

Insurrectionary Violence in Sri Lanka: The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna Insurgencies of 1971 and 1987-1989

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A Review Article

Prins Gunasekara, *Sri Lanka in Crisis: A Lost Generation - The Untold Story*, Colombo, S Godage & Brothers, 1998, 776pp.

Abstract

As this article shows the book being reviewed does not deal adequately with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's (JVP) insurgency of 1971, where the United Front (UF) coalition government led by Mrs Sirima Bandaranaike resorted to a repressive policy which resulted in a death rate that, in the two weeks the insurrection lasted, was proportionately heavier than in the JVP insurgency of 1987-89. The author's virtual neglect of the government repression of 1971 is in marked contrast to his treatment of the state's counter offensive against the JVP in 1987-89 to which he devotes several chapters. The article points out that the shooting war which became the second JVP insurgency of 1987-89 was started not by the government in power at that time but by the JVP. While anti-Indianism was supposed to be the *raison d'être* of the JVP's second insurgency, none of the JVP's targets and victims were from the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). The book recounts in detail how close the system came to succumbing to the JVP in 1989 and also how, very close links between the JVP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) were, with each party seeking to use the other for its own purposes. Given the JVP's refusal to compromise, the Premadasa government "fighting for its very existence with its back to the wall" had only two options: either to hand over power to the JVP, or to try to face the challenge of the JVP. The government opted the latter and succeeded in crushing the movement in late 1989. By the middle of December 1989 the country was back to normal.

"I summon history to my aid."

- Wole Soyinka

I

The First JVP Insurrection of 1971 and its Aftermath

The greatest merit of Prins Gunasekara's book, *'Sri Lanka in Crisis: A Lost Generation - The Untold Story* (hereafter *A Lost Generation*) is that it is a necessary (albeit incomplete) attempt to deal with a very important phase in the post-independence history of Sri Lanka. This book covers a period of roughly two decades—from the first JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) insurrection of 1971 to the second JVP insurrection of 1987-89 (with brief forays into the 1990-93 period). It was a period of tragedy and triumph—tragedy because it contained two episodes of insurgency associated with the JVP, and one prolonged episode of separatist violence led by the Tamil groups, with their share of death and destruction; triumph because Sri Lankan democracy emerged in 1989 from an unprecedented crisis of survival, battered but resilient.

The opening chapter in Prins Gunasekara's *Sri Lanka in Crisis: A Lost Generation - The Untold Story* deals with the first JVP insurrection of 1971. One cannot but wonder whether a mere 17 pages out of a total of 776 is adequate to deal with one of the most important events in the modern history of Sri Lanka. It is also significant that this chapter barely mentions the then United Front (UF) government's ferociously violent response to this attempt by a group of poorly armed and badly organised youth to capture state power. The UF was a coalition between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by Mrs Bandaranaike, and two Marxist parties, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP) Moscow Wing.

The 1971 insurrection lasted for five weeks. The rebels did not succeed in assassinating a single prominent member of the ruling coalition or for that matter physically hurting (either a Parliamentarian or a Cabinet Minister) or a senior police officer. It cannot be credibly argued that they posed anywhere as serious a threat to state power as they were to do in 1987-90. The UF government which had come into office less than one year earlier was still popular; the anti-people and at times bizarre economic policies which made the regime unpopular were still to be implemented. As Prins Gunasekara points out: "The JVP cadre[s] did not have guns or sufficient explosives to counter the fire power of the state. Instead they carried wooden replicas of guns, to frighten the police or the security forces whom they had to subdue" (p 24). Most importantly its charismatic 'maximum leader' Rohana Wijeweera was already in custody. And the regime had the complete backing of the UNP, the main opposition party, against the JVP. Despite all these favourable factors the UF government unleashed a firestorm of repression which is yet to be matched proportionately: 15,000-20,000 killed in just 5 weeks. This is an average of 3,500 deaths per week—far higher than the 625 per week figure for the second insurrection which was suppressed by the UNP. The author's description of the counter attack of the state in 1971 as 'ruthless' seems indecently inadequate. The reports of Amnesty International, an article by Lord Avebury in the *Manchester Guardian* and in *Le Monde* by the famed agronomist Rene Dumont and journalist Jacques Decronoy provide graphic testimony of the scale, scope and character of the repression of April-May 1971.

Prins Gunasekara admits that it was the UF government which introduced the practice of extra judicial killings in 1971: "...the events of 1971, the first JVP insurrection and the state response to it, when rebels were frog marched to the nearest cemetery or bridge over a river and shot in cold blood" (p 670). However, this very significant point is mentioned almost in passing in a subsequent chapter dealing with the government repression in the 1987-89 period. This is in marked contrast to the author's treatment of the state's counter-offensive against the second JVP insurgency—several long chapters are devoted to the subject, with detailed accounts of methods of killing/torture and family histories of victims.

There is also Prins Gunasekara's failure to compare and contrast the different *modus operandi* of the two JVP insurgencies. In 1971 the JVP started off by attacking police stations. The second time around the starting point was lethal violence against radical left leaders and activists. In 1971 the JVP in the main targeted members of the police and the armed forces; though there were civilian killings, they were few in number. In 1987-89 the JVP gave priority to the killing of civilians—be it political rivals or simple citizens who disobeyed their innumerable orders and *fatwahas*. In 1971 it was the regime which branded even non/anti-JVP leftists 'insurgents' and imprisoned them—LSSP MP, Vasudeva Nanayakkara, breakaway SLFPer S D Bandaranaike and the leader of the Maoist Ceylon Communist Party, N Shanmugathasan being the best known examples. In 1987-89 the JVP branded leftists with proven anti-government/UNP credentials 'traitors' and targeted them and murdered quite a few. The contrast in political behaviour displayed in 1971 and 1987-90 demonstrates the contrasting character of the two insurrections.

Prins Gunasekara makes a praiseworthy effort to record the kaleidoscopic events of those two decades. His book is factually rich, containing a considerable amount of valuable information and some useful insights. He also endeavours to make sense of what happened, of what went wrong and why; how one of the most peaceful countries in the Third World became in a period of less than two decades the most violent place on earth, next to Lebanon (as the London *Economist* described it). Therefore despite its many weaknesses *A Lost Generation* is still a book that must be read by anyone (Sri Lankan or non-Sri Lankan) who wishes to understand and reflect on the past, the present and the future of this country.

As a participant in many of the events he writes about, Prins Gunasekara is understandably subjective. Unfortunately this subjectivism causes him to ignore or trivialise many important episodes and aspects in the story of which he is the narrator, while expending much paper and ink on things which are but appendices, at best. This weakness is particularly evident in his handling of the JVP's second insurrection.

His failure to deal with the genesis of the JVP's campaign of violence is a serious flaw in his book. The UNP (United National Party) in 1983 committed the signal (and completely unwarranted) error of proscribing the JVP on spurious charges. This unjust proscription of the JVP was perhaps the single biggest mistake committed by the J R Jayewardene regime, not excluding July 1983—since contrary to the current dominant myths, the UNP did not perpetrate the July 1983 riots; it just mishandled them. There was no evidence to connect the JVP, as a party, with the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983; nor was it secretly preparing to launch an armed struggle to overthrow the state or the UNP. On the contrary, the JVP was comfortably settling into the political mainstream and beginning to enjoy the fruits of high profile electoral politics. They did not willingly or voluntarily leave the mainstream; they were forced out of it by the Jayewardene regime.

Therefore it is correct to say that with this unwarranted proscription, the state commenced the political attack on the JVP. But the shooting war which became the second JVP insurgency of 1987-89 was started not by the UNP but by the JVP. Prins Gunasekara talks of the repression visited on the JVP by the state after the proscription. At this point it is important to mention that the repression on the part of the state (and its security apparatus) did not go beyond detention and perhaps physical assault. Even according to Prins Gunasekara it did not include lethal violence. This effectively debunks a myth which is very much in vogue (a myth to which the book's author also subscribes)—that the state started the killing and the JVP's use of lethal violence (however abhorrent) was reactive by nature. The truth is the polar opposite. The JVP drew first blood—of the Left, the security forces and the UNP, in that order. The use of lethal violence on the part of all these entities against the JVP (irrespective of the magnitude) was essentially a reactive violence, a counter violence. The game of political murder was commenced by the JVP—though Prins Gunasekara consistently omits to mention this all important fact in his book. Significantly, the JVP's first victim was not a representative of the bourgeois state or the

UNP which proscribed the JVP, but a radical student activist, with impeccable anti-UNP credentials—Daya Pathirana,ⁱ the leader of the Independent Students Union (ISU) of the University of Colombo!

Prins Gunasekara says of the JVP's activism during the post 1983 period: "A hunted animal on the run for its life had little time, or inclination to indulge in extra (parliamentary) activity" (p 246). The author is correct in the sense that at least till 1987 the JVP hardly launched any attacks on either the state or the ruling UNP. However the reason for this absence of extra parliamentary activity was not that it was on the run but that it was too busy launching armed attacks on its leftist rivals/competitors. The JVP certainly had both the 'time' and the 'inclination' to plan and execute the Pathirana assassination on 15 December 1986. It had both the 'time' and the 'inclination' to plan and execute a series of bomb attacks on the Sri Lanka Mahajana Partyⁱⁱ (SLMP) public meetings as well as on the residences of a number of left leaders (such as Vijaya Kumaratunga) throughout 1985 and 1986.

The Daya Pathirana assassination was a watershed in the JVP's post-1983 history. It played a key role in deciding the nature and the trajectory of the JVP's second insurgency. Prins Gunasekara however mentions the Pathirana assassination only in passing, though he devotes fifteen pages to recount the life stories of a doctor and a medical student who were among the 'disappeared'. Whatever the reason for this rather curious omission, the outcome is the author's near total failure to understand the essential character of the JVP's second insurgency.

Why did the JVP commence its 'armed struggle' by targeting radical leftists—and the very ones who had clearly spoken out against the proscription of the JVP? The JVP was not even settling the scores of 1971. Their primary target was not the old left which had played such a key role in putting down the 1971 uprising but the so called 'new left'—from Vijaya Kumaratunga and Daya Pathirana to ex-JVPers of 1971 vintage such as Nandana Marasinghe (a legendary combatant of 1971) and Jamis Athugala (a radical peasant activist). In fact the JVP gave the highest priority to the targeting of the very elements who had not committed those errors and crimes it was most critical of in the old left—precisely because only such elements could have amounted to an alternative to the JVP.

In this sense the JVP, despite its attempts to identify itself with Fidel Castro's 26 July Movement, with Ché Guevara, the Chilean Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) and the Argentinean People's Revolutionary Army, or to give its Spanish title, Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), had more in common with the Peruvian Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), Kampuchea's Khmer Rouge and of course, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Like the Khmer Rouge it sought to annihilate anyone who expressed a contrary viewpoint. Its use of lethal violence against any (armed or unarmed) competitor is very similar to the practice of the Shining Path whose victims included members of the pro-Cuban, Revolutionary Movement of Tupak Amaru (MRTA) and unarmed social activists, such as Maria Elena, who worked among the urban poor in a shanty town in Lima. (A movie on the life and death of this young activist won a prestigious Cuban award). And like the LTTE which was insistent on being accepted as the sole representative of the Tamil people, the JVP was obsessive in its desire to become the sole representative of the anti-UNP forces.

This brings us to one of the major errors of the post-1983 JVP—its incorrect handling of contradictions. Instead of building alliances with those forces and entities which were anti-government to varying degrees, the JVP launched a merciless assault on many of them, forcing them reluctantly to build alliances with the government instead. Its policy of targeting what it called the 'unpatriotic' elements commencing, it must be noted, prior to the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987, provided the beleaguered state with badly needed political allies, thereby ending its isolation. Instead of 'uniting the many' to overthrow the state, the JVP by its actions united the many against itself.

Prins Gunasekara is of the opinion that the JVP's errors and its ultimate failure were due to its adherence to Marxism. On the contrary. Its failure was not due to its Marxism, but to its insufficient Marxism, its inability to have a correct, Marxian understanding of contradictions. As Prins Gunasekara himself points out:

"The JVP also had access to powerful Marxist/Maoist slogans, which could have been freely obtained from the Chinese Revolution and deployed locally in the 'patriotic struggle.' The slogan 'Chinese must not fight Chinese' could have been easily adapted to read 'Sri Lankans must not fight Sri Lankans'.... With a slogan such as that, more effective than 'Motherland first—Education second' which alienated the parents of the youth, the JVP might have successfully pressurised the Premadasa government not to unleash terror on the rebel JVP."ⁱⁱⁱ

The JVP's problem was not that it was Marxist, but that it was quasi-Marxist.

The JVP's mistake therefore was that it turned its back on both Mao and Ché—on the lessons of national liberation struggles (the Chinese war against Japanese invaders, and the Vietcong's resistance to the US) and revolutionary struggles (Cuba and Nicaragua). According to Mao "the object of the war is specifically to preserve oneself and destroy the enemy **to destroy the enemy means to disarm him or deprive him of the power to resist and does not mean to destroy every member of his force physically**"^{iv} (emphasis mine). Discussing the tasks of the Eighth Route Army in the war of resistance against Japan, Mao identified "giving lenient treatment to prisoners of war" as an important component of the political work of the Chinese Communists. "**We shall not change it if even the Japanese army carries out its declared intention of using poison gas against the Eighth Route Army. We shall go on giving lenient treatment to captured Japanese soldiers...** We shall not insult or abuse them but shall set them free after explaining to them the identity of the interests of the two countries"^v (emphasis mine).

Ché Guevara was similarly unequivocal. "There are always laggards who remain behind but our function is **not to liquidate them—to crush them and force them to bow to an armed vanguard**—but to educate them by leading them forward and getting them to follow us because of our example, or as Fidel called it **moral compulsion**"^{vi} (emphasis mine).

The JVP with its indiscriminate and deadly assault on any other person/organisation which dared to disagree with it (this eventually included its one time ally Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and with its arbitrary dictates concerning every aspect of the day to day life of the populace, eventually played into the hands of the state. In the short term the fear psychosis it created was extremely effective. But in the medium term it enabled the state/regime to occupy the moral high ground. Still as long as the legitimacy of its main theme—opposition to the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) on Sri Lankan soil remained—the JVP was able to retain the initiative, despite its other mistakes. This changed when President Premadasa publicly demanded the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF in June 1989. And sans both the political initiative and the moral high ground, the end was not far away.

II

The JVP and Its Anti-Indian Agitation, 1987-88

After the assassination of the leader of the SLMP, Vijaya Kumaratunga, the husband of Chandrika Kumaratunga, Sri Lanka's present Executive President, the JVP issued two leaflets justifying this most heinous crime. The first was by its alter ego—the Deshapremi Janatha Viyaparaya (DJV - Patriotic Peoples Movement). But more important was the second, issued on the day of Kumaratunga's funeral, by the official JVP. This listed a number of reasons as to why Vijaya was a 'traitor' deserving death. Prominent among these was the charge that Vijaya was a "puppet of Indian imperialism."

Anti-Indianism was supposed to be the *raison d'être* for the JVP's second insurgency. It justified everything—from the killing of Vijaya Kumaratunga to unplugging incubators at the main Children's Hospital during the JVP led health workers strike. This campaign of voracious and lethal violence was characterised by the JVP (and by its allies and enemies) as an anti-Indian struggle with the objective of liberating Sri Lanka from the Indian yoke.

Very few people remarked on a quite glaring anomaly in all this. The JVP's anti-Indian struggle was launched entirely against Sri Lankans (and Sinhalese in particular); its targets and victims were **exclusively** Sri Lankans—from UNP politicians to radical left activists; from policemen to soldiers; from bus drivers who refused to obey the JVP's constant strike orders to voters who disregarded the JVP ban and went out to vote. **None of the targets, none of the victims were from the IPKF.** Prins Gunasekara deserves credit for remarking on the vast gap between the JVP's rhetoric and actions in this regard. As he points out:

"Their anti-Indianism was extended more to the field of trade and commerce sanctions, an embargo on India exported/produced goods, than in the fighting field. The DJV banned the use of even India-manufactured drugs and medicine or anything imported from that country. The DJV/JVP are credited with the killing of Gladys Jayewardene, sister-in-law of President Jayewardene, Chairperson of the Pharmaceutical Corporation. Her crime: not adhering to the JVP/DJV order not to import Indian medicine... They (the JVP) would have even formed a united front with Premadasa to fight the bogey of the 'Indian invaders'—the IPKF, as Chiang Kai Shek was compelled to join with the Maoist Communists, in fighting the Japanese invasion. Yet the hawks in the JVP/DJV combine appear to have been busy planning the assassination of their political dissidents—University Professors, University students, media employees, Buddhist monks in sympathy with the government and trade unionists who disagreed with them..."^{vii}

The DJV was the armed wing of the JVP and headed by a politburo member, Saman Piyasiri Fernando, who was known as 'Keerthi Wijayabahu' (the name of an ancient Sinhala prince who waged a long and successful war against Indian invaders).

The author laments that "the JVP did little to take advantage of the government's anti-IPKF policy. The LTTE on the other hand tactically and materially benefited immensely by responding to the government's call for talks."^{viii} The reason is simple. The LTTE **really did** want to get rid of the IPKF; it was in its interests to do so. Therefore it was willing to (and did) launch an actual, physical struggle to achieve this aim, at considerable risk to itself.

To the JVP opposition to the presence of the IPKF was only a convenient slogan. In fact it was the ideal camouflage for its real objective: the elimination of all competitors/rivals and the capture of state power at the Centre. Anti-Indianism helped the JVP to obtain the support/ neutrality of those who would have opposed it otherwise, as well as to cover up a multitude of sins. It could commit everything from the most heinous of crimes to the most ludicrous of acts by using anti-Indianism as justification, and avoid all the dangers which would have been inevitable had it taken on the regional super power, with the fourth largest army in the world—with more than 60,000 of them on Sri Lankan

soil. This is why, (as the author states) “even the offer by the STF chief Ravi Jayewardene to arm the JVP to fight the IPKF appears to have fallen on deaf ears.”^{ix} Ravi Jayewardene is President J R Jayewardene’s only child; he served as security advisor to his father. He is credited with being the person responsible for the establishment of the paramilitary Special Task Force (STF) of the police.

Unsurprisingly the Indians never regarded the JVP as a threat, an enemy. They were more wary of R Premadasa (even before the 1 June 1989 announcement calling for the removal of the IPKF from Sri Lanka) suspecting him of harbouring anti-Indian sentiments. And the Indian establishment was far more worried, apprehensive and angry about Premadasa’s public request for the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF than it ever was about the JVP’s ‘anti-Indian struggle.’ Therefore it is hardly surprising that J N Dixit in *Assignment Colombo*, his memoirs of his stint in Sri Lanka as the Indian High Commissioner gives no indication whatsoever that India/the IPKF considered the JVP to be a threat (unlike the LTTE). Prins Gunasekara provides confirmation:

“But the evidence that has started trickling in, in recent times, makes me wonder whether their anti-Indianism was really so... Many student activists of the IUSF, in sympathy with the JVP, had been seen visiting the Indian High Commission in Colombo, even telling them that they had nothing to fear from the JVP, that the Indian Embassy officials need not be evacuated to the security of the Taj-Samudra Hotel. These overtures to the Indian Embassy had been rewarded by extensively issued visas to students and others to escape to India, in the difficult months soon after the assassination of the JVP leadership...”^x

In fact during the high tide of its anti-Indian struggle, the JVP would send messages to some of the Indian journalists based in Sri Lanka through emissaries assuring them of the JVP’s lack of hostility towards India/Indians—while it continued to kill Sri Lankan shop keepers for selling Bombay onions! The JVP succeeded in perpetrating this hoax for almost two years, until Ranasinghe Premadasa publicly called for the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF. If not for Premadasa’s public demand, the JVP could have continued with its sham anti-Indian struggle, until it achieved its ultimate goal of state power. Premadasa called it bluff.

I have often wondered how (and why) the JVP managed to keep this illusion, this phantom anti-Indian struggle going for so long. *A Lost Generation* has helped me to understand the reasons at least partially. Prins Gunasekara was a leading light of the Mawbima Surakeeme Viyaparaya^{xi} (MSV) and was its organising secretary. The MSV had as one of its main objectives, opposition to the Indo-Lanka Accord and the IPKF. Given this background the author’s reaction to Premadasa’s public demand for the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF is rather illuminating. He heaps criticism on this demand, calling it ‘short sighted’ and an exercise in ‘one upmanship.’^{xii} “President Premadasa it would appear was most concerned that his election pledge to send the IPKF out of the country was fulfilled, as soon as he was elected. This ego-boosting, pyrotechnics of an executive President was akin to the megalomania of a Ferdinando Marcos or a Kim Il Sung.”^{xiii} The SLFP’s Anura Bandaranaike, another indefatigable campaigner against the IPKF, reacted to Premadasa’s call in a similar manner. “We must be realistic in these matters. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has to face the electorate this year, so he can’t take such decisions in a hurry. Mr Premadasa’s demand was an insult to Mr Gandhi’s personal judgement.”^{xiv}

Incidentally, outside observers, including Indian journalists, were more understanding of the compulsions which forced Premadasa to make this move. “With Premadasa’s government under siege from the JVP it was perhaps essential that he made some dramatic gesture to buy time, and since the removal of the IPKF is the most prominent of the JVP’s demands, asking for its withdrawal was perhaps the best way to do it.”^{xv}

Could it be that this reaction on the part of these two key anti-IPKF campaigners was due to the fact that Premadasa’s announcement deprived them of the most effective slogan against the ruling

UNP? Is it possible that not just the JVP but also its allies and supporters considered 'anti-Indian struggle' exclusively as a stick to beat up their political enemies with—as the SLFP did in the case of Vijaya Kumaratunga? And if persons like Anura Bandaranaike and Prins Gunasekara reacted with such horror to a mere, politely worded (" the President's speech was couched in the politest of terms,"^{xvi}) verbal request by the President of the Republic for the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF, what would their reaction have been if the JVP really did conduct an armed struggle against India/IPKF instead of targeting Sinhalese? Perhaps the JVP conducted the only kind of anti-Indian struggle its camp followers and allies could stomach and wanted—a bogus one.

III

The Presidential Election of 1988

Almost immediately after the second JVP insurgency came to an end (with the killing of the top JVP/DJV leaders in November, 1989), the rewriting of history began. This exercise took a number of forms. Foremost among them were: the attempt to depict the JVP in roseate hues as a group of angry but innocent and romantic young men and women who became the victims of a bloodthirsty, despotic regime; and the attempt to deliberately play down the threat posed by the JVP to the democratic system and the populace as a whole.

A Lost Generation recounts in great detail how close the system came to succumbing to the JVP. This happened twice—the second time was in mid-1989 when the JVP literally paralysed the system through its strikes, curfews and acts of economic sabotage. The first instance was relatively less obvious though perhaps more dangerous—when almost the entirety of the political-religious-professional elites went along with the JVP's demand for the immediate dissolution of Parliament and the holding of Parliamentary and Presidential elections simultaneously, under the auspices of a caretaker administration. The JVP very successfully used the understandable yearning for peace and normalcy on the part of the populace, to push its agenda forward (this is what the LTTE has done and is still doing, with remarkable success). The fact that the parliament had very little legitimacy because of the 1982 Referendum (the Report of the Elections Commissioner which clearly exposed the fraudulent nature of this exercise was out by then) added weight to its demand. By late 1988 a desperate President Jayewardene had been forced to the point of surrender. There was only one impediment to the success of the JVP's creeping coup—the strident opposition of Prime Minister Premadasa. As the author states:

"The JVP was now heard to demand the simultaneous holding of the Presidential and Parliamentary elections to make it 'absolutely democratic' (sic)... There were official statements issued in the names of Rohana Wijeweera the leader and Upatissa Gamanayake, the General Secretary, of the JVP (*Island* and *Divayana* – 4 October 1988)... At last President Jayewardene plucked up courage to do... what the JVP demanded... but Premadasa alone opposed it."^{xvii}

It is important to spell out what the outcome would have been if the JVP had its way. The UNP had already been considerably weakened; with the dissolution of Parliament and the appointment of an interim administration, it would have lost what little will to resist that still remained. In fact once it lost its (already far from strong) grip on power, it would have had to be on the run from its opponents (both the JVP and the SLFP), who would have been intent on revenge (of course far in excess of its original sins). The UNP therefore would not have been able to put up much of a performance at either the Presidential or Parliamentary election. And if the JVP proposals were accepted overriding the objectives of Prime Minister Premadasa, the UNP would have lost the only candidate capable of taking the party to victory at the Presidential polls—since Premadasa had threatened to resign from his candidacy in such an eventuality. This would have opened the door to an internecine confrontation between Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Dissanayake (with the former supported by the armed forces and the latter by India) for the candidacy, thereby further dividing and debilitating the UNP. K M de Silva and Howard Wriggins in their biography of J R Jayewardene state

how Premadasa at one point told several of his confidantes that by the end of 1988 he intended to retire from politics. Jayewardene saw this as a bit of kite-flying to see how the party would respond to this for both he (Jayewardene) and party stalwarts realised that he (Premadasa) was the UNP's best candidate and probably the only one with the ability to defeat Mrs. Bandaranaike. If on the other hand he was genuinely intent on retiring from politics such an announcement was certain to lead to a bitter struggle for leadership of the UNP.^{xviii} This is confirmed by none other than J N Dixit, the former Indian High Commissioner in Sri Lanka:

"Despite our reservations about Premadasa... he was the most appropriate choice for succeeding Jayewardene... Whatever his political persona and his limitations, he had a mass base and he was immensely popular with the rural population of Sri Lanka."^{xix}

What of the SLFP? Prins Gunasekara's account of the famous Mawbima Surakeeme Viyaparaya (MSV) rally in Kandy organised ostensibly by the SLFP and the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) is illustrative of the extremely close links between the main opposition party and the JVP and the former's near total dependence on the latter in the sphere of politico-agitational work.

"On the previous Thursday, when I visited Kandy, there were no visible signs of any preparations for the weekend meeting... I walked into the SLFP Office in the heart of the City hoping to find an explanation. There I met Colonel Anuruddha Ratwatte and Yasaratne Tennekoon... the two active SLFP stalwarts who ran the show in the area... The two of them led me to an adjacent room in their office, opened the door and showed me the posters, flags, buntings, banners and other decorative paraphernalia for the meeting... I expressed my disbelief. 'How can you make a success of the meeting on Saturday with all this publicity material still locked up and stacked in your SLFP headquarters?' 'Nothing to worry Prins... tonight the city and all the approaches for miles will be covered up by these flags and posters...' assured Anuruddha. 'But where is the organisation—and the personnel' I was still sceptical. 'No problem Prins... the JVP boys in the area will take care of all of that' both of them observed... When I attended the meeting on Saturday afternoon... the town was a sky of saffron coloured flags. The boys had done what Anuruddha said they were going to do."^{xx}

The SLFP and the JVP both had one objective—power. The SLFP was hoping to use the JVP to destabilise the country and weaken its enemies—the UNP and the United Socialist Alliance^{xxi} (USA)—and thus come into office. The JVP was hoping to use the SLFP to further its own cause. The SLFP considered the JVP as a possible junior partner in the future government headed by the SLFP. Consequently Anura Bandaranaike offered the portfolio of Youth and Employment to Wijeweera—a clear indication of how little the SLFP understood the JVP! Obviously the SLFP really thought that the JVP's goal was the amelioration of youth problems! On its part the JVP made it clear that real effective power was what it was after. As the authors of J R Jayewardene's political biography point out:

"It (the JVP) called upon the SLFP to withdraw from the elections and asserted that if the JVP were to join the SLFP in any future government, it would want at least a fourth of the Cabinet positions and a fourth of the seats in parliament. Among the cabinet posts they insisted on was the Ministry of Defence."^{xxii}

By mid-1988, the SLFP was confident that its long stint in the Opposition was coming to an end. The JVP was rapidly making the country ungovernable; it had also removed an important electoral threat to the SLFP with the assassination of the charismatic leader of the SLMP/USA, Vijaya Kumaratunga. The SLFP hoped to reap the benefits soon in the form of electoral victories over its main rival, the UNP.

“Anura Bandaranaike Leader of the Opposition said this would be the last May Day rally the SLFP would be holding as a opposition party as he was certain of the party coming into power at the next general election due next year and holding the May Day rally at the Galle Face Green as the Governing party...”^{xxiii}

But the JVP had absolutely no intention of allowing the SLFP to become the chief beneficiary of its campaign of violence. Neither did it want to be a junior partner in a SLFP regime. The JVP wanted to use the SLFP as a battering ram to force the regime into holding the Presidential and Parliamentary elections simultaneously under a caretaker government—the scenario most advantageous to it. Then the UNP would have been on the run and the SLFP, given its organisational weakness and dependence on the JVP, would never have been strong enough to withstand the JVP’s pressure let alone challenge it for the dominant role. That way the JVP could have emerged as the most organised, effective and feared political force in Sri Lanka—outwitting and overtaking both mainstream democratic parties. The SLFP would have been allowed to function—so long as it was willing to play the role the JVP envisaged for it—that of monkey to the JVP’s organ grinder. Any attempt to depart from this script, to assert itself would have brought the lethal wrath of the JVP upon it. This in a sense is what happened once the SLFP-JVP alliance fell apart and the JVP commenced targeting its erstwhile ally in the run up to the presidential election. The SLFP then turned to the state security apparatus for protection. But if the JVP’s demand had been granted the security forces too would have been emasculated, a mere marionette dancing to the JVP’s tune and therefore incapable of affording any protection to the SLFP. With both the UNP and the SLFP thus rendered powerless and ineffective the JVP would have shot and elbowed its way into absolute power.

IV

1988: The SLFP-JVP Alliance

The Presidential election of December 1988 was undoubtedly the most violent election in the history of Sri Lanka. The JVP, having failed in its attempt to obtain simultaneous Parliamentary and Presidential elections, broke off its negotiations with the SLFP/Democratic Peoples Alliance (DPA)—the umbrella organisation formed by the SLFP and its allies to contest the Presidential election of 1988—and declared the 19 December election to be an unpatriotic exercise. Intent on sabotaging the election, they declared: “We have decided to punish all treacherous persons who support the treacherous Presidential election...”^{xxiv} Public meetings of both the UNP and the USA were attacked and party leaders and activists butchered. The SLFP, now on the list of enemies for its participation in the election, was not spared either. Several of its meetings were attacked and a number of activists were killed—though the level of violence directed at the SLFP was considerably lower than the level of violence directed at the UNP and the USA, the authors of the J R Jayewardene political biography point out:

“By the beginning of November the JVP turned on the SLFP and started killing SLFP supporters in the South of the country, although not on the same scale as they did the UNP cadres and supporters of the Socialist Alliance.”^{xxv}

The SLFP, during the campaign, ceaselessly maintained that it was not a target of JVP violence, and that the attackers were actually UNP/USA members, masquerading as JVPers. The reason was that the SLFP was at pains to give the impression that there were no major contradictions between itself and the JVP—thereby winning the sympathy and support of at least some segments of the JVP. *A Lost Generation* mentions a number of such instances.

“Dismissing rumours that the election campaign of Mrs. Bandaranaike has been disrupted by the JVP, Dr Ratwatte^{xxvi} commented that she was going ahead with all her meetings... Only in the Uva was there a few instances when the SLFP campaign ran into problems due to some misunderstanding with the local level JVP activists, according to Dr Ratwatte.”^{xxvii}

“Stop sabotage of SLFP meetings, Anura tells the UNP. Addressing a large gathering in Badulla he said that the UNP and the SLMP were sending threatening letters to the SLFP organisers not to hold public meetings under the threat of death. They have used the name of the JVP to send these letters... If they do not stop this nonsense immediately we will take steps to prevent Mr Premadasa’s meetings.”^{xxviii}

On the election day, the JVP declared a curfew and stated that all those who went out to vote, as well as election officials, will be killed as traitors. And in many places this threat was carried out with horrendous success. Despite this, 55.9% of the electorate did vote and the UNP won the election, polling more than 50% of the valid vote.

The firmly pro-SLFP magazine, *Ravaya*, identified three factors which led to the SLFP’s defeat: its inability to win over the minorities; its failure to be critical of the JVP’s more objectionable errors and excesses; and its lack of a policy package directed at the rural poor in general and food stamp holders in particular.^{xxix} Premadasa on the other hand was able to obtain the support of the powerful Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)—and through these, the votes of the upcountry Tamils of Indian origin and Eastern Province Muslims. He also succeeded in winning over the poorer segments of the populace through his innovative poverty alleviation programme, Janasaviya.

The *Ravaya* identified yet another factor for the defeat of the SLFP—caste.

“The depressed castes amount to 28.8% of the total populace of the country and 40.44% of the Sinhalese. However they have been prevented from obtaining parliamentary representation that is proportionate to these large numbers. The Govigama caste which makes up 36% of the total population of Sri Lanka occupy 58.5% of the parliamentary seats; Karawa, Salagama and Durawa castes which make up 6.4% of the populace have 14% of the parliamentary seats. The depressed castes amount to 28.8% of the population but have only 5.9% of the parliamentary seats. The SLFP has been unable to demonstrate that it is interested in correcting this injustice. Even in the parliamentary electorates with a majority of depressed caste voters the SLFP has shown a propensity to appoint Govigama organisers—causing these voters to lose faith in the SLFP. For example in 6 out of the 8 electorates in the Kegalle district (with the exception of the electorates of Dedigama and Mawanella) the majority of the voters come from non-Govigama castes. Still most of the organisers representing these electorates are members of the Govigama caste. If at the Presidential election the competition was between two candidates from ‘Walawwas’ (i.e. upper caste feudals—TG) this factor would not have been of much pertinence. But the fact that this time the competition was not between two feudals but a feudal and a non-feudal caused a change. This factor too played a role in the SLFP’s defeat in its traditional bastions such as the districts of Ratnapura, Kegalle and Kandy.”^{xxx}

In their biography of J R Jayewardene, de Silva and Wriggins identified organisational weaknesses and the inability to win over the ethnic and religious minorities as the main causes of the SLFP’s unexpected defeat.

“A number of perceptive journalists who followed Mrs. Bandaranaike on the campaign trail remarked on how untidy and disorganised the SLFP campaign had been up to that time... There was also a paucity of top quality speakers on the SLFP platform... The SLFP had not been able to evoke a strong response from the minorities, ethnic and religious. All the signs were that most of the Christians, Muslims and Sri Lankan Tamils resident outside the North-East and above all the Indian Tamils backed the UNP.”^{xxxi}

An analysis of the electoral statistics demonstrates the validity of many of these arguments. In the Eastern province with its large number of Muslim votes, the average poll was a high 61.7% and the UNP came first, 16.4% ahead of the SLFP. In the Nuwara Eliya district with its majority of Tamils of Indian origin, the valid vote was a high 79.96% and the UNP won by 26.2%.

There was a similar outcome in the Roman Catholic majority areas. The valid vote was high (as the level of JVP violence was low) and the UNP won the so-called ‘Catholic belt’ resoundingly.

Electorate / District	Valid Vote (%)	UNP (%)	SLFP / DPA (%)
Moratuwa	67.8	48.8	45.8
Wattala	72.8	56.8	39.6
Negombo	70.2	61.3	35.1
Katana	74.6	51.2	45.2
Ja-ela	71.4	52.5	44.4
Puttalam district	71.2	55.9	42.3

Subsequently the SLFP filed an election petition claiming that the Presidential election was unfree and unfair because of the violence that prevailed. The UNP’s counter argument was that the anti-election violence by the JVP affected the UNP far more than it did the SLFP. *A Lost Generation* provides a list of violent anti-election activities carried out by the JVP in November 1988. According to this list the UNP was attacked on five occasions while the SLFP was attacked only once.^{xxxii} After listening to the evidence of 977 witnesses over a period of 2,047 days of inquiry, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka held with the UNP and rejected the election petition.

Prins Gunasekara treats this decision with great derision—because he agrees with the SLFP’s charge that the UNP used the JVP/DJV to defeat SLFP:

“The DJV supported, battle-hardened Premadasa’s foot soldiers, led their supporters and voters to the polling booths—over the dead bodies of slain voters—and won the election.”^{xxxiii}

This is a complete contradiction of his previous conclusion, six pages earlier:

“The SLFP did not want to admit that the said violence originated with the JVP+DJV elements and deliberately and dishonestly attributed same to the UNP”^{xxxiv}

He also quotes the *Far Eastern Economic Review* to prove this point:

“The SLFP... has claimed the UNP has used the JVP name and disrupted SLFP meetings but it had become clear that the UNP had no hand in these incidents...”^{xxxv}

An analysis of the election statistics disproves the SLFP/Prins Gunasekara theory. Polling was low precisely in areas where the JVP was strong and well entrenched—such as the main base of the JVP, the Southern Province (34.4%); North Central Province (35%); and the Uva Province (29.45%). Low polling does not seem to have hurt the SLFP much. In fact, of the eight districts outside of the North East in which the valid vote was higher than the national average, the SLFP won only two; on the other hand, of the nine districts in which the valid vote was lower than the national average the SLFP won three. And the SLFP managed to poll more than 50% of the votes only in districts where there was a low poll and the valid vote fell far short of the national average (55.5%).

District	Valid Vote (%)	SLFP / DPA (%)
Galle	49.8	53.1
Matara	23.8	54.3
Anuradhapura	40.4	55.2

It is also significant that in the traditional bastion of the Bandaranaike family, the Gampaha district, the SLFP did not succeed in obtaining more than 50% of the vote (it only got 48.83%) despite the fact that the valid vote was a high 76.12%. The UNP also won the capital city, Colombo where election related violence by the JVP was low and polling was high. In the Colombo city the valid vote was 65.8%; the UNP got 59% of the vote while the SLFP polled only 35% of the vote. All this clearly demonstrates that a low poll was relatively more advantageous than disadvantageous to the SLFP.

The UNP as part of its defence in the election petition provided evidence that the JVP/DJV carried out a systematic campaign in the run up to the Presidential election against the UNP, unlike the occasional attacks on the SLFP. Given below are three samples chosen at random because they provide a valuable insight into the *modus operandi* of the JVP.

The evidence of Mrs Greta Kodituwakku Abeysirigunawardene (34) whose husband K W Dayananda of Akmeemana (Galle) was a UNP activist. On the 6 December 1988 a group of about 15 people came to her house.

“Witness recalled that one of them asked for her husband by name... One of them pulled him by his hair and took him outside... The following morning they got information that her husband was killed on the bund and that his body was thrown into the marsh... She went and saw the dismembered body of her husband lying in the marsh, his eye missing, minus teeth, his body bearing deep cuts and a gaping bullet wound on his chest. Beside his body was a poster and witness remembered someone read it giving the reasons for her husband’s killing as voting for the traitorous UNP government, holding office in the government party and for supporting the Presidential election. No *Bhikkhu* attended her husband’s funeral rites as they too had been threatened. Her husband was still President of Padinoruwa UNP when he was killed.”^{xxxvi}

In Wilgamuwa, Handungamuwa

“Biso Menike provided refreshments for UNP meetings. Her hair was shorn off and her husband and son assaulted. She was ordered to go round the village on a bicycle with two placards pinned on her body.”^{xxxvii}

The evidence of L H Upali of Ambalangoda was that:

“Three houses of UNP supporters were attacked and burnt simultaneously in a UNP bastion and the inmates killed a few days before the Presidential election. (They were hacked and burnt to death). The incident caused fear among the voters and over 100 persons did not go to vote.”^{xxxviii}

V

1989: The Crushing of the JVP

Two theories still very much in vogue concerning the suppression of the second JVP insurgency are: a) the regime preferred a military solution to the JVP problem; that it was determined to drown the insurgency in blood; and b) Premadasa was secretly co-operating with and helping the JVP; the insurgency was defeated despite him and solely because of the efforts of the hardline Deputy Minister of Defence, Ranjan Wijeratne and a section within the army.

Neither is correct. Both the Jayewardene and Premadasa governments endeavoured to effect a compromise solution to the JVP crisis. Jayewardene despite his tough talking, made several efforts to begin a dialogue with the JVP—for example, once through his Minister of National Security, Lalith Athulathmudali and on another occasion through his Security Advisor and son Ravi Jayewardene. Athulathmudali signed an agreement with a person he thought was an official representative of the JVP. A couple of days later it was discovered that this person, K C Senanayake, was an impostor who was not even a member of the JVP! The fact that Athulathmudali who prided himself on his Oxford degree allowed himself to be duped by an academically far from successful alumnus of the University of Colombo is perhaps indicative of the need felt by the Jayewardene regime to bring back normality through whatever means necessary—military victory or negotiated settlement. As Prins Gunasekara himself states:

“The President is running all over the place looking for a JVP man to talk to. His son and security Advisor is in correspondence with a top JVPer whom he had released, only a month ago... and offering to arrange a meeting with the Hon. Prime Minister... The clergy, the student movement, the trade unions, the intellectuals, the mercantile sector, in fact all who mattered in society were one-voicedly pleading with the JVP to accept what was being offered by the government. It was like a concerned parent beseeching a sulking, hungry child to drink the milk that was being offered, promising more if only he drank the first cup that was being offered. But the stupid, stubborn child would kick the cup of milk—and, crying his heart out for more, choked himself to death!”^{xxxix}

Premadasa too made a number of efforts after his victory at the Presidential election of 1988 to avoid the military option. Premadasa did not want a JVP victory. But he did not want to impose a bloody and humiliating defeat on the JVP either. He made every effort to come up with a compromise; and opted for a military solution only as a last resort, after all efforts at a negotiated settlement failed due to the JVP’s determination not to settle for anything other than absolute power. This is a distinction the author of *A Lost Generation* (like so many others) has failed to comprehend—the difference between surrender and compromise. Premadasa was not willing to surrender to the JVP; but he was more than willing to effect an honourable, mutually advantageous compromise. The JVP refused any compromise and demanded unconditional surrender from the regime and the democratic system. The military option was imposed on Premadasa by the JVP, because of this intransigence and maximalism.

A Lost Generation mentions the many attempts by Premadasa to negotiate with the JVP.

“The readiness with which President Premadasa accepted the suggestion for peace talks was evident from the advanced publicity given by the state managed media... The President was more than willing to call for a cease fire to be reciprocated by the rebels.”^{xl}

“President Premadasa’s first offer to negotiate peace in a troubled country was soon after his victory at the Presidential Polls on 20 December... This indeed was a bold step... Not only did he advance the date to end the emergency, he proceeded to free 1,400 detainees in the South from custody, having released another batch of 574 in the first week itself.”^{xli}

“As a gesture of good will towards the JVP+IUSF^{xliii} led campaign,^{xliii} the new Premadasa regime made an early decision to have the North Colombo Medical College (NMC) vested in the state. The obvious intent of this take over was to mollify the JVP-led IUSF and the student movement that the Premadasa regime was serious about solving issues that concerned specially the youth... President Premadasa took great pains to convince the rebels.. that he was genuinely interested in a dialogue with them and that his concern for their welfare was genuine... President Premadasa’s crusade for ‘CONSULTATION, CONSENSUS, COMPROMISE’ was sustained at a very high profile throughout this period. His offer on the National Independence Day 4 February ‘to talk peace with

anybody, any where, any time' was repeated at his Poverty Alleviation programme inaugural address on 25 February 1989...^{xliv} (Emphasis/Italics in the original).

This call was repeated in Mahiyangana in early April.

"One week after the Mahiyangana appeal for peace the state unilaterally declared a cease fire to coincide with the annual National festivities of the Sinhala and Tamil communities..."^{xlv}

Premadasa's appeals were echoed by the 'hawkish' Deputy Minister of Defence Ranjan Wijeratne:

"Meet President at any place you name—Ranjan.... After all they are our youths. We can't disregard them. They might be misguided persons but we should try to get them back to the democratic process."^{xlvi}

Concludes the author:

"**No head of state would go that far to appease the rebels.** No Executive President would offer so many attractive concessions to insurgents hell bent on overthrowing his regime. Now with hind sight it may be observed that the JVP rejection was an irrevocable disaster to the Southern rebels."^{xlvii} (Emphasis mine).

This attitude on the part of the UNP was in marked contrast to those adopted by regimes of most third world countries facing armed rebellions—particularly in Latin America. Take for instance Peru's attempts to deal with the Sendero rebellion. **President Alberto Fujimori suspended both the Congress and the Constitution in his battle against the Senderistas. Premadasa called for an All Parties Conference and invited the JVP to participate.** The parliament and the opposition parties continued to function freely—as freely as the JVP allowed them. Any restrictions on political/social activism were imposed not by the regime but by the JVP. For example, **the regime did not impose a press censorship**; the JVP did so and the editor of a leading non government Sinhala language daily stopped coming to his office because of JVP threats.

Obviously the JVP was not dealing with some uncompromising and bloodthirsty despotic regime (of the Latin American variety) which did not want to make any concessions and demanded unconditional surrender from the insurgents. Far from it. As Prins Gunasekara points out:

"Did not President Premadasa release thousands of young rebels held without charge, without trial within two or three weeks of assumption of office...? Did he not concede the highly-charged IUSF demand that the Private Medical College be taken over by the state? Did he not terminate five years of emergency and vow not to re-impose it releasing many rebels even before the emergency ended? How many peace overtures did he make to the rebels—unconditionally? Did he not offer to dissolve the parliament to enable the rebels to contest and enter Parliament? Did he not invite them through All Parties Conference to come out sit and talk to them? Did he not seek to negotiate through independent organisations like the Quaker Peace Services (QPS) to meet the JVP leaders, if necessary outside the country? I'm personally aware of several meetings the QPS representatives had with the JVP representatives in London... I'm aware of the direct talks these foreign reps had with President Premadasa with a view to arranging a meeting, in or out of the country with the JVP leaders."^{xlviii}

In other words the JVP (perhaps more than any other rebel movement in the Third World) had the option of an honourable settlement which was advantageous to it and would have given it a significant degree of power at the centre. But, as Prins Gunasekara asks:

“What were the responses by the rebel leaders to these persistent overtures”? And answers: “Did not the rebels indulge in a spree of senseless killings, of Vice Chancellors, Nayaka Buddhist Monks, rival student union leaders, soldiers and their family members?”^{xlix}

The JVP turned down every offer by the Premadasa regime. In fact with every concession the tempo of the JVP’s violence increased. They went on to terrorise the country and cripple the economy with their indiscriminate killings, wild cat strikes, unofficial curfews and acts of sabotage. The opposition SLFP, its honeymoon with the JVP firmly in the past, became very vocal in criticising the UNP regime for not being firm enough, for being unable to restore law and order and normalcy.

By now the regime was “fighting for its very existence with its back to the wall,”¹ as Prins Gunasekara correctly states. Given the JVP’s refusal to compromise, the regime had only two options. Either give in to the demands of the JVP i.e. hand over power completely; or try to face the challenge. Premadasa opted for the latter. As Prins Gunasekara himself says: “JVP...failed to respond. Can one blame Premadasa for that?”ⁱⁱ

This was the context in which Premadasa made his 1 June 1989 demand for the immediate withdrawal of the IPKF. This call was at one and the same time an attempt to persuade the JVP to come to the negotiating table by officially accepting its principal demand and an attempt to create the necessary political conditions for the defeat of the JVP—if it persisted in its refusal to accept an honourable compromise. The JVP had made the stand on the IPKF the dividing line in Lankan politics—and with this announcement Premadasa very firmly placed himself and his government in the anti-IPKF camp. Now was the chance for the JVP to negotiate with the regime, without betraying its principles—because it would be negotiating not with a pro-Indian (therefore ‘unpatriotic’) regime but with an anti-Indian (therefore a ‘patriotic’) regime, and one which had taken the enormous risk of giving the IPKF its marching orders.

This completely unexpected development obviously took the JVP by surprise and presented it with a dilemma. If it refused the government’s offer to negotiate in the new conjuncture, it would be exposing the hollowness of its anti-Indianism; if it accepted the offer to negotiate it will have to give up its goal of absolute political power which at that moment seemed (and indeed was) so tantalisingly within reach. The JVP opted to stick to its real objective—power. At a mammoth rally held in Nugegoda soon after Premadasa’s 1 June announcement, the JVP stepped up its anti-UNP rhetoric and demanded the resignation of both the President and the government. This was followed by a series of crippling strikes which almost brought the country and the economy to a standstill. Colombo became a ghost town and the JVP looked more invincible than ever.

But the tide was beginning to turn. Premadasa had understood what the crucially important link was and had grasped it, despite the risks it entailed.

“Premadasa’s own explanation has been that the presence of the IPKF is creating more antagonisms domestically and the JVP’s call for a ‘war against Indian imperialism’ has to be defused. The best way to do that was to pre-empt the JVP by asking for a quick withdrawal of the Indian troops. As the JVP has the ability to create another wave of civil unrest and destabilise the government Premadasa’s fears are genuine. His response has been to outmanoeuvre the JVP by winning over its extremist nationalist constituency...”^{lii}

“In Sri Lanka however the general response to Premadasa’s call has been good among the Sinhala majority. There is a wide spread feeling even among sober, moderate people that two years was a long period and that the Indian army’s presence beyond that would be counter productive.”^{liii}

Before long, the JVP's monolithic anti-Indian United Front slowly started to unravel. When in July it announced its customary week of protest to mark the second Anniversary of the Indo-Lanka Accord, the response from the public was disappointing. By the second and the third days, the public started to disobey the curfew order for the first time in two years—particularly in Colombo. Consensus had broken down and the JVP's moment of hegemony was over. From now on it would have to use force primarily and predominantly on an increasingly unsympathetic public in order to get its demands complied with. With the *raison d'être* for the second JVP insurgency gone, the stage was set for the military campaign against the JVP.

Within six months of Premadasa's announcement it was all over. The fire of the second JVP insurgency which for two years burnt bright just fizzled out with the capture and the killing of its three top political and military leaders in November 1989. By mid/late December the country was back to normal.

Victory came at a high price—60,000 dead in two years. Premadasa perhaps more than any one else knew that the human cost of victory would be high. This was probably why he made such repeated efforts to avoid the military option. The following comment by Premadasa a few months later can serve as the epitaph of the JVP and its second insurrection.

"I think the JVP's aim to overhaul the system was a good one and I was broadly in sympathy with that ideal, but I totally disagreed with their choice of strategies and their commitment to violence and terror. I saw in their idealism and in their commitment a great potential which we could harness to the democratic process in order to speed up change. That was why even in the run up to the Presidential elections, even though my supporters were being murdered brutally, I never condemned or criticised the JVP. I was prepared to wait, hoping that they would change. I'm personally very sad that such idealism, such commitment had to be wasted."^{liv}

VI

Prins Gunasekara's Contradictions

One of the most striking features of *A Lost Generation* is its propensity for contradictory statements. Just to mention one example, on page 547 the JVP is criticised for its failure to adopt Maoist slogans. Yet on page 597, the JVP is described as 'Maoist' and its failure to negotiate with the regime is blamed on this 'Maoism'!

This genius on the part of Prins Gunasekara for self contradiction, for offering conclusions which are totally at variance with facts he himself provides, is never more in evidence than in his analysis of Premadasa—a key actor in the tragedy which was the second JVP insurgency.

Gunasekara's book provides ample factual proof as to how hard Premadasa tried to effect a compromise solution and how he was forced to adopt the military option by the JVP's intransigence. As he himself says on page 610 "No head of state would go that far to appease the rebels. No Executive President would offer so many attractive concessions to insurgents hell bent on overthrowing his regime." On page 545 he says that the JVP signed its own death warrant "Wisdom of the JVP strategy: Death Warrant—Signed by Themselves." Having said so, Prins Gunasekara concludes that Premadasa was the "Genghis Khan of local politics" (p 736); "a man with unlimited capacity for violence and insensitivity to human feelings!" (p 597)

On page 519 Prins Gunasekara thus describes the state of the country Premadasa inherited in December 1988: "A fractured country, shattered by civil strife and with a crippled economy, besieged by insurgents both in the North and the South..." Less than 100 pages later, the author concludes: "Premadasa Presidency will certainly go down in history as the period when a beautiful country with

charming law abiding civilised people was transformed into a smouldering hell of unidentified dead bodies burning in every street corner...!" (p 596)

This is hardly objective analysis. It is more like a diatribe against a hated enemy. In fact Prins Gunasekara's subjectivism reaches new heights when he is dealing with Premadasa and it is this subjectivism which makes him contradict himself and draw conclusions which are dis-proven by his own facts.

Prins Gunasekara's impassioned comments on Premadasa's *origins* may provide a clue concerning the root cause of this subjectivism. "The enigma of this shadowy character from the **slummy** Mariakade region..." (p 462) "He inherited no family legacy, social, political, intellectual or financial. He had no claims to any worthwhile educational or academic background, no professional training, **no ready made acceptance in decent society.**" (p 593) "Ranasinghe Premadasa, born to a Mariakade **nondescript slum-dwelling family**, reached the highest point of political and executive power in the country, ruthlessly eliminating his political rivals and dissenters with machine like efficiency." (p 594) "That was the hall mark of his character which raised him from the **social gutter to which he was born in the slummy Kehelwatte-Mariakade ghetto** to the highest political position in the land." (p 530) "Here was Kehelwatte dictating terms to Kurunduwatte. Foot Note: Kehelwatte (Banana Garden) is the **slum area** of the City, ordinarily associated with mafia violence; said to be the area where the Prime Minister has his political roots. Kurunduwatte (Cinnamon Garden) is the upper class residential part of the City, (Colombo 7). (p 429) "Was not JR forced to play second fiddle to a Mariakade politician? Foot Note: Mariakade is the colloquial name for Maradana, **a slummy**, shadowy market place in the city of Colombo, frequented by drug peddling, pick-pocketing mafia, believed to be Premadasa's political support base, where he claimed to have launched the moral regeneration crusade—Sucharitha Viyaparaya."^{iv} (p 459)

Sri Lanka is a country where caste still matters and Premadasa belonged to a sub caste which was considered to be at the bottom of the caste totem pole. *He was the first non 'upper' caste person to become the leader of the country in its entire history—ancient and modern.* For many 'upper' caste members this would indeed have been a bitter pill—because though caste is hardly ever discussed or even mentioned in public, it is omnipresent in Sri Lankan polity and society, just below the surface. Therefore when Premadasa became the Executive President of the country and started taking steps to correct this sociological injustice, he was regarded as an upstart **and** a threat by the upper caste elite which had traditionally dominated the Sri Lankan political scene.

Prins Gunasekara in his book rarely refers to caste. But when he mentions Premadasa's origins what he displays is the hatred of the rural Sinhala petit-bourgeois (of 'upper caste' origins) against what it perceives to be "the Other"—the urban "low caste" poor. This type of diatribe has many historical parallels. For example the hatred evoked by Haitian national hero and the first Chief of State (who was a symbol of unyielding nationalism) Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a former slave (who gave assistance to Simon Bolivar on condition of the emancipation of slaves) among a section of the Haitian society (particularly the light skinned 'anciens libres').

In December 1988, Premadasa inherited a country which was in the throes of a multiple crisis. "His (Premadasa) political fortitude and perseverance helped the country survive a very dark moment in its recent history. In some way it is correct to say that his presidency was born during the greatest emergency Sri Lanka has ever known."^{vi}

Prins Gunasekara himself admits (in one of his less subjective moments) that Premadasa did inherit a country which was on the brink of politico-social anarchy and economic ruin. Four years later, when he was assassinated by the LTTE, he left behind a country with a fast growing economy, a more equitable society and a vibrant democracy (as evidenced by the fact that there was an opposition

and a press which publicly and repeatedly accused Premadasa of every conceivable crime from sacrificing virgins to shaving his eyebrows and dying his hair black!).

When Premadasa was killed by the LTTE on 1 May 1993 as he was directing the UNP May Day procession, some people reacted by lighting crackers, beating *rabanas*—the traditional drum, played as an expression of joy or celebration—eating *kiribath*, rice cooked with coconut milk, also associated with ceremonial occasions. Prins Gunasekara glorifies this tribalistic behaviour of a small part of the populace, regarding this conduct as a fitting rejection of the Supreme Court verdict on the Presidential Election of 1988: “The Sovereign People exercising their collective judgement overruled resoundingly (with fire crackers) the Supreme Court judgement.”^{lvii}

Premadasa, more than any other mainstream political leader in Sri Lanka, understood the flaws in the system and the need to radically reform them. In 1971 he had even wanted the UNP to support the JVP insurrection publicly. As Prins Gunasekara comments:

“Premadasa as an opposition parliamentarian at the time was keenly interested in this phenomenon and studied it, dispassionately, perhaps even sympathetically. His own personal background was in most respects, comparable to the plight of the many thousands of disadvantaged, under-privileged and deprived youth who were the victims of 1971 and detained under the emergency. He was a regular spectator at the CJC trials of the JVP rebels. He alone from the Opposition developed a kind of rapport with the JVP rebels... Premadasa realised the resilience of the youth movement and had a secret admiration and respect for it. Even in the Parliamentary debates that followed the 1971 insurrection I do not recall Premadasa ever being harsh or critical of the JVP misadventure. Any reference he made to the victims of 1971 were in a sympathetic tone...”^{lviii}

Premadasa knew that the system accepted him reluctantly, on sufferance, because he was the only leader who could have saved it in that critically decisive period of 1988-89. Premadasa, though, was not content with saving the system; he also wanted to change it. But he knew that the reform agenda he had in mind, which he regarded as being necessary to prevent another uprising, will have to face formidable opposition from within the system. It is possible that he considered the LTTE and the JVP as potential allies in this task—if they could be persuaded to give up violence and enter the democratic mainstream. This is probably one of the reasons for his tireless efforts to come to a settlement with both organisations. Premadasa was unable or unwilling to understand that neither the JVP nor the LTTE shared his goal. He wanted radical reforms while the JVP wanted power at the centre and LTTE wanted its separate independent ethnic state. Neither would settle for anything less and therefore both regarded Premadasa as the enemy, despite his efforts at reconciliation. That was his tragedy. His utopian belief that the JVP would agree to an honourable compromise almost cost him his Presidency in 1989. His equally erroneous belief that the LTTE would eventually agree to a political solution cost him his life, in May 1993.

VII

Prins Gunasekara and the Richard de Zoysa Episode

The abduction and killing of Richard de Zoysa was an important turning point in the story which Prins Gunasekara narrates. De Zoysa, a young journalist from an upper class family had close JVP connections. As his friend, Rajiva Wijesinha recalled:

“...in the two years that followed the signing the Indo-Lanka Accord, Richard came more and more to sympathise with the JVP position and even to accept to some extent the violence to which it gave rise. Thus though initially he had been horrified at the murder of Kumaratunga in time he came to terms with the explanation, even if seeing it as a justification was more difficult, that Kumaratunga had let himself be used by the

government to further its own self-regarding and nationally destructive interests. So too a year and a half later he was dispassionate about the murder of Thevis Guruge... Guruge had been one of the most enlightened and able of broadcasters and Richard had appreciated the ease and efficiency with which he had run the Independent Television Network after the government took that over..."

According to Prins Gunasekara:

"Richard moved with ease in the professional, elitist circles in Colombo and was in a way, a political asset to the JVP..."^{lix}

When de Zoysa was killed, the Opposition and a section of the media were quick to blame Premadasa. The most popular reason given was that he co-operated in the making of a political drama which was critical of Premadasa. But as Wijesinha points out:

"It is unlikely (apart from the fact that Richard's particular contribution to the play was uncertain) that so accomplished a politician as Premadasa could have actually given so direct an order as was bound to increase his unpopularity, in influential circles in particular, without actually achieving anything concrete."^{lx}

In *A Lost Generation* Prins Gunasekara has a very interesting story to tell—that when he met de Zoysa's mother, Dr Manorani Saravanamuttu, she did not believe that Premadasa had anything to do with her son's murder. On the contrary she had believed that it

"was the handywork of some jealous persons in the Premadasa administration, like Ranjan Wijeratne, acting independently of President Premadasa. It may even be some old school feud carried too far. At least that is what Manorani Saravanamuttu told me... I told her it was alright telling me about her disbelief in Premadasa's involvement but she should not voice such naïve statements elsewhere, as her own credibility would be doubted."^{lxi}

Dr Saravanamuttu obviously benefited from Prins Gunasekara's advice because she soon became a vital part of the opposition's campaign blaming Premadasa for de Zoysa's murder. She also accused Senior Superintendent of Police Ronnie Gunasinghe, who was believed to be close to UNP leadership (and to Premadasa in particular), of being the person who abducted her son. An affidavit was submitted to the magistrate making this allegation. The Attorney General wanted the proceedings to be 'suspended' because of weaknesses in Dr Saravanamuttu's 'belated statements.' According to Prins Gunasekara

"Lawyer appearing on behalf of Richard's mother objected to 'suspending' the inquiry. He went one step further and wanted the proceedings 'discontinued.' The case against Ronnie Gunasinghe was dismissed... as Mrs Saravanamuttu's lawyer agreed to let the case go no further."^{lxii}

Why did Dr Saravanamuttu's own lawyer, having filed the affidavit in the first place, request that the case be discontinued? What was the reason for this rather curious behaviour? In case it is surmised that Dr Saravanamuttu's lawyer took this stand because he was bribed or intimidated by the Premadasa government, it should be mentioned that this lawyer, Batty Weerakoon was one of the top leaders of the fiercely anti UNP/Premadasa opposition party, the LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party) and that he wrote a book subsequently accusing Premadasa of getting de Zoysa murdered! And up to now Dr Saravanamuttu has not claimed that her lawyer took this rather unusual step because of the fear of Presidential reprisals. Therefore, the only logical conclusion is that the Attorney General was correct when he moved for the suspension of the proceedings because of weaknesses in Dr Saravanamuttu's statement and in her identification. Ronnie Gunasinghe subsequently filed a case for defamation—hardly the action of a guilty man. (The case could not be completed because Gunasinghe died in the bomb blast on 1 May 1993, which killed President Premadasa).

Prins Gunasekara is not interested in finding out the reasons for this rather strange behaviour on the part of Dr Saravanamuttu's lawyer. He does not seem to see the need for it. He is convinced that de Zoysa was killed by Gunasinghe on Premadasa's orders and he thinks he has the proof required for this assertion of his. I will reproduce his story at length since it is symbolic of the weaknesses/flaws which characterise *A Lost Generation*.

"I have this recital of events on the authority of a close friend and former Ministerial colleague of the late Lalith Athulathmudali and also a close friend of the new National Security Minister Ranajin Wijeratne... On the night of 18 February 1990, SSP Ronnie Gunasinghe's special killer squad left on their mission while Ronnie went to see his Minister, Ranjan Wijeratne at the latter's Havelock Town official residence. Ronnie disclosed to his minister the mission undertaken by his trusted team of policemen that night. The special hit men were to contact Ronnie their superior officer after Richard had been taken into their custody. Meanwhile the top officer was having a drink with his Minister... When he divulged the details of the mission undertaken by his killer squad that night to his Minister, he was shaken... He tried to dissuade the police officer from carrying out the operation as planned.

Ronnie what is the need to dispose this man—Richard de Zoysa? He is due to leave the country any way on a foreign job very soon. So take him into custody and release him later... And avoid all this unnecessary complications... and adverse publicity... was Ranjan Wijeratne's advice to the SSP.

Ronnie... was divided in his loyalty—to his Minister and to his Big Boss—the President. He had to be mindful of and more concerned with his obligation to the Big Man on whose behalf he was carrying out the mission. Ronnie started muttering incoherencies... but divulging the details of the whole three—stage project... This was the second cluster of three... The first disposal that of producer Laxman Perera had been carried out—successfully... The third one and the most important of the trio—the one who masterminded the scandalous thing, the disposal of Lalith Athulathmudali himself—had to be carried out within a week of the second execution. Ronnie was really distraught... and appeared confused, agitated, helpless. He only remarked—What can I do Sir? Lokka (the Big Boss) wants this done. I have no choice in the matter...

Ronnie's walkie talkie whirred. And he was gone!"^{lxiii}

Obviously there is a contradiction here—between this tale and Dr Saravanamuttu's story that it was SSP Gunasinghe who came to her house and took her son away. If Gunasinghe was having a drink with minister Wijeratne, then he could not have been at Dr Saravanamuttu's residence abducting her son in person. If he was at Dr Saravanamuttu's residence abducting her son in person, he could not have been having a drink with Minister Wijeratne. So either Dr Saravanamuttu is mistaken. Or Prins Gunasekara's source is lying. Both cannot be telling the truth, though both can be lying.

Of course this contradiction does not in any way discompose Prins Gunasekara. He resolves it in his own inimitable fashion: "It is not necessary to express any opinion over the credibility—or the plausibility of either of the two versions. The main perpetrators of the criminal conspiracy remain constant, the only verifiable factors being where and how it was committed."^{lxiv} One cannot but wonder how Prins Gunasekara can square this statement (and his entire approach in this case) with his legal training!

VIII Concluding Remarks

I do not want to comment at length on the literary flaws in *A Lost Generation*. I will merely content myself with the comment that Prins Gunasekara should have obtained the services of a competent editor. That way the readers could have been spared the shock of suddenly coming across words like 'silly billy' and 'cute manipulator.'

These critical remarks in no way negate the fact that *A Lost Generation* is both interesting and informative. (I'm indebted to Prins Gunasekara for the information that it was Premadasa who prevented an attempt by the Jayewardene regime to increase the land ceiling from 50 acres to 100 acres). Prins Gunasekara has written a book that had to be written—and should be read by anyone interested in the 20th century history of Sri Lanka.

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Notes

Prins Gunasekara is introduced on the back cover of *A Lost Generation* as a 'journalist, lawyer-advocate, parliamentarian, human rights activist.' In the post-1971 period he became one of the most important fellow travellers of the JVP—even going to the extent of allowing JVP leader and presidential candidate Rohana Wijeweera to use his house as the JVP's presidential campaign headquarters in 1982. He continued his work on behalf of the JVP even after its proscription in 1983 including negotiating with both President Jayewardene and President Premadasa, in his capacity as a leading figure of the Mawbima Surakeeme Viyaparaya (MSV). Though Prins Gunasekara and the other negotiators believed they were acting on behalf of the JVP, the JVP double-crossed them subsequently, denying any such special relationship.

Prins Gunasekara campaigned indefatigably on behalf of the human rights of the JVP. However, he maintained a public silence on the JVP's violent campaign against the other left parties and groups in the 1987-89 period. His pro-JVP human rights campaign came to an end when the father of Kanchana Abeypala (Prins Gunasekara's nephew and a lawyer who was killed by anti-JVP death squads) accused Gunasekara of being responsible for the death of his son!

Prins Gunasekara was a virulent critic of the Premadasa regime and was in self-exile in London from 1989. In the final footnote of *A Lost Generation* he hails the People's Alliance (PA) election victory of 1994: "A new era of hope has dawned. A multitude of human rights aspirations await fulfilment (p 736). At least one of those 'aspirations' was fated to remain unfulfilled. Even after five years of the PA government, Prins Gunasekara is still a self-exile in London because "A new *fatwah* by the present regime's head obstacles [sic] his return to the country of his birth."

- i. Pathirana was a leading student militant in the mid nineteen eighties and led a number of student struggles against the policies of the UNP regime. The JVP which considered the universities as their main power base cum recruiting ground regarded Pathirana as a threat. On 15 December 1986, Pathirana was abducted and tortured to death by the JVP.
- ii. A left wing breakaway from the SLFP, the SLMP was formed in January 1984. The JVP started targeting it because of its support for a political solution to the ethnic problem and its efforts to form a broad left-of-centre coalition as an alternative to both the SLFP and the UNP. The SLMP was led by Vijaya Kumaratunga.
- iii. Prins Gunasekara, *Sri Lanka in Crisis, A Lost Generation: The Untold Story*, Colombo, S Godage & Brothers, 1998, p 547. (Hereafter *A Lost Generation*)
- iv. *On Protracted War, Selected Works*, Vol. II, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 2nd edition, 1960, p 156.
- v. *Ibid.*, Interview with James Bertram, p 55.
- vi. *Venceramos: The Speeches and Writings of Ché Guevara*, John Gerassi (ed.), New York, A Clarion Book, Simon and Schuster, 1968.
- vii. *A Lost Generation*, pp 542-548.
- viii. *Ibid.*, p 542.
- ix. *Ibid.*, p 548. Whether Ravi Jayewardene ever made such an offer to the JVP we do not know for certain. He did have negotiations with the JVP on behalf of his father.

- x. *Ibid.*, p 543.
- xi. An umbrella organisation bringing together all the anti-devolution parties and organisations, it was formed in the mid nineteen eighties to oppose the UNP's efforts to come up with a political solution to the ethnic problem. The JVP was the driving force of this grouping.
- xii. *A Lost Generation*, p 625.
- xiii. *Ibid.*, p 547.
- xiv. See *Khaleej Times*, 3 July 1989.
- xv. *Frontline*, 10-23 June 1989.
- xvi. *Ibid.*
- xvii. *A Lost Generation*, pp 511-517.
- xviii. K M de Silva and Howard Wriggins (eds), *JR Jayewardene of Sri Lanka. A Political Biography*, Vol. II, Leo Cooper, London, 1994, pp 704 ff.
- xix. J N Dixit, *Assignment Colombo*, Colombo, Vijitha Yapa Bookshop, 1998, pp 273-274.
- xx. *A Lost Generation*, p 17.
- xxi. The left front formed under the leadership of Vijaya Kumaratunga.
- xxii. K M de Silva and Howard Wriggins, *op.cit.*, p 704.
- xxiii. *A Lost Generation*, pp 316-317.
- xxiv. *Ibid.*, p 510.
- xxv. K M de Silva and Howard Wriggins, *op.cit.*, p 711.
- xxvi. Mrs Bandaranaike's brother.
- xxvii. *A Lost Generation*, p 397.
- xxviii. *Ibid.*, p 402.
- xxix. *Ravaya*, January 1989.
- xxx. *Ibid.* Statistics on caste are generally not very accurate. We do not know on what basis these figures were computed.
- xxxi. K M de Silva and Howard Wriggins, *op.cit.*, p 702.
- xxxii. *A Lost Generation*, pp 476-479.
- xxxiii. *Ibid.*, p 407.
- xxxiv. *Ibid.*, p 401.
- xxxv. *Ibid.*, p 399.
- xxxvi. *The Daily News*, 2 July 1991.
- xxxvii. *Ibid.*, 5 June 1991.
- xxxviii. *Ibid.*, 6 June 1991.

- xxxix. *A Lost Generation*, p 515.
- xl. *Ibid.*, pp 555-556.
- xli. *Ibid.*, pp 598-599.
- xlii. Inter University Student Federation. In the late nineteen eighties it functioned as one of the main front organisations of the JVP.
- xliii. North Colombo Medical College was the first and only private medical college in Sri Lanka. The students (both JVP and anti-JVP) waged a long struggle demanding that the NCMC be taken over by the government.
- xliv. *A Lost Generation*, pp 601-603.
- xlv. *Ibid.*, p 607.
- xlvi. *Ibid.*, pp 608-609.
- xlvii. *Ibid.*, p 610.
- xlviii. *Ibid.*, p 734.
- xlix. *Ibid.*
- l. *Ibid.*, p 614.
- li. *Ibid.*, p 734.
- lii. *Frontline*, 24 June - 7 July 1989.
- liii. *Frontline*, 10-23 June 1989.
- liv. *A Charter of Democracy for Sri Lanka*, Colombo, April 1990.
- lv. Emphasis in the entire paragraph is mine - TG.
- lvi. Bruce Matthews, "Trouble in Srikotha: Strains and Perils of Democracy in Sri Lanka," *The Round Table*, April 1992, pp 215-227.
- lvii. *A Lost Generation*, p 492.
- lviii. *Ibid.*, p 504.
- lix. *Ibid.*, p 522.
- lx. *The Liberal Review*, February 1991.
- lxi. *A Lost Generation*, p 524.
- lxii. *Ibid.*, p 529.
- lxiii. *Ibid.*, pp 531-532.
- lxiv. *Ibid.*, p 530.