

Will Indo-Sri Lankan Accord survive the election?

by Susan Maitra

In two separate incidents on Oct. 10, some 60 people were killed in Sri Lanka. Forty-five Sinhala villagers in the north were butchered by the Tamil extremist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and at least 25 were killed in the south, as nationwide strikes against the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, called by the Sinhala extremist Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), led to clashes with police.

The date is significant: Oct. 10 should have been a benchmark in resolving the five-year-old ethnic crisis on the island. On that day the merger of the Tamil-majority northern and eastern provinces took effect—part of a scheme for devolution of power to newly elected provincial assemblies that is the core of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord. But as it is, resolution of the crisis seems as illusive as ever. The LTTE has refused to participate in the provincial elections, crippling the initiative.

Oct. 10 also marks the anniversary of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) operations, where, under the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, Indian troops were introduced to disarm the Tamil guerrillas. It was originally envisioned as a several-month operation. The IPKF's inability to bring the LTTE into a political settlement, and the resurgence of extremist violence on both sides of the island's ethnic divide, are only the most dramatic signs that the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord is itself hanging by a thread.

Now, with the December presidential election in sight, a wave of chauvinism is sweeping the island. The ruling United National Party (UNP) has chosen Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa, a Sinhala chauvinist, as its candidate. Premadasa will attempt to outshout opposition leader and former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, head of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), who has already made the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord and the Tamil issue the center of the campaign. Both are wooing the Sinhala extremist JVP, whose chief, Rohan Wijeweera, is a graduate of Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow, turned "Maoist." Curiously, the once-banned JVP appears to be operating these days with a free hand.

Barring an eleventh-hour demonstration of bold statesmanship by Sri Lankan President Junius Jayawardene, there is every likelihood that the election frenzy will sweep away the last hope of a legitimate settlement for the Tamils, along with India's ability to constructively influence them.

Accord stalled

Even before the recent violence, the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord had run into difficulties. For reasons only they can explain, the LTTE did an about-face and rejected the Accord as soon as it was announced more than a year ago. Their armed resistance has forced India to make a much greater commitment of men and materials to the job of pacification than anticipated—a development which contains its own backfire potential in Sri Lanka and India.

But what appeared to have finally brought the momentum to a halt was the LTTE's refusal to participate in elections for the newly created North-East Province, now scheduled for mid-November. When the Jayawardene administration finally announced the merger of the northern and eastern provinces, where Tamils are a majority, on Sept. 8—a move which was opposed as an intolerable "sellout" even within his own administration—intensive discussions with the LTTE and other Tamil groups were renewed.

To facilitate the discussion and the prospects of the LTTE joining the political settlement, the IPKF declared a unilateral ceasefire in its operation against the militants, which was extended for a total of 10 days.

In the end, the LTTE stuck to its guns, so to speak. On Oct. 6, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), once the largest Tamil political grouping, announced lamely that, since the LTTE had refused to participate in the elections, an unarmed, nonviolent party like itself could not participate either.

Oct. 10 was also the day that nomination for the North East Provincial Assembly elections closed. Three radical Tamil groups with no connection to the LTTE filed nominations for most of the 71 seats, and in 36, mostly in the north, they appear to be running unopposed. In three eastern dis-

districts of the new province, which have the remaining 35, the Tamil candidates will face candidates from the UNP and the Sri Lanka Muslim League.

A duly elected provincial assembly will most likely emerge in form, but the effort to restart a genuinely viable political process has been seriously enfeebled. For most of the seven-day nominating period, it was impossible to file papers, because election officers and bureaucrats, like much of the civil administration in the north, have continued to boycott their jobs under threats from the LTTE.

Under the best of circumstances, Sri Lanka's ethnic crisis—the result of long-term systematic discrimination by the Sinhala Buddhist majority against the Tamil Hindu minority—would be a tough nut to crack. With all its shortcomings, the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord offered the best hope to date to actually resolve the problem. But now, the entire tenuous undertaking is being subjected to the chauvinist hysteria of the presidential campaign. Prime Minister Premadasa has vowed to get the Indian troops out of Sri Lanka as soon as he takes office, and says he wants to replace the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord with a “friendship treaty.” In spite of his anti-Accord rhetoric and chauvinist credentials, however, most observers believe the ruling party has no chance of holding on to power. Capitalizing on the Accord's loss of momentum, Mrs. Bandaranaike is widely viewed as a shoo-in.

With the keen nose of an opportunist, Mrs. Bandaranaike has consistently opposed the Accord and vowed to abrogate it if she came to power. In a clever move during a recent campaign tour in the Central Province, the former prime minister declared that she had decided to hold “direct negotiations” with LTTE leader Prabhakaran to find a solution to the ethnic problem. In most of her public statements, Mrs. Bandaranaike has carefully included the assertion that, “of course, Sri Lanka cannot have hostile relations with India.” But her alliance with the (among other things) rabidly anti-India JVP, not to mention her close relations with Beijing, belies the rhetoric.

The JVP factor

Mrs. Bandaranaike's own chauvinist credentials are undisputed. It was she who, as prime minister in 1972, adopted a new “republican” constitution that made Sinhala the only official language and elevated Buddhism to the status of a virtual state religion. Mrs. Bandaranaike's husband had earlier established that, if Sinhala racism was not a family creed, opportunism was. As prime minister in 1956, he piloted the Sinhala Only Act, which overnight replaced English with Sinhala as the sole official language of the country.

Significantly, Mrs. Bandaranaike's SLFP is now attempting to form an eight-party opposition front, prominently including the extremist JVP, to back her presidential drive. The avowedly Marxist and Sinhala chauvinist JVP has risen from oblivion during the recent period to play a key role in the current tumultuous events. The group first rose to prom-

inence in 1971 when it mounted a serious armed coup attempt against the government of Mrs. Bandaranaike herself.

In 1983 President Jayawardene banned the organization and put it under siege when the JVP's role in the violence that precipitated the past five years of warfare was uncovered. At the time, JVP links with North Korean operatives in Sri Lanka were mooted. (Sri Lanka was said to have been the base for North Korea's attack on South Korea's cabinet ministers in Rangoon, Burma.) Earlier, according to some analysts, the JVP had sought and received support from South Yemen. Interestingly, however, Mrs. Bandaranaike has maintained that the group has always been strictly indigenous.

Earlier this year, under pressure from a lobby within his own party, Jayawardene lifted the ban on the JVP political activities—in spite of an assassination attempt against himself and his cabinet members, believed to have been masterminded by the JVP, and in spite of ample hard evidence that the JVP was carrying out a systematic terror drive against politicians supporting the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord.

Meanwhile, JVP had established firm links with the fundamentalist Buddhist organizations, and stepped up a recruitment drive among principally Sinhala youth in and around the universities. The Oct. 10 strike call was preceded by large-scale student demonstrations and agitation against the Accord in central and southern Sri Lanka, where JVP draws its strength.

Strategic turning point?

The sharp deterioration in Sri Lanka has potentially serious consequences for the region's stability. The island nation, just 20 miles off India's southern coast, is strategically placed in the Indian Ocean corridor between East and West Asia and its large natural deep-water port at Trincomalee on the east coast—around which the fighting has raged during the past five years—has been the target of superpower designs as a military base for some time.

Both Peking and Tel Aviv have also been fishing in Sri Lanka's troubled waters. The Indo-Sri Lankan Accord had, for the time being, prevented their foothold from broadening, but neither can be expected to sit on their hands now.

The Soviet Union's recent appointment of a KGB agent as ambassador to Sri Lanka, is an indication of new moves afoot. Yuri Kotov was thrown out of France in 1983 for spying for the Soviet KGB. He was brought back into the Soviet Foreign Ministry as Deputy Director for South Asia, and then appointed ambassador to Togo—a position he never took up, presumably because the Togans did their homework and rejected him. Recently, the same Yuri Kotov was sent to Sri Lanka without even so much as a name change.

Whether the move reflects a renewed Soviet interest in Trincomalee, or a broader plan to take full advantage of a collapse of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord and rupture in Indo-Sri Lankan relations remains to be seen.