that the relatively stable UNP, SLFP, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) party model gave away to new parties like SLPP led by Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Tamil People’s Alliance (TPA), a break-away of TNA led by C.V. Vigneswaran. For example, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, a break-away of SLFP party policies overlaps considerably with Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) mandate. However, over the years due to these divisions there has been contrasting views from certain section of the SLFP members about Chandrika’s leadership.

Hence, it is a time for discussion and consultation among the SLFPs and the followers of the Bandaranaike’s party doctrine. The SLFP must produce simple solutions to simple problems that is affecting the stability of Sri Lanka. Chandrika Bandaranaike tenure as president of Sri Lanka distinguished above all by her foreign Policy and also attempting to reconcile with all communities living in South Asian island nation.

Srima Fernando a research scholar at Jindal School of International Affairs, India and an editor of Diplomatic Society for South Africa and Pooja Singh, a scholar of Masters in Diplomacy, Law, Business at Jindal School of International Affairs, India.