By Priyath Liyanage

Popular Buddhism, Politics & the Ethnic Problem

The vast majority of Sinhalese Sri Lankans are practising Buddhists who attend temple regularly and celebrate traditional festivals. All major festivals are national holidays, including the monthly full moon (*poya* day). Some estimates date the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka as early as 250 BC. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, there was a popular revival in response to the proselytising of evangelical Christian missionaries. One of the key features of this revival was the popularisation of many of the historic chronicles of Sinhalese Sri Lanka, notably the *Mahavamsa*, written in the sixth century AD.

The *Mahavamsa* details three separate occasions on which Lord Buddha is said to have visited Sri Lanka. It also identifies Prince Vijaya, the hero of *Mahavamsa*, as the father of the Sinhala people. Vijaya is said to have landed on the island of Lanka from Sinhapura in Bengal on the day of Buddha's death. On his deathbed, Lord Buddha is said to have asked the god Sakra to protect Vijaya in his historic mission to Sri Lanka, where he prophesied Buddhism would flourish for 5,000 years. The *Mahavamsa* also lauds the piety of the ancient Sinhala Buddhist king Duttugamunu who drove his Tamil rivals out of Sri Lanka and united the whole of the island under his leadership. Through the Buddhist revival, the *Mahavamsa's* potent fusing of national identity, territorial integrity and religious duty reverberated into modern Sinhalese politics.

Buddhism and politics in post-colonial Sri Lanka

While Buddhist orthodoxy tends to promote the renunciation of all worldly concerns, there remains significant theological latitude for individual monks (*bhikkus*) to justify political activity which aims to reform society 'for the good'. Since independence, Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders have been active in the political arena whenever they felt it appropriate, particularly on issues relating to the primacy of the Buddhist faith and the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka.

On these issues, and others such as language, the Buddhist clergy as a whole (the *Sangha*) have exerted a particularly powerful influence in Sri Lankan political life. In 1951, resolutions

The Sri Lankan parliament building in Colombo

Credit: Leonard Freed/Magnum Photos

Buddhism and non-violence

While most of the *Sangha* have been content to influence party politics from the sidelines, a number of monks have become more engaged politically, associating themselves openly with Marxist and Sinhala nationalist activism. In the 1980s, and particularly after the signing of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, many became increasingly militant in rejecting proposals for federalism or devolution. The Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (People's Liberation Front — JVP) was very successful at this time in recruiting *bhikkus* in support of its armed anti-accord insurrection.

The JVP monks and the *bhikkus* who joined the army after the 1995 breakdown of peace talks caused deep confusion among those who perceive Buddhism as a philosophy of peace and non-violence. To committed Sinhala Buddhist ideologues, however, violence can be justified to counter the threat posed by the Indo-Lanka Accord to the unity of land, race and religion in Sri Lanka. Of course, many Sri Lankan Buddhists follow Lord Buddha's teaching of *Vassetta Suthra*, which rejects all divisions between human beings. These individuals cannot sanction support of or participation in violence. Even they, however, often harbour deep anxieties about perceived threats to their religion which can be and have been manipulated politically.

of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress to the prime minister included a statement that 'the ... government is legally and morally bound to protect and maintain Buddhism and Buddhist institutions'. It also demanded the restoration of Buddhism to 'the paramount position of prestige which rightfully belongs to it'. In the same year, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was established with a vow to promote Sinhala Buddhist interests, signalling a new era in Sri Lankan politics. Since its formation, the SLFP has alternated in government with the United National Party (UNP), with both parties jockeying for the favour of the Sinhala Buddhist establishment and its huge popular constituency.

Sinhalese politicians have often been calculating in their exploitation of 'the Buddhist card', and the *Sangha* have been manipulated as much as they have been deferred to. It must be remembered, however, that Sri Lankan Buddhists do strongly believe that they have a duty to protect and uphold their faith in Sri Lanka and that tens of thousands of Buddhist monks have taken sacred vows to do so. When Buddhist leaders voice concerns that the faith is under threat, this is an extremely powerful and emotive message.

Shifting perceptions of devolution

The argument that a unitary state with one religion and one language is required to honour the sacred trust of Lord Buddha, has clear ramifications for the self-determination aspirations of Tamils and other minorities living in Sri Lanka. A corollary of this argument — that federalism constitutes a threat to Buddhism — is voiced by some *bhikkus* and by ordinary Sri Lankan Buddhists too. According to some Sinhala factions, all minority ethnicities should respect the dominance of Sinhala Buddhist culture in Sri Lanka and assimilate into it.

As a counterpoint to this radical nationalism, secular democrats, one or two small left-wing parties and a handful of trade union groups have consistently campaigned within the Sinhalese polity for a more moderate approach to the ethnic problem. From 1987, the United Bikshu Congress, an organisation of social activist monks, also started campaigning for devolution. Due partly to the efforts of these groups, strident Sinhala nationalism has become increasingly marginalised in recent years. Today, though 'federalism' remains outside the bounds of acceptable political vocabulary, the need for 'devolution' is widely accepted.

This sea change within Sinhalese society has been gradual as the open market, modern education and globalisation have lessened the political influence of the *Sangha*. It was strenghtened after the 1990 renewal of hostilities in the north and east between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which demanded increased army recruitment and the sustained sacrifice of young Sinhalese lives. The popular thirst for an end to the war was then nurtured and consolidated by the People's Alliance and its leader Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge, who in 1994 achieved unprecedented electoral success on a platform of peace and negotiations with the LTTE.

As euphoria at the prospect of peace spread, the precepts of non-violence and accommodation regained primacy within the Buddhist establishment, even among those who had vigorously opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord. This was illustrated in 1995 in a joint statement issued by prominent members of the *Sangha* and the Catholic clergy which broadly supported government devolution proposals. The statement clearly acknowledged the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and accepted that war was not a legitimate solution. It suggested instead that a negotiated settlement based on devolution of power was the only way forward, specifying that, 'whatever the solution may be, it should not be a Sinhala solution imposed by force on Tamil people'.

Perhaps the most important indication of the erosion of hardline Sinhalese opinion, however, was the publication of the interim report of the Sinhala Commission in September 1997. The commission consisted of a large number of Sinhala nationalist organisations from all parts of the country, convened in December 1996 'to inquire into and report on the injustices caused to the Sinhala people'.

The interim report was primarily a riposte to the PA government's draft constitution. Couched in pro-Sinhala language, it roundly condemned 'Eelamists' (an ill-defined group possibly including liberal federalists as well as LTTE supporters). 'With the emasculation of the powers of [central] government', it stated, 'the future of Buddhism in this country will indeed be bleak'. Despite its hardline rhetoric, however, the surprise of the Interim Report was its tacit acceptance of the principles of the 13th amendment to the constitution which enacted the devolution provisions of the Indo-Lanka Accord. Ten years earlier, these provisions had been bitterly opposed by Sinhala Buddhist nationalists.

Popular Sinhala Buddhist opinion, therefore, has largely conceded the need to respect and protect the civil liberties of Tamils and other minorities. While many continue to equate a threat to the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka with a threat to the Sinhala identity, it is also widely accepted that devolution *per se* will not mean the bifurcation of the island.

The *Dalada Maligawa*

The Dalada Maligawa is at the heart of Sinhala Buddhist identity. Worship of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha housed in the temple is considered equal to the worship of Lord Buddha himself. While of enormous religious significance, the relic is also associated with the sovereignty of Sri Lanka. When it was captured by the British in 1818, this was considered by many a defeat more decisive than the loss of lands; it signified the beginning of total subjugation. As its loss has symbolised ultimate defeat for the Sinhalese, the exploding of a high powered bomb only a few feet from the relic was hugely provocative.

The Dalada Maligawa, bombed by the LTTE in January 1998

Nevertheless, many Sinhalese remain suspicious that Tamil nationalist claims for '*self determination*' still entail the division of the country, and the hardline demands of the LTTE continue to inspire heartfelt resistance. Reflecting this popular dichotomy, Sinhala politicians in the south now argue about the appropriate degree of devolution while, in the north and east, the military execute war on the LTTE with ever-increasing vigour.

The present danger — devolution and the LTTE

The increased intensity of the government-LTTE war since 1995 has resulted in more bombings in the south and renewed anxieties among southern Sinhala Buddhists. On 25 January 1998, these anxieties were intensified when an LTTE suicide bomber targeted the sacred Temple of the Tooth (*Dalada Maligawa*) in Kandy, causing considerable damage to the building, killing 13 people and injuring 20 more. Sinhalese Buddhists were appaled by this desecration. Secular peace activists in the south were also deeply disconcerted by the attack which seemed to target not the Sri Lankan state, but the Sinhala people as a whole.

While the bombing of the *Dalada Maligawa* caused deep outrage and sorrow, there was almost no violent reaction. The only significant retaliation was reported from Kandy, where a small Sinhala mob attacked a Hindu temple but was soon dispersed on the orders of government ministers. Considering the long history of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, this restraint on the part of the Sinhala people and their rulers reflects a remarkable transformation in Sinhala communal attitudes.

At the same time, however, the bombing galvanised popular Sinhala opinion behind the government's 'anti-terrorist' agenda. Through this agenda, the government has represented Tamil citizens as innocent victims of the war, seeking to separate them, both physically and in the minds of the population, from the nar-

rowly nationalist and anti-Sinhala LTTE. Since the bombing, people continue to voice concern for Tamil aspirations in general, while asserting that the LTTE must be defeated totally. In June 1998, even *bhikkus* who support the devolution proposals of the draft constitution demonstrated outside the UK High Commission to demand that Britain outlaw the 'terrorist' LTTE and close down their London offices.

Current dilemmas

The ascendancy of moderation within the Sinhalese community has meant that, to rally public opinion, the PA government has had to portray itself as peace-maker, even when justifying its continued war efforts. In almost all public gatherings, the president and her closest allies present the 'war for peace' as a short-term but necessary evil on the road to devolution and peace. Nevertheless, the army is having difficulty in recruiting, despite a reduction in minimum qualifications and increases in other benefits, while a recent amnesty to call back more than 15,000 deserters did not meet with much success. In 1994, the non-violent and accommodating dimensions of popular Buddhism blossomed in Sri Lanka and the Sinhala people gave an overwhelming democratic mandate for a just and honourable settlement to the ethnic problem. Since then, their support for the war has been partial, reluctant and motivated primarily by exasperation at LTTE intransigence. ■

'Anti-terrorism' and foreign policy

Having banned the LTTE within Sri Lanka in the wake of the *Dalada Maligawa* bombing, the government has redoubled its efforts to persuade western governments to do the same. In late 1997, the Tigers were included on the list of 'terrorist' organisations banned in the USA, while India and Malaysia instituted a similar ban some time ago. The UK is now a major target for Sri Lankan government lobbying as the LTTE's International Secretariat remains open in London.

The fight against 'International Tamil Tiger Terrorism' has been spearheaded by Sri Lanka's foreign minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, himself Tamil. Key dimensions of the campaign include promotion of the United Nations International Convention Against Terrorism, which Sri Lanka was the first to sign in January 1998. The convention proposes sweeping measures to cut away the financial and organisational underpinnings of broadly-defined international terrorism.