

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Impeachment and DUNF

*“I want to be a soldier in the battle of ideas”*

— *Fidel Castro*



In 1989, with the Presidency already in its pocket, the UNP was well placed to emerge as the winner in the Parliamentary election. The opposition was divided and bereft of its chief vote getter Vijaya Kumaratunga who had been murdered by the JVP in 1987. The big question therefore was who was to be the Prime Minister in the forthcoming Premadasa Cabinet? In the Presidential election Premadasa had skilfully exploited the rivalry of Gamini and Lalith by indicating that the harder campaigner between them would be considered for the post of PM. Partly for

this reason, and also because they were dedicated UNPers, the two aspirants threw themselves into the presidential campaign and garnered a large number of votes in their bailiwicks for Premadasa. They were then asked to win their electoral districts in the Parliamentary election with large majorities so as to be considered for higher office. Both undertook this task with gusto, but Lalith appeared to be leading because his base was in the Colombo district which was numerically superior to Gamini's Nuwara Eliya district. It was at this time that Gamini decided to contest Kandy district in the future to ensure a wider support base to propel his vaulting ambition.

While President Premadasa shrewdly kept the younger contenders in the fight we received disconcerting news from time to time that he was also looking for other options. Before nominations were concluded he brought in DB Wijetunga, who had been relegated to the wilderness as the Governor of North Western province by JRJ, to contest from the Kandy district. Premadasa supported Wijetunga's campaign with enough funds and instructed him to make sure that he came first in the UNP list from Kandy come what may. Both Lalith and Gamini received secret information about these designs but there was little they could do except to exert themselves even more to gather votes to impress the new President. I remember attending Lalith's mammoth last rally in Ratmalana where his supporters were openly exhorting voters to back Lalith, the next Prime Minister. No doubt these announcements were filtered back to Premadasa who was carefully planning his next political "coup". The UNP won handsomely but with the new PR electoral system the SLFP led by Mrs. Bandaranaike also gained a considerable number of seats and she became the Leader of the Opposition. The President then sprang a surprise, particularly to the other contenders, by appointing Wijetunga as Prime Minister thereby signalling his desire to have

a “weak” PM, who would sign off on all his Presidential orders. To soften the blow he sent messages to Lalith and Gamini that this was only a “transitional” appointment and that he would be reviewing this arrangement in one years time. This did not satisfy them but there was little they could do but accept the “fait accompli” and hope for the best. This however was the beginning of a disenchantment which laid the basis for the dramatic events that followed some time later, particularly in the impeachment of the President which convulsed the political atmosphere of this period. In his first Cabinet appointments President Premadasa gave plum posts to Gamini and Lalith. It was rumoured that Sirisena Cooray and Mrs. Premadasa had urged the President to be charitable. Gamini was made the Minister of Plantation Industries and Lalith the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Cooperatives. While both accepted these appointments their staff, in their disappointment at not being been made the PMs men as they had anticipated, began to malign the new President, often in an unfair manner. They did not realise that party politics had changed from the “laissez faire” approach of JRJ to the intensive involvement in detail by the new chief. Gamini’s staff was particularly nasty in their whispering campaigns. Gamini too began to act in an offhanded manner and soon the two former adversaries were again on collision course. Then Gamini made, in my opinion, a bad political mistake. Thinking that “distance lends enchantment to the view”, he sought to avoid conflict with the President by asking for long leave to follow studies in Cambridge University while at the same time remaining in the Cabinet. This request which was extraordinarily unorthodox and ill advised naturally infuriated Premadasa who took it as a calculated insult to him personally. He sacked Gamini from the Cabinet and added sarcastically that he was now free to pursue his studies without the burden of cabinet responsibilities. Gamini left for

Cambridge and Premadasa began inquiring into his activities as a Minister in the JRJ cabinet with a view to eliminating him from the political arena. In the course of these investigations he was assisted by Ravi Jayewardene, JRJ's son, who had developed an antipathy to Gamini for reasons unknown. Ravi led Premadasa to the Buultjens case which I have described in Volume One of my autobiography, with the idea of implicating Gamini in a criminal case which included kidnapping. At one stage a message was sent to Gamini not to return as he would be arrested at the airport on arrival. It is to Gamini's credit that he boldly decided to return and face charges. While the antipathy of the new President to Gamini was clear, Lalith did not attempt to cross his path and may have survived but for local politics of the Colombo district and the dramatic abduction and murder of Richard de Zoysa. Sirisena Cooray was the new President's right hand man and the rise of Lalith was resented by his supporters even during the election campaign when they competed for the top slot in the Colombo list. However in fairness it must be stated that Cooray never encouraged this rivalry and, as mentioned above, even recommended to Premadasa that either Gamini or Lalith should be made PM. This advice was duly noted by Wijetunga who gave short shrift to Cooray for his pains after the death of Premadasa.

## Impeachment

The tale of the Premadasa impeachment has not yet been fully told. There are so many angles and versions to this episode that it has a "Rashomon" like quality with each participant presenting his own version of the event that is often at odds with the recollections of others. I will attempt to describe the evolving scenario mostly from the vantage point of Lalith and Gamini who were bamboozled by the Speaker Mohamed and had their

political futures irrevocably compromised. I will narrate those events as they unfolded before my eyes.

One day in August 1991, I received an urgent telephone call from Gamini saying that he and Wickreme Weerasooria were on their way to my home in Siripa Road to discuss an important matter. Gamini had the habit of dropping in on his friends at short notice to discuss political and personal matters. On this day we went to my office room and Gamini asked me whether in my opinion he could trust Lalith on a serious political matter. I was not taken aback since the evening before I had been with some friends at the Eighty Club and there had been whispers of a crisis in the Cabinet though nobody really knew what it was all about. I replied that Lalith was an ambitious and able politician and that it would be difficult to fight him. On the other hand if he was to be a partner in a political venture he would be an indefatigable and effective comrade in arms. This seemed to satisfy Gamini and Wickreme and they confided in me about the impeachment process that had been launched. From then on till their betrayal by the Speaker, I was in the know of the details of the impeachment attempt which was unique in the annals of our modern history.

## **Background**

The background to the impeachment attempt was Premadasa's impatience to mould the UNP into a party in his own image. This was reasonable in that he had loyally long served the party in various capacities and had saved the UNP from disaster by his heroic efforts in winning the Presidency. This was followed by the UNP victory under his leadership in the succeeding Parliamentary election. He then characteristically lost no time in attempting to make the UNP more democratic and efficient.

A long tenure since 1977 during which JRJ had permitted his MPs to earn money by way of liquor licences, permits to open petrol sheds, allocation of import quotas, allocating of lands under the Land Reform Commission and all manner of other “deals” had alienated them from their voters. The new President wanted “fresh blood”, preferably of those personally loyal to him, to come into the grass roots organisations of the party. For example under JRJ party branches could be set up only by the relevant party organiser who usually was the MP. Premadasa allowed the formation of party branches without the imprimatur of the MP cum organiser. This led to much heartburn as party branches sprang up, often times in opposition to the MP. A test case was that of the Speaker’s son Hussein Mohamed who made no attempt to nurse his electorate but depended on his father to pull his political chestnuts out of the fire. Premadasa, for whatever reason, pounced on him and wanted him removed from the organisership of the Borella electorate. In fact Lalith Athulathmudali, as district leader, was nominated to hold an inquiry into Hussein’s inefficiency and lethargy. Hussein was a bit of a joke among the party leaders due to his uncritical worship of his father. His nickname was “Daddy told” because he would begin every sentence with “Daddy told” much to the amusement of his colleagues. The bond between father and son was very strong. Another instance of Premadasa’s growing impatience was the manner in which he treated GM Premachandra who was the MP representing Mawatagama electorate. Premachandra was known to be a camp follower of the President being identified as “Punchi Premadasa” or acolyte of the big man. This identification was enhanced when he was selected as the deputy to the Minister of Highways—a portfolio held by the President himself. However he had countermanded an order made by his minister and a furious Premadasa had him removed. This led to an enmity between the two and Premachandra switched his

allegiance to Gamini and became a leader of the impeachment effort. Samaraweera Weerawanni, an able young orator from Uva, had been warned by Premadasa about allegations of bribery. Thus there were both political and personal interests involved in the impeachment effort.

Speaker Mohamed had another grouse with Premadasa. As a party senior he had expected to join the Cabinet. However Premadasa made him the Speaker. This was to prevent Mohamed from interfering in tenders and engaging in other forms of corruption that he was known for under the JRJ dispensation when he was Minister of Transport. There also may have been electoral rivalry as both came from the Colombo district and had to compete under proportional representation. The Speaker, who was a party senior and former UNP Mayor of Colombo, referred to the new President without much respect. The upshot of this hostility was that Mohamed spent time in studying the constitutional provisions regarding the impeachment of an incumbent President. This was article 38 of the Constitution which had not been studied with any enthusiasm by MPs during the JRJ Presidency. The Constitution gave considerable discretion to the Speaker. If more than half the number of MPs supported a motion for the impeachment of the President for prescribed reasons he could launch proceedings on the lines set out culminating in the dismissal of the incumbent after an inquiry and the passage of a motion with a two third majority. Once he accepted the impeachment notice with the support of half the number of MPs the President was precluded from dissolving Parliament by article 70[i]c. Mohamed's first masterstroke was to draw Mrs. Bandaranaike into his grand design. She was smarting under her defeat to Premadasa who had used harsh words on her, and her son Anura, in Parliament which she found difficult to accept.

Perhaps an even more important development was that the new President had set a cracking pace after he was elected and was cutting into her electoral base. By emphasising the need to get the IPKF out of Sri Lanka he had taken over the main demand of the SLFP and the JVP. Moreover given his opposition to Indian policies from the time of JRJ he had gained credibility among the Sinhala voters who had earlier backed the SLFP. Unlike in the case of JRJ, Premadasa became a favourite of the Sangha. He took great pains to attend to their everyday needs and wean them away from their natural ally - the SLFP. I was personally aware of his sensitivity after I went on a mission to Malwatta and Asgiriya on behalf of Gamini Dissanayake. Uduwawela Chandananda, who was the head priest of the influential Adahana Maluwa of the Asgiriya fraternity, was my kinsman. On one of my visits he told me that the rooms of the priests in the Asgiriya monastery were in a very bad state and needed to be repaired. I mentioned this to Gamini who immediately decided to undertake that work at his expense. He delegated this job to one of his businessman friends who had probably grown rich on contracts awarded by the Mahaweli Ministry. This friend and I visited Asgiriya and itemised the repair work which was necessary. Included in this list was the “pansala” of the influential Mahanayake, Palipane Chandananda who was a fierce critic of the Indo-Lanka accord and of JRJ himself. Imagine our surprise when we learnt that the businessman had betrayed Gamini and had taken the refurbishment project to Premadasa. In order to please Premadasa he undertook to complete the work with his own funds which were probably the by product of Gamini’s largesse. Gamini’s friend thereby became a favourite of the new President and his liaison officer to the Kandyan monks who had been introduced to him by me at Gamini’s behest. Such were the background tensions among the leaders of the UNP



notwithstanding its electoral successes which were envied by the SLFP. Some leaders of the SLFP like Stanley Tillekeratne, who did not forgive Mrs. B for not making him a minister in her 1970 Cabinet, were consorting with Premadasa and adding to Mrs. B's woes. The SLFP was split into warring factions. The most tragic situation for Mrs. B was that she was at loggerheads with her favourite child, Anura. The anti Sirimavo faction of the SLFP was so offensive to her that she suffered a stroke which later in time killed her. To her great credit she did not abandon the SLFP in spite of the rank ingratitude of many of its leaders who had earlier been sponsored by her.

Another threat to the SLFP was the populist measures undertaken by President Premadasa. He launched the "Janasaviya" programme which was a radical poverty alleviation measure. All families below the poverty line were entitled to a "relief package" of basic food items. In turn they were to contribute their manual labour for village infrastructure projects. This was a novel village level programme which caught the imagination of the rural populace who formed the bulk of the SLFP vote base. The President succeeded in inducting a new set of young public servants like Susil Siriwardene who helped in conceptualising this project and implementing it through the public service. The Janasaviya programme became a signature project of the new President. It has survived to this day under different names despite changes of rulers and their political ideologies.

### **Modus Operandi**

The biggest challenge was to keep the impeachment project a secret while at the same time coopting a majority of signatories as required by law. Nihal Seneviratne who was the Secretary General to the House in his book "A Clerk Reminisces" refers

to this; "Anil Moonesinghe MP walked into my room and sat down. He opened his conversation by saying "Nihal, you will be at the centre of a big controversy very soon." I was quite puzzled by this remark and asked him, "why me of all people"? Anil smiled and said, "You will know soon" and walked out of my room". Keeping this secret was almost a superhuman effort as MPs are loose tongued and apt to run to their chiefs with the latest information to score brownie points. So it is likely that some were not told the truth before they signed the petition. The "modus operandi" was to entrust the collection of signatures to a few trusted "conspirators" who were then to ensure that their quota of members would be roped in. The main "collectors" were Lalith and Gamini from the UNP, Anuruddha Ratwatte and Anura for the SLFP and the Speaker for the rest. It is said that the Speaker over dramatised the situation by kissing his set of signatories on both cheeks and offering them refreshments in the Speaker's chamber. It need hardly be said that this was not a conduct in keeping with the traditional responsibilities of a Speaker of Parliament. All the while he was egging on Lalith and Gamini by frequently telephoning them and assuring them that everything was going according to plan. Actually it was not so though the plotters were optimistic. Mrs. B gave her full support and her confidence in Gamini and Lalith was complete though they were in different parties.

Once there was panic when Stanley Tillekeratne, who was inching ever closer to Premadasa, demanded to see the petition and even wanted to take it home for further study. Mrs. B adroitly evaded the issue though Stanley had already alerted Premadasa regarding some challenge to his authority. Each conspirator had a separate sheet of paper on which their designated MPs would sign. Later many of them alleged that they were asked to sign a blank sheet in the hope that they were asking for a salary increase.

This may have been a lame excuse after their efforts failed and they had to face a future with a revengeful President. However as a friend of Gamini I shared the incoming information in “real time” which at that stage appeared to be satisfactory. Gamini was in constant touch with Lalith and Mohamed. Little did he, and by the same token we his supporters, know of what was really going on. A huge drama of intrigue and betrayal was about to begin.

### Speaker's Letter

As planned the Speaker addressed a letter to the President stating that he had accepted a motion of impeachment presented to him by more than half the number of MPs and therefore section 38 of the constitution was now brought into play. This letter was brought by the President to the Cabinet which proceeded unanimously to declare their confidence in Premadasa. At this meeting Lalith and Premachandra who were Cabinet ministers at that time had also voted in favour of a confidence vote in the President though by this time they had affixed their signatures to the motion referred to by the Speaker. Let us listen to Nihal Seneviratne to get Premadasa's reaction;” He [the President] asked “Nihal have you seen this impeachment motion?” I replied, “which impeachment motion, Sir?” He replied saying Speaker Mohamed had sent him a few hours earlier a motion of impeachment against him. I was quite categorical and said that I had not seen it at all, which was the truth... I realised that the Speaker had sent him the motion by hand without showing it to me”.

The following day the President summoned all his party MPs to the Parliament building and spoke to them individually. Predictably most of them denied that they signed any such document or said that they were misled. Since the acceptance of the motion meant

that the President was precluded from dissolving Parliament he used his right to prorogue Parliament and resummoned it at a later date [September 21st] thereby gaining time to reverse the impeachment process. In the meanwhile he, with his usual thoroughness, identified Mohamed as the “brains” behind the move and began a series of behind the scenes activities to “torpedo” the motion. According to Nihal Seneviratne he [the President] is even believed to have advised a royal dignitary in the Middle East to refrain from supporting some of the Islam related projects that the Speaker was sponsoring here. The Speakers family was also known to have owned a company importing motor cars from India. It was believed that the President had asked the Inland Revenue department to check and scrutinise all documents pertaining to that business. Perhaps all this was in progress when the Speaker announced a more nuanced position to Parliament that “I wish to inform the House that I have been given notice of a resolution under article 38[2] of the constitution. Having satisfied myself that the resolution is in order I decided to entertain it. Subsequently written and oral representations have been made to me questioning the validity of the signatures on the resolution. I am looking into this matter at present. My decision will be conveyed to the House soon”. Even at this time Lalith and Gamini had faith in the Speaker because he was sending message after message to them that he was standing unequivocally with them. But at the same time we were receiving information that Mohamed was changing horses in midstream. Gamini was for trusting the Speaker but Lalith was beginning to have doubts as there was a flow of information-some from the Speakers household itself- that a “conspiracy was afoot”. Seneviratne refers to Laliths consternation; I asked him Lalith, “why are you rocking the boat?” His instant reply was, “don’t ask me that question. Address it to your Speaker. I was surprised but remained silent.”

In the meanwhile the Speaker made ready to visit New Delhi for a meeting of the Inter Parliamentary Union. This naturally added to the tension as both parties were now depending on him to make the next move. If the conspirators were more perceptive they would have been suspicious with a development that Seneviratne describes thus; “We [the Speaker included] had not received permission from the President to leave the country. Soon after, the President rang me and said to inform the Speaker and members of the delegation that he had given permission for the delegation to proceed to India which we did”. The plotters should have smelt a rat because usually Premadasa was very vindictive in his responses to his opponents. But Gamini, in my presence, spoke several times to Mohamed by phone and appeared to be satisfied that the impeachment was on track.

### **Enter Thondaman**

But as Gamini learned later to his cost, Mohamed had already succumbed to Premadasa before he emplaned for Delhi though he kept it a secret and was giving assurances to the contrary to the conspirators. I can now reveal that this “volte face” was engineered by Thondaman, the leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress in order to strengthen his alliance with the President. No doubt the inquiries about Mohamed’s business dealings had softened him up but it was Thondaman’s arguments that had clinched the deal. The leader of the upcountry Tamils had pointed out that both he and Mohamed represented ethnic minorities which could not alienate the head of state, and certainly not a head like Premadasa, who enjoyed the confidence of the Sangha and the majority of Buddhist voters. An infuriated President, argued Thondaman, could unleash a pogrom against the Muslims and Tamils if they were perceived as the leaders of an attempt to eliminate a Buddhist head of state. Whether he bought this argument or not

Mohamed, whose electoral strength in his Borella constituency was in the hands of the Salagama caste members of Wanathamulla with whom Premadasa claimed kinship, yielded to Thondaman's entreaties and agreed to switch sides. To be fair by Mohamed he was also beginning to have doubts about the veracity of the numbers and signatures as provided to him by the sponsors, mainly Lalith and Gamini. He began, with increasing urgency, to demand the final list of sponsoring MPs even though he had gone out on a limb by accepting the motion and informing the President of its acceptance by him. Without the numbers his hands were tied and a constitutional crisis could have erupted adding to the strength of Thondaman's doomsday scenario.

Then another hurdle had to be overcome. The Speaker and Thondaman, most likely with Premadasa looking over their shoulders, had to agree on a draft which in effect stated that the numbers were not there and therefore the motion could not proceed. Mohamed pleaded for time to make the announcement so that he could save face by muddying the waters regarding the required number of signatures. But Premadasa was unrelenting and wanted the crucial statement signed, sealed and handed over to Thondaman before the Speaker left for Delhi. The message to Seneviratne from the President that they could now emplane for Delhi must have been a signal to Mohamed that his capitulation was complete. The vital letter with his signature was in the President's hands via Thondaman so that he could continue to fool the conspirators that the impeachment game was still on. It must be admitted that this master act of deception and manipulation of the Speaker attested to Premadasa's skill and determination to both safeguard his mandate as well as spectacularly punish his foes. The failure of the impeachment motion in effect ended the upward political trajectories of Gamini and Lalith and drove

them into the political wilderness which only ended with their tragic and unexpected deaths.



*President Premadasa addressing Parliament*

### **Aftermath**

Having prorogued Parliament, Premadasa summoned the next session for 24<sup>th</sup> September and, as customary, got ready to address the House. Not everybody knew of what had gone on behind the scenes. Though Seneviratne, the bureaucratic custodian of the House, is understandably silent on these matters it appears that both sides invoked the gods to grant them success. The President is alleged to have brought in Malayali shamans [kattadiyas] from Kerala to “bind” the premises in his favour while Mrs. B is reputed to have brought in vials of pigs fat which were supposed to counter the magical oils of the Malayalis, and had the seats in the house daubed with it. This must have been a new low in the annals of our Parliament which up to then never had leaders who believed implicitly in such mumbo-jumbo. Seneviratne skips this part of the clandestine operations in his narrative except to say that “members were in a confrontational mood”, He then records what happened on the 24th. “We escorted the President

to the robing room of the House and he stayed there until it was time to enter the chamber. I recall telling him that since he was presiding over the sittings of the House, he must be cautious and careful in tackling the members since I believed that many were planning to heckle him... He swiftly responded “Nihal, don’t worry. I know how to tackle them”. No doubt this was true because now we know that he already had the Speaker’s note dismissing the motion in his pocket. He had insisted through Thondaman that this document be left in his hands by the Speaker before he emplaned for Delhi. Lalith and Gamini were the last to know since the Speaker was hypocritically responding to their telephone calls to Delhi and providing assurances that all was well and that they need not worry.

Though indeed there was heckling, almost exclusively from the SLFP ranks, Premadasa ignored them and made a non confrontational speech. He then left the building and prepared to give the “coup de grace” to the conspirators. He had the Speaker on his side who on the 8th of October made the following statement to the House. “I wish to inform the House that having inquired into the matter, I am now of the view that the resolution does not have the required number of valid signatures and therefore it cannot be proceeded with.” The saga of impeachment was at an end. Mohamed who had launched the operation had brought it ignominiously to a close, sacrificing the many MPs who had signed the motion and now had to face the wrath of the President. Surprisingly, I found that Gamini was forgiving of Mohamed perhaps because he had already crossed the rubicon. But it was a bitter blow to Lalith who however with his characteristic determination decided to fight back.

Premadasa struck back fast and he struck back hard. He got the UNP to sack Lalith, Gamini, Premachandra and five other party



MPs even without a proper disciplinary inquiry. The affected eight then went to the Supreme Court led by Justice Mark Fernando and included Wadugodapitiya J and Kulatunga J on the grounds that natural justice had not been observed. The majority verdict of the court was that the sackings were valid. Mark Fernando in a dissenting verdict held that Lalith and Premachandra were guilty since they had been Cabinet members who had voted earlier indicating their confidence in the President. The other six were given the benefit of a denial of natural justice plea but the majority verdict prevailed and all eight lost their seats in Parliament. It was a sad sight to see Lalith and Gamini in their advocates robes in the courts trying desperately to mitigate the legal assault on them which had been meticulously planned by the President and his legal advisors led by “Cassie” Choksy. But the die had been cast with the verdict of the Supreme Court.

### **A New Political Party (DUNF)**

At this time Anuruddha Ratwatte had emerged as the “strong man” of the SLFP. As the cousin of Mrs. B he had access to her and was able to console her regarding the behaviour of her son Anura who was a captive of the anti-Sirimavo faction led by Maithripala Senanayake, who had become a favourite of the UNP. Anuruddha was living in the residence allocated to the leader of the Opposition in Colombo 7. He was the coordinator responsible for getting the signatures of the SLFP members for the impeachment motion. This was no easy task as some of them like Stanley Tillekeratne were consorting with Premadasa. I would meet Anuruddha in his residence where he was usually in the company of journalists like Victor Ivan and Sunanda Deshapriya who were able to track the anti-Premadasa moves for the readers of “Ravaya” and “Yukthiya” weeklies which they edited. Though the impeachment motion failed and Mrs. B was

genuinely distressed by the embarrassment caused to Gamini and Lalith, the SLFP as a party gained by this manoeuvre because they were able to crack the up to now monolithic UNP apart. Mrs. B and Anura also enjoyed the humiliation of Premadasa whom they disliked at a personal level. Led by Anura who had become a skilled debater, they began to fight back in Parliament and established a cordial relationship between the SLFP and the UNP dissidents. I accompanied Gamini for several meetings with Mrs. B at her Rosmead Place residence. She had Nimal Siripala de Silva as her legal advisor at those meetings.

The dissidents on the other hand were in a desperate position. They were on the verge of being driven out of the UNP by an unrelenting Premadasa. Some dissidents however wanted to remain in the party “to fight another day”. J. R. Jayewardene’s advice was that they should remain and struggle within the party as he had done when Dudley was under pressure to expel him from the UNP. The solution which emerged was to follow a two pronged strategy. While Lalith and Gamini would face party and Supreme Court inquiries, a “dummy” party was to be set up with its credentials presented to the Elections Commissioner. The new party could be activated if the duo were forced out of the UNP. The composition of the office bearers had to reflect the interests of the two leaders. Accordingly A. C. Gooneratne, a senior President’s Counsel and Lalith’s relative, was made the President of the new party and I was made its Vice President. The Secretary was Fonseka, a lawyer from Lalith’s chambers. None of us were members of the UNP and there were no complications arising regarding conflict of interest. We made an application to the Elections Commissioner for the registration of a new political party. After much deliberation we decided to seek such registration as the “Democratic United National Front” [DUNF]. It was an attempt to seek legitimacy as a UNP oriented outfit, while at the

same time satisfying the demand by the Commissioner that it would not lead to a confusion of identities by the voter. We were lucky in that the Elections Commissioner was an old University hand who had served as a distinguished official under Gamini. He held the scales evenly but Premadasa was fighting all the way and had sent a team led by Choksy and Sirisena Cooray to file objections to our application. We were bracing for this encounter when our leaders were expelled and they were able to lead our counter attack in the Commissioners office. Having won the name of the new party we turned to the symbol and colours which had to be approved by the Commissioner. As regards the symbol someone had the bright idea to ask for the eagle or “Rajaliya”. In Sinhala Rajaliya (meaning Eagle) can be pronounced as “Raja Aliya” meaning “King Elephant” which suited the recently sacked UNPers just fine. Indeed the majority of the voting public did not bother with the appellation DUNF but referred to us as the “Rajaliya” or King Elephant party. As regards party colours we broke new ground by asking for a combination of two colours—green and yellow. Since green was the UNP colour our platform decor had a preponderance of that colour which satisfied the UNPers who were abandoning Premadasa’s UNP by the day. After a protracted inquiry the Commissioner approved our choices much to the annoyance of the President who needled his lawyers for their incompetence. However I got the sense during the inquiry that both Choksy and Cooray were not very convinced of the value of Premadasa’s relentless persecution of the dissidents who were after all UNP stalwarts. But they were too afraid to argue with their leader. We on the other hand emerged from this encounter with all our demands intact.

The entry of the DUNF as a third force, with its own symbol and colours, led to a considerable realignment of Sri Lankan politics. By this time there was manifest disenchantment with

the autocratic ways of the new President. Also there were many businessmen who had benefited from the earlier decisions of Lalith and Gamini and were willing to bankroll the new party. The media was very supportive and we began to make headway as an efficient third force much to the annoyance of Premadasa. Our main attraction was our speakers list which included Lalith, Gamini, Premachandra, Weerawanni and a few others who could not be matched by other parties. The UNP meetings were a “one man show” of Premadasa who, no doubt, was an orator of the first rank. The first DUNF meeting which was held in Nugegoda was a mammoth one which scared the UNP and brought out the “lumpen” urban supporters of Premadasa who used violence to intimidate our supporters. In Nugegoda they created a stampede and many onlookers were injured. Every meeting saw the mass crossover of UNP supporters, including some MPs, to the DUNF stage. At the Kandy meeting which was held inspite of the opposition of the Chief Minister who had become an acolyte of the President after abandoning his mentor Gamini, Muthubanda the MP for Polonnaruwa was carried on the shoulders of the bystanders to the stage from where his earstwhile boss Gamini was addressing the public. He was fired by Premadasa the following day. In Kesbewa, Lalith was attacked by the goons of a Minister who was at that time a supporter of Premadasa. We realised that politics was no longer a cakewalk. Several of us wrote our wills and testaments because the future was uncertain.

### **The Pannala Attack**

We all nearly died from a grenade attack at our Pannala meeting. We planned this meeting with care because it was the political base of Gamini Jayawickreme Perera, a Premadasa loyalist. He was supported in the area by another UNP member known to

be violence prone. Gamini and I left Kandy in the morning and reached Lalith's farm in Giriulla for lunch. This small plot had been inherited by Lalith from his parents and he nurtured it with great care. He loved to walk about his land in a pair of muddied rubber boots while experimenting with new breeds of rice and growing local vegetables. He had planned to feed us the products of the farm of which he was very proud though it did not receive the same publicity as did Premadasa's farm in Ambanpola, also in the Kurunegala district. After lunch we drove to nearby Pannala for our propaganda meeting. It was a busy day for me as Hugh Fernando- a former Speaker of Parliament and the uncle of my son-in-law Rohan Fernando, - had invited all of us to dinner at his house in Wennappuwa. We had started the meeting and the crowds were coming in when a live grenade was hurled at the stage on which we were seated. Had it burst on the stage all of us would have been killed instantly. However it hit a wire which was strung across the stage and fell on to the audience injuring many onlookers who had to be rushed to hospital. Naturally the dinner was not a great success. We spent time in the hospital and it was late by the time we reached Hugh Fernando's house. But he was forgiving especially after we found that he had been present "incognito" at the Pannala meeting and had seen the bomb attack on the DUNF stage. He was helpful to the DUNF though in the end he preferred to remain with the SLFP. Later he collapsed while leading a SLFP procession organised by Mahinda Rajapaksa and died before he could be rushed to hospital. The party asked me to represent it at the funeral which was held in Wennappuwa and in my speech I thanked him for his support. A nephew became our party organizer for the Wennappuwa electorate.

## Leader



*Gamini Dissanayake pictured with Lalith Athulathmudali and Premachandra*

While the DUNF was gathering strength in the country where we were holding well attended public meetings every week, the inevitable problem of selecting a party leader arose. Both Gamini and Lalith aspired to hold that office and there emerged a “cold war” among their respective supporters even though the two leaders were on good terms. They met almost daily and decided on party activities. Most importantly they shared the not inconsiderable costs of running the party propaganda machine. There were many business people who made voluntary contributions and we were able to finance our public meetings with such “ad hoc” support. Since I was on good terms with both leaders I could smoothen out some problems which were created by tale carriers. For instance Lalith held a meeting in the Kalutara Town Hall and a tale carrier who wanted to be the organiser rushed to Gamini alleging that Lalith had criticised him. Fortunately I happened to be at that meeting and could inform Gamini that no such thing happened. This was a difficult time for the Gamini camp because Lalith’s organisation was far superior and his lawyer friends were more committed to their

leader. Moreover Lalith would appear in courts regularly for his supporters while Gamini's camp had to depend on lawyer friends like Nigel Hatch to represent our activists. All the while Premadasa was keeping a wary eye on the progress of the DUNF and doing everything in his power to sabotage its activities. By this time he had gathered a fawning group of courtiers led by AJ Ranasinghe who was feeding him horror stories about the DUNF and urging him to use state power to curb its progress. Some of those courtiers did not hesitate to use violence as they did in Kesbewa and Pannala. They also began to intimidate the non state media which was headed by outstanding journalists like Victor Ivan [Ravaya] and Sunanda Deshapriya [Yukthiya]. Many of them found the DUNF more responsive than the slothful SLFP which at that time was mired in internal conflicts and was intrigue prone. Independent journalists however maintained good relations with Anuruddha Ratwatte but he had no idea about getting an adequate coverage for SLFP activities. The non state media highlighted human rights abuses by the Premadasa regime. They were supported in this field by several reputed intellectuals like Reggie Siriwardene and Charles Abeysekere. The opposition managed to win the sympathy of Sinhala cultural heroes like Sarathchandra and Madoluwawe Sobhita Thero as well as religious dignitaries like Father Tissa Balasuriya of the Catholic church and several Anglican Bishops. It was an impressive collection of dissidents and Non Governmental Organisations. They were able to influence the western embassies whose leaders were themselves highlighting human rights issues. We in the DUNF were regular invitees to such embassy parties. They must have sent blood-curdling political reports to their Chancellories. One Ambassador of a western country told me that if my life was in danger he would personally escort me to Katunayake airport in order to ensure that I would not be kidnapped on the way by state security.

## Media Power



*At a Protest rally with Free Media leaders*

President Premadasa was ill served by his media advisors. Though he was warned by close associates like Sirisena Cooray to be more tolerant he preferred to rely on the advice of his cronies like AJ Ranasinghe, Hudson Samarasinghe and Anton Alwis who were given prominent positions in the state media institutions. They suggested the launching of an aggressive approach regarding the free media using not only the state media institutions but also bringing in the police to silence critics. In the end this aggression and use of state power proved to be a boon to the opposition, particularly to the DUNF. Both Lalith and Gamini were media savvy and were always available to respond to the demands of journalists. Since they were better educated and more likely to give newsworthy interviews the free media often preferred to quote them than the SLFP which was still mired in internal wrangles. The DUNF supported the Free Media movement which based its membership on a more radical set of journalists from the weekly Sinhala publications. They became household names in the country and created a critical readership which



was hostile to Premadasa and favourable to the DUNF and the SLFP, though we were probably the biggest beneficiaries. This movement also drew in many University teachers and progressive Sinhala literati to our cause. Ravaya and Yukthiya which were close to the anti-government NGOs operating in the domain of human rights, helped in the rapid progress of the DUNF which led to further frustration in the Premadasa camp.

### **Gampaha, Kalawewa and Hiniduma Meetings**

There was such a big demand for our public rallies that we planned to hold two large meetings every week in addition to other small electorate based meetings. The upshot of our popularity was that even SLFPers, including some of their leaders, were seen at our meetings. Many of them preferred to keep a distance by remaining in the periphery of the meeting grounds. But some others, particularly those who had distanced themselves from their party infighting, figured more prominently by getting on to our stage. For instance SD Bandaranayake, a grandee of SLFP battles from before 1956, indicated that he would come onto our stage in Gampaha and also address the meeting. This was a considerable victory for our fledgeling party as SDB was part of the radical, and anti UNP, history of Siyane Korale. We assembled at his “Madugaha Walawwe” in Gampaha for lunch and from there accompanied him to the meeting grounds where he received a rousing welcome. It was a memorable meeting for me also because I began addressing DUNF party rallies from the Gampaha meeting onwards. It was the beginning of a hectic speaking schedule which has since taken me to all parts of the country for close on thirty years.

Another leading SLFPer who helped us from behind the scenes was Bertie Dissanayake who was one of the political leaders of

Anuradhapura district. Our local leaders had characterised Bertie as violence prone and we were somewhat apprehensive when Gamini, Premachandra and I were billed to speak at a meeting in his Kalawewa electorate. It was a largely attended meeting which was held in a scenic grounds overlooking a reservoir. We need not have worried since Bertie, who was seen driving about in a jeep in the vicinity, had asked his supporters not to obstruct us in anyway. Since the Kalawewa electorate was one of the beneficiaries of the Mahaweli project there was a large gathering to greet Gamini. Bertie himself had earlier benefitted from the ex-Mahaweli minister's largesse. We were pleasantly surprised when many of the Mahaweli settlers met us after the meeting. Many of them had been selected from Kandyan villages for settlement in Kalawewa under the Mahaweli project. They insisted on our visiting the "Teldeniya Ela" or "Tumpane Ela" where they had been relocated after coming to the "Raja Rata". It was nightfall when we got back to our vehicles after enjoying a Kandyan meal with them. Though they were UNP supporters earlier we were able to draft them into our new party. Several UNP MPs of the Rajarata like HGP Nelson helped us on the sly and even paid our hotel bills after the Polonnaruwa meeting.

I had a similar experience when we held a meeting in Hiniduma in the hilly periphery of Galle district. I attended this meeting with Gamini, Lalith and Premachandra. As a researcher with Gananath Obeyesekere in the sixties and later as Assistant Government Agent of Galle district I had worked with the villagers of Hiniduma and they turned up in strength at our meeting held in Neluwa. After listening to our leaders they insisted that I speak to them much to the delight of our organiser for Hiniduma electorate who found a welcome "block" of voters for his campaign in an electorate which had been a leftist stronghold. Here again we were fortunate that the UNP organiser

Sarath Amarasiri was the son of MS Amarasiri who was Lalith's deputy minister during the JRJ regime. He made no attempt to sabotage our meeting unlike many of Premadasa's favourite MPs who confronted us in their bailiwicks.

### **Anuradhapura**

The growing success of our meetings were reported to the President who was by now getting anxious and was preparing for a showdown. His opportunity came when we planned to hold a large rally in Anuradhapura. In order to capitalise on the large crowds that congregate there on religious holidays we had arranged to hold our meeting on a Poya day in a large playground. We were sure of a historic gathering and every effort was made to make it a major event. This must have been conveyed to Premadasa who banned the meeting by slapping a prohibitory order. When the party leaders met at the Anuradhapura Resthouse, Police bigwigs came there with copies of the order and requested us to cancel the meeting. Following the Presidents wishes they had been ordered by the IGP to stop the DUNF meeting at any cost. In the meanwhile our supporters were coming in from all parts of the country and were congregating in the new city area expecting to attend the rally. After a hurried consultation we decided that it would be a fatal blow to the party if we abandoned the meeting. However there was no doubt regarding the determination of the police to stop us. So we decided on a strategy of making it appear to be a religious gathering. We divided our followers into four groups who wended their way from different directions to the Ruvanweliseya carrying baskets of flowers to be offered at the Dagoba. Each group was led by party seniors who were to ensure that there was no violence. Fortunately a chief of a temple in Anuradhapura who was earlier an undergraduate at Vidyodaya university and a well known Sinhala lyric writer and

a friend of mine, agreed to my request to come to the Dagoba area to administer Pansil thereby giving credence to our claims of religious devotion. This got us out of a difficult predicament as my friend the priest was well regarded by the Police who then decided to stand by rather than confront us. I can remember as an aside that the famous singer Gunadasa Kapuge, who was attached to the Raja Rata Radio, also joined us in an inebriated state and started chanting Buddhist stanzas much to the amusement of the audience. He had come to meet the priest and wandered into our meeting. We dispersed peacefully and held a press conference the following day in Colombo probably annoying the President who was spoiling for a fight and did not want a peaceful resolution in the sacred city. By this time the DUNF was beginning to attract much attention and was setting the political agenda by highlighting anti-government issues which the SLFP had been reluctant or unable to convey to the masses of voters who were now beginning to get disenchanted.

### **Denzil Kobbekaduwa**

Gamini, Denzil Kobbekaduwa and I were friends from our time as students at Trinity College in Kandy. With the civil war sapping the growth momentum of the country the government was losing its popularity and many were turning to the army as a saviour of the integrity of the country. This was symbolised by the emergence of the charismatic Denzil K as a leader of the new national minded army. Earlier Army commanders, however competent they may have been, were “Sandhurst types” who did not win national recognition. The SLFP and the DUNF were all praise for Denzil adding to the fears of Premadasa. All Sri Lankan presidents, including Mahinda Rajapaksa, were afraid of Army Commanders and were on the lookout for any suspicious move by the army top brass. Mahinda Rajapaksa who got on well with army Commander Fonseka during the war later became

apprehensive after the victorious army boss planned a massive celebratory jamboree in Colombo. Premadasa who knew of Denzil's kinship links with the Ratwattes and personal friendship with several DUNF leaders, began to keep tabs on him though there was no open confrontation. Since Gamini was already under surveillance it was decided that Denzil should contact me with messages which I would then convey to the DUNF leaders. In addition to our Trinity connection my younger brother, Major General Asoka Amunugama, had served as Denzil's ADC in the northern theatre. I must emphasise here that although he told me about army plans to attack the LTTE, Denzil at no time appeared to be disloyal to the elected head of the country. He was personally concerned that the country was sliding towards further turmoil but he did not contemplate involving the army in national politics. However I had the distinct feeling in our discussions that he was thinking of a political role as a civilian once he retired from the army. His sympathies were with the DUNF and the SLFP and the opposition had no hesitation in referring to him as a politician in the making in their propaganda by constantly extolling his leadership qualities. The President could be excused for thinking that Denzil will become a problem for him in the future. This does not mean that he plotted the army hero's murder as the opposition whispered after the Aralai point debacle when Denzil, Wimalaratne and several other senior commanders of the army and navy were killed by the LTTE which had planted land mines on the terrain which was to be used to launch an amphibious landing across the lagoon. However it must be stated that the commanders were breaking their own rules that they should not travel together. Denzil and Wimalaratne were in the same jeep and paid the price. Before he left for Jaffna for this operation Denzil phoned me at home early in the morning and we agreed to have a meeting with Gamini once he returned after Aralai. Sadly it was not to be.



*Denzil at the front in Jaffna*

The death of Denzil, Wimalaratne and their staff led to a wave of hatred against Premadasa who hastily tried to win back sympathy by declaring a major road as Denzil Kobbakaduwa Mawatha to no avail. As opposition leaders we followed the cortege from his residence in Rosmead Place to Kanatte where there was a large gathering of people, some of whom were shouting slogans. This was followed by ugly scenes when well known supporters of Premadasa were manhandled. They fled to safety and one wrote later to say that he thought that he would be killed by the mob that day. These incidents were game changers and the Premadasa government was fast losing its popularity. This compelled the President to take several strategic decisions which culminated with his murder by the LTTE only a week after the assassination of Lalith Athulathmudali.

## **Second Provincial Council Elections**

The term of office of the first Provincial Councils were nearing its end and new elections were due in 1993. This created a dilemma

for Premadasa since his popularity had plummeted. He also received information from his acolytes that the DUNF, which was gaining public favour, was locked into a battle for leadership which was eyed by both Lalith and Gamini. Gamini was senior but he was already in the doghouse when Lalith made a great sacrifice and left the Cabinet. He could have easily betrayed Gamini and earned Premadasa's favour. Indeed even after the rupture Mrs. Hema Premadasa was busily engaged in trying to get Lalith back and isolating Gamini thereby weakening the DUNF and even driving it out of electoral contention. The President believed that the two ambitious leaders would fall out if he played for time. Such a rift would create the opportunity for him to call for a snap provincial council election. For us in the DUNF the opposite was true. We had to hold together and force an early election.

## Lalith

Since I was acceptable to both leaders I was entrusted with finding a way to settle the leadership issue. A few of us would meet in PBG Kalugalle's house in Cambridge Terrace to find a way out. I remember that Ravi Karunanayake, who was part of Lalith's entourage, coming to Gamini's house in his old motorcycle to plead the case for his mentor. Our small group first decided that the first leader would hold office for six months of the year to be followed by the other who also will have a six month tenure. During the leadership of one the other would hold the office of national organiser and vice versa. This idea was acceptable to Lalith and Gamini. But the all important question of who would first ascend the "gadi" was left open for further discussion. At this stage I suggested to Gamini that he should make a grand gesture by inviting Lalith to be the first leader. After all we would simultaneously announce that he will hold that office in six

months time. Such a gesture would enhance his image and ensure the competitiveness of the DUNF in the forthcoming elections. A leadership impasse at this stage would weaken the party at a crucial testing time. With some reluctance Gamini agreed to my suggestion and I typed out the compromise formula.

I must say that Lalith who was the beneficiary of this formula behaved impeccably by thanking Gamini and consulting him every day on the progress of the party. He also, much to his rivals relief, undertook the responsibility of collecting funds for the forthcoming electoral battle. This act of cooperation and reconciliation sent shock waves to both the UNP and SLFP who were used to bitter internecine warfare in their recent history. I read recently in an interview given by a Lalith confidante that his leader was so moved by Gamini's gesture that he had decided to nominate the latter for the Presidential bid and await his turn after Gamini's term of office.

### **Premadasa's Response**

Within days of our announcement of satisfactory leadership arrangements a disappointed President Premadasa called for provincial council elections. He knew that with more time the DUNF would now grow in strength and cut into the UNPs membership as well as its vote bank. Our meetings were exceptionally successful and our "attack team" of Premachandra and Weerawanni was tearing up Premadasa's image. It is also likely that the SLFP was looking on this contest with glee and were encouraging their members to attend our meetings to swell the crowds and thereby demoralise the UNP. We were in friendly competition and often worked together on human rights and media issues. Premadasa who was unforgiving pulled out an old murder charge against Parliamentarian Lakshman Seneviratne



who had joined the DUNF. He was remanded and locked up in Bogambara prison. We and the media took this issue up and organised a demonstration and motorcade in which Anura Bandaranaike of the SLFP joined us. This common front helped in winning many of the prison officials to our side who looked the other way when we sent food and other amenities to Lakshman from outside. These gifts included a smart phone for him to speak to his family who were then in Australia. The phone was smuggled into his cell in a hollowed out birthday cake. Mrs. Bandaranaike herself was very cooperative and probably preferred to interact with us rather than some of her own party members like Mervyn Silva who humiliated her on the orders of the anti-Sirima faction of the SLFP. The SLFP was in turmoil with Anura loyalists fighting tooth and nail to keep Chandrika out of the Central Committee of the party though Mrs. B wanted her in. CBK as a new face and the wife of the late Vijaya Kumaratunga as well as with her obvious sincerity and commitment was rejuvenating the SLFP. I was researching with ICES at that time and remember the enthusiasm with which Neelan Tiruchelvam and his group were promoting the “new political star” on the horizon. I was a speaker at a seminar organised by ICES at which CBK was also invited to be a speaker. As usual she was late, but when she did turn up there was such a “buzz” in the audience which clearly indicated that she had “star quality” and would figure in the political struggle to come. By this time she had a faction in the SLFP led by Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, Mangala Samaraweera and S. B. Dissanayake who were engaged in promoting her with the blessings of Mrs. B.

### **A New Star**

Chandrika Kumaratunga blazed like a comet in the Sri lankan political firmament at a time when the SLFP was riven with

dissent. The manipulation of the leadership of the SLFP begun by JRJ, and continued by Premadasa, was facilitated by a series of electoral setbacks faced by Mrs. B. After her civic rights were curtailed she lost her authority as best seen in the emergence of Hector Kobbekaduwa as the SLFP's presidential candidate. The Bandaranaike family was divided over the Kobbekaduwa issue. While Chandrika and her husband Vijaya Kumaratunga virtually ran the SLFP campaign, Mrs. B and Anura did their best to sabotage Kobbekaduwa's chances. Actually Mrs. B had preferred to have the SLFP supporting Colvin R de Silva's candidature. Anticipating her backing Colvin had thrown his hat into the ring only to find that SLFP support was not forthcoming. On discovering that he was betrayed Colvin attacked the SLFP candidate saying that Kobbekaduwa would be unseated even if he was elected. Coming from a legal eagle like Colvin that was a serious warning. On the other hand Anura, obviously fronting for his mother, declared that HK was only "a contractor" who would turn over power to Mrs. B if he was elected. Being at the receiving end of a two pronged attack, Kobbekaduwa not only lost the Presidential election but consequently split up the SLFP into different factions making them easy prey for JRJ and Premadasa. One direct consequence of this SLFP fiasco was the creation of the Sri Lanka Mahajana Pakshaya by Vijaya Kumaratunga and Chandrika.

## SLMP

The SLMP caught the imagination of the younger generation of radicals, including those who had earlier supported the JVP but had escaped the army dragnet. Their May day parade and meeting presided over by TB Illangaratne-a giant of the original SLFP of Bandaranaike, outshone Mrs. B and Anura's parade and earned for CBK the hatred of the SLFP old stagers, especially of Anura

and Mahinda Rajapaksa. Open conflict broke out later in their “long march” from Colombo to Kataragama which received the covert blessings of President Premadasa. But CBK persisted in joining the march and won praise from party members who did not approve of splitting the SLFP. But funds were hard to come by and Vijaya had to draw on the goodwill he had earned from the producers of Sinhala films and other personnel associated with film production. The position taken by Vijaya and CBK on the national question was not to the liking of several ex-SLFP veterans. Ilangaratne and Kularatne left the party claiming that they were not consulted on this sensitive issue. This intervention became the swansong of Ilangaratne who had suffered many slights from the party and died a poor and disgruntled man. Since he had been my minister when I was a civil servant, I met TBI when he was down in life and tried to be of some service to him. He died not long after. As MP for Galagedera I arranged with the People’s Bank to erect his statue in his home town as an act of homage to its founder.

## Vijaya

It soon became clear that Vijaya was the best possible candidate to lead a left coalition. His charisma and position on the ethnic issue made him a candidate who could attract minorities as well. I remember Colvin R de Silva telling me that the LSSP, of which originally Vijaya was a member, was backing him to the hilt. Sampanthan told me that in the opinion of S. Nadesan, the iconic Tamil lawyer, the CBK–Vijaya combination was the most promising partner for the Tamils. Even Tamil separatist leaders like Uma Maheshwaran and Pathmanathan had faith in him. Though bitterly criticised by Sinhala politicians, Vijaya undertook a visit to the LTTE dominated part of the Jaffna peninsula and with the popular Captain Kotelawela of the SL Army in attendance, had discussions with LTTE commander

Rahim [an old Trinitian whose birth name was Kanagaratnam]. With his open backing of the 13th amendment and undoubted popularity among the Sinhala masses, the JVP leadership decided to eliminate Vijaya no matter the cost. It must be stated that Vijaya was the only politician to openly defy the JVP and challenge them to do their worst, especially when he was affected by the killing of his party comrades. A large number of ex-JVPers and left radicals like Reginald Cooray, Dilan Perera, Jagath Naranbedda and Navaratne joined the SLMP much to the indignation of the JVP leaders who approved the “the termination with extreme prejudice” of Vijaya Kumaratunga. It was a traumatic event for his young family as well as a large multitude of people from all walks of life.

## CBK

With the assassination of Vijaya, the Mahajana Pakshaya lost its leader and CBK left with her children to seek refuge in the UK. The party was split wide open with some rejoining the SLFP while others like Ossie Abeygunasekera threw in their lot with Premadasa and, with the latter's death, allied himself with the UNP led by Gamini Dissanayake. Ossie was a victim of the Thotalanga bomb blast and succumbed to those injuries. With the announcement of the first Provincial Council elections, to establish which the SLMP had paid a heavy price, CBK with great courage returned from the U.K. to lead her party. The SLFP boycotted this election thereby helping in the murderous rampage of the JVP. The JVP went on a killing spree of the candidates and voters who dared to participate in the election. This was a tragic decision since both the SLFP and JVP became enthusiastic participants at subsequent PC elections.

The leaders of the left, particularly Rajitha Senaratne, supported desperate efforts to get CBK back to Sri Lanka to give them leadership in the context of a weakened SLFP now led by Anura. Anura was busy trying to reimage the SLFP as a middle of the road Social Democratic party like that of his father. This was after a long period of SLFP subservience to the Marxist parties with whom Mrs. B had entered an alliance in the late 1960s. It had led to a bitter conflict which tore the Bandaranaiques apart. Mrs. B was deliberately humiliated at party meetings and she backed CBK to enter the SLFP with a view to wresting the leadership. All attempts to block her entry to the SLFPs central committee failed because Wiswa Warnapala agreed to relinquish his position to accommodate CBK. As a new star and a dedicated worker she reinvigorated the party. A disappointed Anura then was lured by Sirisena Cooray to cross over to the UNP, where President Wijetunga welcomed him and immediately made him the Minister of Higher Education. But he could not make a difference to the fortunes of the UNP. With the defacto merger of the SLFP and the SLMP and the growing unpopularity of the UNP, partly due to the attacks of the DUNF, the opposition was poised to make a strong showing in the Provincial Council election after over two decades in the wilderness. The election of Councillors for the second tenure of Provincial Councils turned out to be a three cornered struggle between the UNP, SLFP and DUNF. The results were a tribute to CBKs sagacity as she was able to engineer a collaboration between the SLFP and the DUNF in a new context where both Lalith Athulathmudali [DUNF Leader] and Premadasa [UNP Leader] had been assassinated in quick succession by the LTTE and the election was held under crisis conditions. On the results of this election CBK became the Chief Minister of the Western Province with a record poll and thereafter led her party to victory both in the Parliamentary and Presidential elections.



*With CBK*

## DUNF

The DUNF, of which I was Vice President, was at the height of its strength when nominations for the Provincial Council elections were called. Our meetings which were directed at criticising the Premadasa regime were drawing large crowds. Sponsors were coming forward with invitations as well as funds and we were able to increase the number of meetings. The demand was so great that we had to split our schedule of meetings so that while Gamini concentrated on the Kandyan areas and the Mahaweli region, Lalith worked the urban areas in the key demographic triangle of Colombo. Gampaha and Kalutara. G. M. Premachandra who was in great demand as an “attack speaker” led our propaganda in the Kurunegala district. This arrangement was logical in that these leaders were our nominees for the posts of Chief Minister in those provinces. With the internal conflicts in the SLFP surfacing some seniors jumped ship and joined the DUNF. Leading them were SLFP grandees like PBG Kalugalle and Monty Gopallawa. Lakshman Seneviratne and Samaraweera, long time MPs led our effort in Badulla district while the Gamini Dissanayake electoral machine, now led by his wife Srimala, secured a good following in Nuwara Eliya. Dissidents from the UNP like Dr Cyril led our effort in the Hambantota district. Gamini had the best

of relations with Basil Rajapaksa who though not joining the DUNF, maintained links with us as he had earlier contested a seat under JRJ as a nominee of the UNP. His brother Mahinda who was the chief lieutenant of Anura Bandaranaike, was sulking in the SLFP tent and he made no attempt to prevent his mentor from crossing over to the UNP under Wijetunga though he himself refused to leave the SLFP.

We spent a considerable amount of time in preparing the party manifesto. The lead was taken by the indefatigable Lalith, whose training as a constitutional lawyer came into play, as he personally penned many of the provisions of the document after discussions with our group. As the perceived victims of an overweening Presidency, the DUNF was the first to advocate the abolition of the post of executive President. It must be noted however that all those who advocated this measure went back on it no sooner than they were elected to office. It was rumoured that JRJ had advised CBK, who had pledged in writing to abolish the executive Presidency, that “as PM you will last five months but as Executive President you will last five years”. History shows that CBK accepted that advice. The DUNF was presented as a Social Democratic party which was against privilege and the concentration of power. It emphasised an export oriented economic policy and a domestic food security policy based on high yields following the Mahaweli scheme and recognising the needs of the farming community. Special emphasis was placed on the possibilities of export agriculture as in the “agricultural villages/communes” which were pioneered by Lalith. Predictably emphasis was placed on education and technology. The “Mahapola” scheme aimed at ensuring that no deserving student was left behind, attracted many young people to the DUNF. Finally a social welfare net to assist those below the poverty line was included in the manifesto. Though we would have preferred a longer period to continue with our upward trajectory we were

in a positive mood when nominations were called. Never in our wildest nightmares did we think that our leader Lalith would be assassinated while on the stump for the DUNF. It drew the wrath of the public and President Premadasa was forced to be on the defensive. His plaintive call to “kill me but do not kill my good name” was a sign that he was deeply troubled by the shift of public sympathy. He was planning to make this plea the thrust of his May day speech. This manifest anxiety of the President probably hastened his assassination. In order to make this May day a spectacular success, under trying circumstances, he flouted the advice of his astrologers not to step out on that day. Secondly the LTTE would have thought it the ideal opportunity to kill him because public opinion was turning against him. This “cruellest month” changed the trajectory of contemporary Sri Lankan politics and later with the death of Gamini Dissanayake spelt the doom of the DUNF which had begun with so much hope. All of us who gladly joined in that adventure were dispersed to follow our own destinies and lament the end of the “shining city on the hill”.

