SWRD Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka: Commemorating the 120th birth anniversary of SLFP founder

By Srimal Fernando, 11 January 2019

The year 1951 was a turning point in Sri Lanka’s political history when a split happened within the United National Party (UNP). In a stunning political move SWRD Bandaranaike resigned from his cabinet post and crossed the floor in the Parliament to the Opposition. At the same time his popularity began to rise within the Sinhalese rural masses as Bandaranaike launched a centre-left political party called Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

This is hardly the whole story however, since the political change, a slow but increasing tide of blue wave began when the SLFP membership increased compared to the centre right United National Party (UNP). This background paved the way for Sinhala nationalists such as S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, D.A. Rajapaksa and Philip Gunewardena to form an alliance in order to topple the UNP government that was ruling the nation from the time of independence.

In Sri Lanka voters do not always behave as predicted and by 1956 the chances of the SLFP backed leftist government coming to power remained very high. On the other hand elections remained a matter of speculation but there was no indication that the United National Party (UNP) had lost any influence with the rural masses of the country.

Having succeeded in their mission, the SLFP came into power in 1956. SWRD Bandaranaike became the new Prime Minister with a Sinhala nationalist base and was backed by what were known as the five forces: the clergy; teachers; physicians; farmers and the working class. The general elections in April 1956 brought a sea change in the country’s foreign policy and was a significant departure from the previous regime’s pro-Western policy. Premier Bandaranaike’s approach to foreign policy was that the proper position for Sri Lanka is to follow a neutral policy and non-aligned with any power bloc. On this basis he wanted to be “friends of all, enemies of none.” A notable feature in Bandaranaike’s policy soon after becoming Prime Minister was his request that the British withdraw their bases in Sri Lanka. As a result, the government of UK transferred to Sri Lanka the Royal Base in Trincomalee and the Air Force Station at Katunayake. At the Commonwealth Prime Minister’s conference in 1956, Bandaranaike declared his intent of making Sri Lanka a republic while remaining in the Commonwealth, as India had. Thus, foreign policy was taking on a new dimension of anti-colonist notion amplified by the Bandaranaike – Nehru joint communiqué of May 1957 expressing
concern about “development in some parts of Western Asia” and that people of those parts should be left free to solve their own issues.

In contrast to the former UNP regime, the SLFP government’s foreign relations now tilted towards the Soviet Union and China. Bandaranaike and his counterpart in India, Indian Prime Minister Nehru were not only close friends but also shared an identical view on world affairs. This relationship helped bridge the gap. However, Nehru and Bandaranaike championed the concept of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) which brought together mostly developing nations who preferred to stay away from either power bloc. Furthermore, due to Bandaranaike’s close association with the socialist bloc, China became a close friend of Sri Lanka for the first time.

In keeping with his election promises to the majority Sinhalese who brought him into power, he passed the Sinhala only Act in 1956 making Sinhalese the official language of the country. Hence, this new Act was vehemently opposed by the minority Tamils leading to riots. Meanwhile the Tamil Federal Party led by S.J.V. Chelvanayakam began to demand for minority rights. Chelvanayakam pressed for devolved power within a federalist structure for the Northern and Eastern provinces of Ceylon where most of the minority communities live. This demand was strongly opposed by Sinhalese Nationalists. Bandaranaike realizing the gravity of the impact of the official languages Act attempted to diffuse the prevailing hostilities between the two communities. He made a pact with Chelvanayakam in April 1958, allowing for the use of Tamil as the official language in Tamil speaking Provinces. This pact was strongly opposed by the UNP led by the then Finance Minister J.R. Jayewardene which led to Bandaranaike nullifying the pact. What followed were the first ethnic riots since independence known as the 58 riots targeting the minority Tamil community. At that time Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) society found itself ill prepared to deal with the troublesome issues.

Prime Minister Bandaranaike’s assassination on September 26, 1959 by a Buddhist priest Somarama Thero once again changed Ceylon’s political discourse and its foreign policy directions. The assassination of SWRD Bandaranaike in 1959 led to a decade where the political thinking was divided between the Socialist leaning party and the Western thinking liberal party. As a nation Sri Lanka is moving away from a conflict past to a progressive future. There is hope that political leaders and members of the SLFP will learn from their mistakes and finally establish a unified leadership. In Sri Lanka politics remained unpredictable. It is obvious that SLFPs expansion was a reflection on the principals laid sixty seven years ago by SWRD Bandaranaike that altered the political course of Sri Lanka in a new direction. In years ahead the role of SLFP leadership will play an increasingly significant role in unifying the nations multicultural spirit.

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