SRI LANKA: MASS COMMUNICATION IN A CIVIL-REGIONAL CONFLICT

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This comment examines the role of mass communication in the civil-regional conflict in Sri Lanka. The conflict is described thus to indicate both internal aspect, wherein Sri Lankan citizens of Tamil as well as of Sinhala ethnic origin have taken up arms against the state, and its external aspect, wherein the regional power, India, armed and provided a base area to secessionist groups on it soil prior to July 1987 and now has between 50,000 and 100,000 troops on Sri Lankan territory. The role of mass communication is examined primarily from within the Gramscian framework of the state (Gramsci 1971). The authors consider Gramsci's concept of hegemony and coercion to be extremely useful in analyzing multiethnic Third World societies such as Sri Lanka (Keerawella and Samarajiva, 1987). It is recognized that there is overlap between the concept of hegemony and the assertion made by Janeway that

what the powerful want from the weak...is assurance that their power is held rightfully, within a relationship which sanctions its use and validates the rights of these rulers to rule. What the powerful need is the consent of the governed...; and this consent can be granted only by the governed, the other member of the power relationship. Force of arms or physical might cannot extract this grant (cited in Anderson 1988).

Sri Lanka has been in the throes of a civil and regional conflict for the past decade. During this period, the country's defence budget has grown from one of the smallest in the world (in absolute terms, and as a percentage of government expenditures) to around 15%, a closer to the Third World norm. The armed forces, one described by many as performing a ceremonial function, have grown in leaps and bounds. Needless to say, the role of the military in civil society has greatly expanded. However, there has been no military takeover nor a formal suspension of the constitutional system. The political regime fashioned by the Jayewardene government during the past decade is a peculiar amalgam defying the easy description.

Sri Lanka has one of the strongest democratic traditions in the Third World. Its people have enjoyed universal franchise since 1933. The country's leftist movement played a vigorous role in the early years of independence, reaching a high point with the Hartal (national strike) of 1952 that came very close to paralyzing the state. Enthusiastic voters changed governments in every election from 1956 to 1977, in all cases
going against the recommendations of the dominant media (de Silva and Siriwardene, 1977:54-55). The year 1956 was a watershed, marking the end of attempts at accommodation between Sinhala (74% of the total population in 1981) and Sri Lankan Tamil (12.6%) elites and the beginning of many efforts by hitherto marginalized groups within the majority to more actively participate in politics.

There have been only two serious extra-parliamentary attempts to capture political power since independence. The first was the unsuccessful coup attempt of 1962 led by senior officers of the Armed Forces and the Police (Horowitz, 1980). The second was the defeated insurrection of 1971 (Alles, 1977). The coup was foiled without a shot being fired, but resulted in a restructuring of the Armed Forces that increased the degree of civilian control. The 1971 insurrection was crushed by military force and led to an enhanced role for the Armed Forces and the Police. Emergency rule has been an increasingly important element of the Sri Lankan polity since the 1960s. Originally conceived as a state of exception, emergency rule gradually became the norm in the 1960s and the 1970s. Rule under emergency powers was heavily criticized in the election campaign of 1977 and the Jayewardene government which took power that year placed constraints on emergency rule such as periodic approval by a two-thirds majority in Parliament. However, the changes were cosmetic. Many emergency regulations were incorporated into ordinary legislation. Parliamentary control, which may have made sense under the previous Westminster-type constitutions, or even the Gaullist-type constitution adopted in 1978, ceased to have much meaning in the context of the extensive constitutional gerrymandering that characterized the post-1977 period.

The Constitution has been amended on 13 separate occasions since 1978. An emasculated Parliament consisting of M.P.s elected in 1977 under a first-past-the-post electoral system whose terms have been extended by a controversial referendum, M.P.s appointed by political parties to succeed those who have died, resigned, or been removed, and a few elected in by-elections the government has deigned to hold, exercises little or no control over the President or the exercise of emergency powers. A 1983 constitutional amendment banned and excluded from Parliament M.P.s from the Tamil United Liberation Front including the Leader of the Opposition, effectively disenfranchising all the voters in the Tamil dominated Northern Province and a significant number of voters in the Eastern Province.

The political regime created by President Jayewardene is a peculiar amalgam. The country is under emergency rule, but specific regulations such as restrictions on the distribution of handbills have been successfully challenged in the Supreme Court. General elections have not been held for over 10 years but elections continue to be held for provincial and municipal councils as are by-elections the government chooses to call for tactical reasons. The Sri Lankan Tamil minority in the North and the East was severely repressed, but the political party of the "Indian" Tamil minority in the
Centre of the country (5.6 of the population in 1981) is part of the Jayewardene government and has won some major demands.

There is a degree of militarization of the administrative structure in that coordinating officers from the Armed Forces were appointed to administrative units in the North and the East when the civil war was being fought in those areas by the government, and to districts in the predominantly Sinhala areas since the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord. These administrative officers generally have powers that supercede those of the civilian administrators, the Government Agents. However, another process that may be described as a politicization of the military is also going on, and may even be overshadowing the former process. The key military unit that received Israeli and British mercenary training, the Special Task Force (STF) commandos, is generally considered to be under the political control of the President's faction of the ruling party. In fact, it is said to be under the control of the President's son. The STF was formerly deployed in the crucial Eastern Province, but has been active in the South against the President's Sinhala opponents since the arrival of the Indian Army. All government M.P.s have been granted the status of gazetted police officers within the last year and the unofficial militias some of them command have been extremely active against Sinhala opponents and are commonly known as the "Green Tigers" - drawing a parallel with the Tamil militant group known as the Tigers that has been most ruthless in its attacks on Sinhala civilians. Even the regular military forces have not escaped this politicization. Promotions of senior officers and the selection of new recruits to the ballooning forces have been subject to strong political influence. The government recently passed an amnesty law shielding military and security personnel from prosecution of crimes committed while in uniform, a measure typical of military regimes.

Mass Communication

State power in Sri Lanka has been weakened over the past three decades in that coercion has come to play a larger role than hegemony (Gramsci 1971). In parts of the country such as the Northern Province, the state lost hegemonic control in the 1960s and the 1970s and coercive control in the 1980s. However, the situation was quite different in the Sinhala areas until 1987. Despite the existence of emergency rule, state control here was not primarily through coercion. Hegemony, or control with the consent of the ruled, was the predominant mode. Increased economic opportunities resulting from "open economy" policies and/or the perception of such opportunities in the minds of the populace, combined with nationalistic-chauvinistic appeals and effective sabotage of opposition strategies kept the Jayewardene government comfortably in power until 1987. The mass media played an important role in this hegemonic control.

Sri Lankan has two television stations, one national and the other serving the capital and its suburbs. Both are government owned. Radio broadcasting is completely
government controlled. There are a number of national channels and three regional services. There are five newspaper groups of which two are of minor importance, one publishing in Tamil in the Sinhala dominated areas and another limiting itself to weeklies. Of the three major groups, one is government owned and the others were broadly supportive of government policy though there were significant differences in the degree of support extended by particular newspapers. The country witnessed a boom in periodical publishing and audiocassette production in the 1980s. These media were primarily entertainment oriented, but their economic independence from government had implications for the political process as discussed below. Important government leaders published their own information-oriented, general interest periodicals through their respective ministries. The Sinhala film industry (there is no Sri Lankan Tamil film industry) went through a rough patch with the introduction of television in 1978 and was dependent on a government corporation for distribution, but retained a considerable degree of independence from the state.

The importance of the mass media is highlighted by the struggle for its control following the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord in July 1987 and the resultant crisis of hegemonic control over the Sinhalese. The Accord, which brought Indian troops onto Sri Lankan soil, was opposed principally by the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a political party that had been proscribed by the government without good reason in 1983. Two major factions within the government those led by Prime Minister Premadasa and National Security Minister Athulathmudali, were also opposed to the Accord. The government imposed censorship immediately following the signing of the agreement between President Jayewardene and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Censorship applied to state-owned media as well as private media. Cutting off media access to the dissenting factions within the government and limiting the political damage caused by the Accord appeared to be the prime objectives of the first stage of censorship. Dr Sarath Amunugama, a former senior government and Unesco official and one of Sri Lanka's leading communication scholars, was appointed as a censor and functioned effectively as the media czar. He personally supervised the national television's news operations and was the primary censor of the most popular Sinhala daily, the Divaina. The appointment of a person from outside government as censor was unprecedented.

In the case of television news, news room personnel were more or less supplanted by Amunugama and editors brought in by him. It was not censorship as commonly understood but more in the nature of a takeover. The reason for this was the nature of factional control of government media operations. Over the long rule of the Jayewardene government, different factions within the government led by the President, the Prime Minister, the Minister for National Security, the Minister for Lands and Mahaveli Development, and others had established a form of condominium rule over news operations in television, radio, and also the government owned newspapers. Each news organization had journalists whose primary loyalties were to political factions, not the organization, or even the government as a whole. At the moment of
crisis, the President overrode the condominium regime and took over control. Once the situation within the government was stabilized (major splits were avoided), Amunugama relaxed his control of TV news. The direct censorship of Divaina, the Sinhala daily which has been thought to be most sympathetic to the proscribed JVP was replaced by another form of control: Amunugama joined the board of directors of the Island Group of Newspapers that published Divaina. There has since been a noticeable change in the paper’s editorial policy.

In the Gramscian framework, the mass media is seen as a crucial element of the exercise of hegemonic power. The media plays a role in creating and sustaining the consent of the people to be ruled. The media itself is controlled hegemonically, not coercively. However, at certain moments of crisis the consent of media institutions and personnel is withdrawn or becomes uncertain. Then the state has to exercise coercive power over its main instrument of hegemonic power. That is what happened in Sri Lanka in July 1987. But coercive power is unstable and it is necessary to return to hegemonic control of the media if hegemonic control over society as a whole is to be restored. The struggle over control of the media was not limited to factional in-fighting within the government. The JVP is generally considered to be responsible for the destruction of the Ruhunu regional broadcasting service facility in the south of Sri Lanka and an extremely successful campaign to limit the distribution of newspapers of the government-owned newspaper group. The radio facility was attacked immediately after the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord. About two months later, newspaper distributors began to receive anonymous letters ordering them to cease dealing in government-owned newspapers under threat of death. These warnings were taken seriously, in light of the JVP’s widespread campaign of political terror that claimed among many others, two successive chairmen of the ruling party. Buses transporting government-owned newspapers to the South of the country, the JVP’s power base, were burned. Within a few weeks, government-owned newspaper were unavailable in many areas of the country.

The JVP has been attempting to establish its own media. This party, which was responsible for the 1971 insurrection, has based its media strategy on two elements it pioneered in its earlier campaign: the wall poster and the audiocassette. In 1970 and 1971, the JVP impressed the population by putting up large and well done wall posters in many parts of the country. The message was more than the slogans on the posters. By putting up the identical slogan in many parts of the country on the same day, the JVP was demonstrating its organizational strength. The JVP was the true pioneer of the political use of the audiocassette, preceding the Ayatollah Khomeini (Mowlana 1979) by almost a decade. Being a clandestine party with a charismatic leader, the JVP used audiocassettes of the leader’s speeches for organizing and recruiting purposes in the period preceding its failed insurrection. At that time, it was necessary for party activists to take cassette players along with them since the technology was not widely available. The "open economy" policies of the Jayewardene government have resulted in the broad dissemination of audiocassette players making it possible for the
JVP to circulate cassettes without having to organize listening groups. The JVP has also made a number of attempts to establish a clandestine radio broadcasting service. A successful broadcast had not been recorded as at July 1988.

The JVP's broadcasting strategy is not the first for a Sri Lankan oppositional group. Tamil militant groups made many radio broadcasts during their heyday in the Jaffna peninsula, including broadcasts in Sinhala aimed at Sinhala audiences on a regular basis. In fact, they even ran a television service in Jaffna called "Kurukavahini." This was said to be more a money making cum cultural venture than a strictly political activity. Kurukavahini was financed by listener fees collected by armed militants coming to the door and by advertising. Programming staples included old Tamil movies from Tamilnadu and videotaped wedding ceremonies broadcast for a fee. The JVP has significantly greater logistical problems than the Tamil groups in establishing supply lines and ensuring the safety of its transmitter, not having a safe base area in a foreign territory nor the assistance of foreign governments.

A brief mention must be made of access to media by unarmed, legal oppositional groups. A number of political parties have their own newspapers which have relatively small circulations. The largest newspaper of this type is a Sinhala daily affiliated with the Communist Party which is periodically closed down under emergency regulations and is perpetually fighting libel cases filed by government politicians. Jaffna, the power base of the Tamil militants, had a number of newspapers that kept publishing even after the main transport links with Colombo were cut. They were pro-militant, including an English newspaper edited by a Sinhala journalist.

Sinhala opposition groups are generally excluded from the major media. However, some interesting alternative modes evolved. A major Colombo-based oppositional party was led by the country's most popular film actor, Vijaya Kumaratunga. His role as a film personality enabled him to use film periodicals to publicize his party's views that were excluded from the government media. In the case of one of his missions to Jaffna to negotiate the release of some prisoners of war held by a Tamil militant group, he was accompanied by a video crew. This turned out to be a good move since attempts were later made to depict his mission as a surrender to the Tamil groups. Kumaratunga was also a popular singer. The government radio did not broadcast any of his songs, but he reached his audience through audiocassettes. Despite the government's attempts to block his access to the public through the major mass media, his films kept drawing crowds and the large hoardings all over the country carried his likeness. Kumaratunga's ability to reach mass audiences despite government control of the media must be seen in the context of South Asian politics which has drawn many of its luminaries such as Annadurai, M. G. Ramachandran, Karunanidhi, and Shivaji Ganeshan of Tamilnadu, and N. T. Rama Rao of Andra Pradesh from the film industry. Kumaratunga's assassination in early 1988, presumably by a front organization of the JVP, robbed his party of a potent weapon in the struggle for access to the mass audience.
The periodicals and audiocassette industries have provided some space for journalists and cultural workers at odds with the government. Sri Lanka's premier songstress, Nanda Malini, was banned for some months from radio and TV in 1986 for supporting a nurses' strike and periodically has had songs banned because of their alleged political content. Her principal media have now become the audiocassette and the stage show.

Concluding Comments

The Sri Lankan case provides insights into the interaction between politico-military processes and communication in the context of a weak state. The hegemonic power of the state first failed to retain a key ethnic minority's consent to be governed. As the coercive power of the state faltered in the face of external intervention for which the conditions were created by the hegemonic crisis, the hegemonic control over the rest of the population also faltered. The very control of the media became dependent on the coercive force. But coercive control of the media is counter productive in the achievement of hegemonic objectives. They lost what credibility they had in the eyes of the ruled. The recent lifting of the proscription on the JVP and the holding of by-elections are signs of a continuing effort to regain hegemonic control which may be reflected in media policies too.

Hegemonic failure led to the greater use of coercion. The entire state became militarized. In its specific Sri Lankan manifestation, the militarization occurred under the leadership of the ruling political party. This does not suggest that the military is unimportant. The careful attention paid to the military by Minister Athulathmudali, a potential successor to the President, and even by the late Vijaya Kumaratunga in his missions to free military prisoners, testify to the political importance of the military in the Sri Lankan polity. However, the Sri Lankan military may be more accurately described as having veto power rather than positive power under the present conditions. This has been reinforced by the overall veto powers exercised on Sri Lankan politics by India.

It is tempting to think that the present mutation of the Sri Lankan state is best understood in terms of the development of the Nazi state. The assumption of power by a political party through democratic means, the role of storm troopers under the control of the party, the existence of highly politicized military formations such as the SS, and the control of the regular military by the party suggest this hypothesis. However, there is a key difference. The Nazi state was hegemonically and coercively strong while the Sri Lankan state is weak. The evolution of the Sri Lankan state will have to be studied on its own terms.
REFERENCES


