The Third World’s Other First Lady

An Interview With Former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike

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In 1960 Sirimavo Bandaranaike, a politically naive, withdrawn, recently bereaved widow, led the Freedom party of her assassinated husband to electoral victory in the island-nation of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and became the world’s first woman prime minister.

Born into the decaying semifeudal rural aristocracy, Sirimavo Bandaranaike received limited formal education. She displayed no early indication of any special abilities. In the early 1940’s, at the behest of her family, she dutifully married a rising political and intellectual star, Solomon Dias Bandaranaike. For the next fifteen years, as her husband’s career progressed, Mrs. Bandaranaike played the traditional role of a successful leader’s spouse—management of his home interspersed with supportive social duties. In 1959, three years after becoming Sri Lanka’s fourth prime minister, Solomon Dias Bandaranaike was murdered in the presence of his wife.

Tragedy and the ambitions of his followers changed her life. Thrust into politics, she fought her first electoral contest as the dead man’s widow, a tearful extension of his political personality, guided by a small group of his closest associates. Those early uncertainties were left behind as the independent political character of Sirimavo Bandaranaike began to take shape. Since then she has become an experienced campaigner in four national elections, winning two major victories and suffering two devastating defeats. For twelve of the past seventeen years she has held office as prime minister of Sri Lanka, surviving an attempted military coup in 1961, a civil war in 1971, and many other lethal challenges. Internationally she led efforts to organize the Nonaligned Movement in the early 1960’s and was elected its leader at the gathering of Third World nations in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1976. With President Tito of Yugoslavia she was the Nonaligned Movement’s senior figure until domestic politics aborted her international position in mid-1977. All this during a period in which obscure territories of former colonial empires emerged as an increasingly significant third force in world affairs.

At sixty-one an assertive pragmatism characterizes Sirimavo Bandaranaike’s intense manner, and a quick and authoritative intonation resonates through her unusually deep voice. Her features show little of her years and less of the pressures of political life. They are somber and a little heavy, matching her sturdy frame. Occasionally the seriousness breaks and the fast-talking political leader becomes, momentarily, a woman of ineffable charm and attraction.

Mrs. Bandaranaike received me in her spacious Colombo mansion. It was barely a month after her defeat at Sri Lanka’s eighth national election, on July 22, 1977. Although she retained her own parliamentary seat, her party was decimated. Her aging and austere opponent, Junius Richard Jayewardene, was now prime minister, with a vast parliamentary majority and a mandate to dismantle many of the programs instituted during the past seven years of Bandaranaike government. Defectors from her party were soliciting membership in Jayewardene’s United National party; others were in detention or dismissed. Racial violence had exploded, as it periodically does between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. Savage attacks were being made on her personally and on her policies.
Mrs. Bandaranaike often has been a spokesperson for the Nonaligned Movement at global gatherings. I asked her to explain the concept of nonalignment.

The movement has gone through many phases. Originally its main efforts were centered on anticolonialism and on reducing the tensions of the cold war. As both receded, the movement progressed toward securing economic gains and promoting economic development among its members. Nonalignment as a political concept merged into the demand of Third World nations for a new international economic order—a means of obtaining economic justice in a world economically colonized by the rich and powerful. By cooperating, the Third World can bring about its economic independence through global collective bargaining.

What about the profound differences between nations in the Third World?

Of course there are major differences such as those between many African states or the disagreements between India and Bangladesh that surfaced at our last conference. Sometimes advancing the interests of one segment of the Third World does have an adverse impact on another area—support for increasing oil prices is the best recent example. Only a few Third World nations are oil producers, and the rest of us suffer when prices are raised. But most of us realize that our individual interests are bound up with the collective interests of the whole Third World.

Recent internal political events in several Third World nations appear to have set back the Nonaligned Movement. Governmental changes in India, Sri Lanka, Mexico, and several other countries have removed articulate activists of nonalignment, replacing them with more conservative and domestically oriented leaders. Mrs. Bandaranaike sees a danger to the Third World in these shifts of policy.

Nonalignment is one of the few protections we have in a world where we are weak. With the removal of leaders vigorously committed to the concept of nonalignment, there is a threat to Third World unity and a possible weakening of our position in global affairs. Poor nations, especially small countries, cannot withdraw into themselves. We must realize that we are part of the world and that we can best secure economic development by acting together. Solidarity is strength. and, at the moment, I see the solidarity we so carefully built being endangered.

India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have all had drastic changes in government recently. The net result has been a major shift in the overall political balance of South Asia toward a more conservative and pro-Western orientation. I asked Sirimavo Bandaranaike about this:

There seems to be a pattern here and it adds up to benefit outside, Western interests. It's always difficult to prove external conspiracy, especially when it is grafted on to domestic political dissatisfaction. But I suspect that some of the political adversities in this area are not coincidental. We have seen external influences at work in Vietnam, in Cuba, in Southern Africa, and many other places. Why should it be any different here? [Her words were reminiscent of two other recently deposed South Asian leaders, Indira Gandhi and Pakistan's Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who have publicly proclaimed similarly intense beliefs that covert U.S. actions forced their ouster. Bandaranaike, Bhutto, and Gandhi may not be excluded from public office permanently. Their resentments could bode ill for the future of U.S. relations with Asia.—R.B.]

We talked of the role of small states in world politics.

Through a creative and innovative approach to foreign policy small states can make suggestions and exercise an influence that big powers cannot. [As examples, she cited several proposals made by Sri Lanka during her administrations—the concept of a nuclear-free zone of peace in the Indian Ocean, the idea of international fertilizer reservoirs for poorer nations, initiatives on strengthening international institutions and on global monetary reform.—R.B.]

Looking at the world today, what did Mrs. Bandaranaike see as the most vital global issues?

There are two sets of problems—those concerning the present condition of humanity and those concerning the future of our planet. In the first category are immediate urgencies such as nuclear proliferation and the arms race, the North-South dialogue about relations between the rich and poor, and sudden crises like food shortages. These are problems of adjustment and restraint in our contemporary global society. Then there are the long-term problems. These are less noticeable, but eventually as serious. They include the problems of population, the availability of natural resources, and environmental preservation. Both groups of problems have to be worked on at the same time, and it is the task of statesmen to attack the immediate problems but not to forget the others as they do this.

In her political life of twenty years Sirimavo Bandaranaike has had exchanges with every major statesman of our time. Who had impressed her most, and why?

Chou En-lai. His wisdom and knowledge far exceeded that of any other leader I have met. He was a remarkable person, and his abilities transcended his ideology. He would have been an asset in any political system in any part of the world. He understood people and had a vast range of information on world affairs. He also had the ability to see the essence of a problem and to assess all its implications. He was an extraordinarily moderate and mature man, and his advice and counsel helped me on
many occasions. I also esteem President Tito for his sagacity, skills of survival, and his seminal impact on the development of a nonaligned philosophy.

She spoke with special affection of Indira Gandhi:
Our families have been friends for many decades, and we have always had the warmest of relations. It is difficult for a small nation to exist next to a very large country; inevitably difficulties arise. But during Mrs. Gandhi's premiership we were able to resolve many of the troubling problems between our two states. Her good will and friendship have been most helpful.

Her political opponents had argued that both women were similar, and Mrs. Bandaranaike's electoral defeat following on that of Indira Gandhi was partially attributed to the influence of Indian politics on the consciousness of the Sri Lanka voter.

There may have been some impact, and there are many superficial parallels, but we are different characters and have different approaches and goals. Besides, the scale of events in our two countries is quite different.

I asked Mrs. Bandaranaike about the impact of activist foreign policy upon domestic electoral politics.

My active foreign policy was not for personal glorification. It is necessary for a small and poor nation in today's global community, and it brought major tangible benefits to Sri Lanka. [I reflected that it brought few domestic political benefits to Mrs. Bandaranaike personally—R.B.]

Politics in Sri Lanka are democratic, a rare phenomenon in the Third World. They are also volatile—since 1956 each election has seen the defeat of the government and its replacement by an opposition group. On July 22, 1977, the Republic held the eighth national election in its thirty-year history. The defeat of Sirimavo Bandaranaike's seven-year-old administration was widely predicted, but its magnitude was totally unexpected. The United National party, led for the first time by veteran politician J.R. Jayewardene, scored unprecedented gains. The parliamentary strength of Mrs. Bandaranaike's Freedom party was reduced from ninety-one to eight. Together with a small group of minority Tamil representatives, they now form a feeble opposition in the National Assembly. The present political picture is essentially one-party dominated. This may vitiate the workings of parliamentary democracy itself, for representational democracy requires a vigorous opposition and a relatively accurate reflection of national sentiment within the legislature.

What caused the defeat of the Freedom party? Mrs. Bandaranaike's explanation:
The main reasons for our defeat were the cost of living and unemployment. International economic conditions beyond our control made these worse—things like the oil price increases had a drastic effect on us, creating an inflation we could not stop. We tried our best to control it by giving government subsidies to the people and taking other measures, but they did not help much. Also I was trying to promote long-term development, and this requires some immediate sacrifices. Our people were not prepared to accept these. No other country has provided so much government assistance in areas of subsidized food and public services, but we cannot have long-term development and immediate comforts at the same time. In short, the electorate really voted for their stomachs.

It may sound strange, but there is no doubt that people were financially better-off, especially the rural farmers—and more than 80 per cent of our people live in the villages. They had more money than at any recent time, their crops were bringing good prices. But the supply could not really meet their demands. People wanted to eat better, dress themselves better, and so on. They could not get what they wanted—shortages of consumer goods and inflation prevented this. The youth were particularly dissatisfied, and the youth normally tend to oppose any government. This happens all over the world—it happened against the former government here when I won in 1970. This time the trend was against us. Young people expect a lot and are often easily disillusioned.
Defeat must have come hard to Mrs. Bandaranaike following on seven years at the head of government.

I was disappointed. I had campaigned very hard. There seemed to be a lot of support for me, and my meetings were very well attended. The elections were held on July 22. Until July 15, I felt we would win, but in the last week I knew that the trend was against us. By election night I felt we would lose, but the size of our defeat surprised everyone. Even my opponents never expected it. We made many mistakes and we must learn from them. Defeat is not new to me. After five years as prime minister I lost in 1965 and spent the next five years in opposition. So again, we have to reorganize ourselves and prepare to fight for the policies we believe in. If I had won, it was not my intention to complete another full term but to retire when my development programs were fully established—perhaps in two or three years. Now I feel an obligation to continue actively in public life.

Those who are against me won’t agree, but I have lost a great deal by being in politics—I lost my husband; my family and I lost most of our holdings and plantations because of the progressive land reforms that my government initiated. Financially we have lost considerably. I have had to sacrifice my personal life and privacy for a public career. But we have to accept hard times as well as good times and continue to fight for our cause.

Prime Minister Jayewardene assumed office on July 23, 1977. Through August serious communal violence dislocated the political and economic life of Sri Lanka. Effective mobilization of the armed forces and other emergency actions have brought a restoration of order and a reduction in the more obvious signs of lawlessness. However, resentment between three million Tamils, a minority originally of South Indian Dravidian ethnic stock, and the majority Sinhalese is deep-seated and simmers below the surface. In a small territory with a population of almost fourteen million these historic aggravations are difficult to contain.

In several public statements the new prime minister criticized the outbreaks of violence. I asked Mrs. Bandaranaike about this.

On the Left

The 1977 election was a political watershed for the Marxist movement in Sri Lanka. For almost five decades they have had articulate spokesmen in the national legislature. Their leadership is among the most distinguished and able in Asia. Between 1964 and 1976 both the Moscow-leaning Communists and the independent Socialists were junior partners in an alliance with Mrs. Bandaranaike, and they had gained considerable strength and influence. Breaking with her government, resigning their cabinet portfolios, the Marxists–Socialists ran an independent ticket, confidently presenting a third option to the Sri Lanka voter. Almost 60 per cent of the island’s population is below twenty-five years of age, economic hardship has increased significantly in the past generation, the influence of tradition is declining, industrial growth and organization have produced strong labor unions, and there are the beginnings of a politically active urban proletariat. In classical Marxist theory the objective conditions were correct, but in the election their United Front was routed: Not a single candidate was elected. Their share of the popular vote was more than halved, from 12 per cent in 1970 to 5 per cent.

What went wrong? Prime Minister J.R. Jayewardene told me that the Left had lost credibility and that most of the country saw this election as a clear contest between his United National party and Mrs. Bandaranaike’s Freedom party. His comment: “I am sorry that they are underrepresented in parliament. Their leaders would be effective opposition spokesmen, and a democracy needs an effective opposition. But what can I do? The people just did not want them.”

Socialist leader N.M. Perera, whose personal defeat after forty years of parliamentary service was a national surprise, had another view: “Our former alliance with Mrs. Bandaranaike tarnished us. We were associated in the public mind with her and her failures, and the avalanche against her swept us away too. Although we had withdrawn from our coalition with her, it was too late.”

Mrs. Bandaranaike saw the elimination of the Left in more personal terms. “They were determined to defeat me at any cost, and in the end they defeated themselves. Actually, my coalition with them damaged me politically.” She felt that the Marxist parties had caused great disruption by provoking prolonged labor unrest during her husband’s administration in the late 1960’s. In her first term in office, in 1964, she negotiated an alliance with them “to show them the problems of running a government and hoping that they would make constructive contributions.” The alliance endured for almost twelve years—when out of office in the late 1960’s, Marxist trade unions were the cutting edge of Mrs. Bandaranaike’s strategy; in power, Marxist collaboration assured few industrial disputes. She acknowledged this but reflected that labor peace had been purchased at a high price. Many of her traditional supporters, including factions of the Buddhist clergy, had become disaffected, and when the rupture with the Marxists came in 1975-76, it was difficult to recapture this lost support.—R.B.
Mrs. Bandaranaike believes that “Although Buddhism is often mistaken for a passive faith, it is a very active path.” Did she perceive religion giving way to ideology? How did she see this affecting young people? Would it lead to the disappearance of religion as a vital social force?

In Sri Lanka most of our people are still deeply influenced by religion, as I am. The youth are less so, otherwise incidents like the violent youth revolt in 1971 could not have taken place in this country. There is no doubt that the younger generation are moving away from religion, but the process is slower here than in other nations. Buddhism is still a force, as are other faiths. Secular ideologies were gaining, but after this election they seem to have lost ground. One of the tasks of older leaders like myself is to try and get the youth to renew their faith in the moral values of religion. Without this our society is going to decline—some of this has already taken place and it is due to the decline of religious belief.

On Religion

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Democracy, former prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike claims, is a fundamental in her thinking. What was her understanding of democracy? She mentioned standard definitions relating to domestic politics and then added two other elements:

Democracy today goes beyond domestic politics. We have to fight a new battle for democracy, for democracy in international affairs. Global politics has long been quite undemocratic, a few big powers making decisions for everyone. To change this and establish a new international order, both political and economic, is a new task for democracy.

Then there are women’s rights. You cannot have democracy without the full participation of women. Their role has been limited in the past, and they must get fully equal status. This is important because women generally account for about one-half of the population and depriving them of rights imposes discrimination on almost one-half of a nation.

Did the defeat of Indira Gandhi and herself set back the cause of women’s rights?

The movement for women’s rights does not depend on individual instances of victory or loss. It is a broad social revolution, and the era of women, far from being over, is just beginning.

We argued over the viability of democracy in the Third World. I suggested that its applicability was limited in the poorer regions. Mrs. Bandaranaike disagreed.

It is true that in some countries the traditions and social conditions work against the establishment of democracy. But here in Sri Lanka we have proved that democracy can work in a Third World country.

Is she worried about its future here?

Yes, very much so. That does not mean that it cannot function. What I fear is subversion of democracy, not its capacity as a working system.

Was there not an inconsistency in Third World nations advocating democracy in international affairs while internal politics is not democratic in most of these nations?

That is correct, but there are many inconsistencies in politics. Big powers who pride themselves on democracy at home actively support dictatorships abroad.

Revolutionaries sometimes support reactionaries, and so on. This should not prevent us from trying to make international politics more democratic. In fact, some nations may learn the value of domestic democracy from participating in this international process.

Part of the Bandaranaike concept of democracy embraced socialism. I asked for clarification. She explained that she saw the goals of democracy as both political and economic.

They should go together—one without the other is not complete. You cannot get perfect democracy anywhere, but economic justice and distribution of wealth are a very necessary part of the whole of democracy. Years ago my husband said that democracy consisted of two groups of rights—the rights of the individual and the rights of society. There has to be a balance between the two, but sometimes advancing one set of rights limits the other. Advancing the economic rights of society as a whole by policies of distributive justice to benefit the underprivileged is a vital part of democracy. We tried to do this in my administration—land reform, nationalization of some private enterprises, placing ceilings on high incomes, control of certain prices were among our efforts. The outcome may not always have been as successful as we had hoped, but we tried.

Socialism as she defined it had little relationship to the Marxist vision; it was more of a populist concept in which private commercial activity would coexist with state-owned monopolies. National planning and control of the key segments of the economy by the government could achieve both distributive justice for the poor and encourage individual initiative, which is one of the advantages of private enterprise. Was not the outcome, measured by Sri Lanka’s recent economic performance, disappointing?

Yes, it was. But you must remember two factors—development takes time, and our programs will not reach fruition for a few years. We were also disadvantaged by unprecedented and adverse international economic circumstances. In time my government’s policies would have produced solid results, evidence of this was just beginning to show. With the present regime I am not so sure.

—R.B.