

'A manipulator, a schemer'

Interview with Sirimavo Bandaranaike

► Mrs. Bandaranaike, could you give us your assessment of the present crisis in Sri Lanka — the crisis in politics and in the democratic process...

...and the Constitution.
► And the Constitution?

Well, this is a crisis of a kind that has never occurred in Sri Lanka before. I don't know whether this kind of impeachment motion against the President has happened in some other countries before it happened in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this is something that, shall I say, has brought about a lot of interest and enthusiasm among the people. Some people do not know what an impeachment means and the Sinhala word for it was hardly used. The people are being told and we are having seminars, etc., which tell the people what it means and what is going to happen.

Now the main thing is that to get the impeachment motion through, we have to have a two-thirds majority. We have given the maximum we can give, 74 of us have signed. Mr. Ashraf (leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and an MP representing Amparai district) has not signed and I don't think he will sign. We didn't ask him to sign because we were not sure. We asked only those we were sure wouldn't leak it out. Because we had to keep this absolutely confidential till it went into the Speaker's hands and the Speaker informed him (the President), otherwise he would dissolve Parliament. I must say it was kept a real secret. They say in Sri Lanka we can't keep secrets! They say women can't keep secrets! (laughs). What happened? I knew about it for some time; we were working on this...

► How many people knew about the impeachment motion?

At the beginning, only two from their side (a reference to Gamini Dissanayake and Lalith Athulathmudali of the UNP), myself first, then I brought in one or two others, then one by one, but until it got off the ground, I don't think more than three, four people in our party knew it...

► It couldn't happen in India, I think.

Really?
► Until it happens.

Anyway, once it leaked out, the danger was that he would dissolve Parliament, so we had to keep it a secret. I told all our MPs... you know, within 24 hours, I got all our MPs' signatures. I was informed we had to give this within 24 hours because otherwise... "the President has got wind of it and he is going to dissolve Parliament". So I had to get them from Amparai, Trincomalee, all over the place, hundreds of miles away... and I must say they all responded and they came rushing down. Because they thought it had something to do with our party... because at that time there was a little problem brewing within the party. It was not that! They came rushing down and I said, "It is not that." They were all very happy.

We all signed it and it was given to the Speaker. Then the President was informed about it and that's how the public came to know about it. There were rumours that something was going to happen, nobody knew what it was. Because impeachment was something people didn't know about.

Now, what next? Now the President is threatening, trying to bribe MPs by telling them, those who have signed, "Don't go, I'll give you this, I'll give you the jobs, I'll give you increased salaries, I'll give you houses to live in." All this he is promising them to keep them on his side, those who signed (the impeachment motion). Forty-odd (UNP MPs) have signed the motion... even I don't know half the names, I don't even want to find out, not my business. Lalith, Gamini and

others have this. They say 40-odd have signed. But out of those 40-odd, as you know, they have got some to re-sign another statement expressing their loyalty to the President. How "loyal" they are, we don't know... maybe, through fear. They are scared, so they have gone and signed.

Now the crucial day will be when we bring that no-confidence motion about this supply of arms to the LTTE. We have some 74, we don't know whether Ashraf is going to vote against that, because they (the LTTE) have killed enough of their people in the Eastern Province. And the EROS may not vote with us, because it is a criticism of the LTTE also. But we have 74 and maybe the TULF also might vote on that. We have to get 112.

Now it is their (the UNP rebels') turn to find the numbers. We have given them the maximum we could give. Now they have to find the balance. They think they can. Because on this issue, they say there are quite a few people who will vote (against the Government). They are very angry about the whole thing.

► There is no doubt about the facts, about these arms being given to the LTTE?

No, that's true. I have myself made some enquiries. You know, eleven lorryloads of arms have gone to them! There are many Army people who know us well. We have collected information on this. Eleven lorryloads have gone straight from the harbour to Panagoda, the main Army camp, from Panagoda to various areas... some of the camps are mentioned and to whom the arms were handed over. There were Army people in the camps whom we know, I will not mention their names, of course, and they handed them to their (the LTTE's) leaders in those areas. I am trying to get all the names of those leaders also, for this (no-confidence) motion. So there is no doubt they were given arms.

► In late 1989?

Yes. I said (to our sources), "Please give me the dates. If you can't give me the exact dates, at least the month. The year and the month are important." It is difficult; there is nothing recorded in their books because these are all clandestine operations, aren't they? Then they were given money, they were given cement and even... I was told by Lalith (Athulathmudali) that they were even given some cooling equipment like airconditioners for their bunkers — which our generals don't have! And this communication equipment, very powerful equipment, I learn.

► Some of this equipment was seized in India, very sophisticated communication equipment.

Which our Army doesn't have! So those are the things they have given them (the LTTE). I think it is a treacherous act, a treacherous act. That's why we put the term, "treason," in our impeachment motion. Let him (Premadasa) explain why he gave it. Of course, first he denied it. Then he said this was to destroy the TNA. Even let us say there was an army called the TNA or the Tamil National Army that Varadarajaperumal and others built up... whatever their purposes were. But have you a right to go and kill our own people? They are our boys; there are other ways of dealing with them. Not to give arms to another rival group and say, "Kill them." Our Army is there; they could have told our Army to arrest them. But do you leave it to the LTTE to go and kill them?

By then, he (Premadasa) should have realised that by arming a group which was a very powerful group, which would use them against anyone the way it is using them now... So

they say this was to destroy the TNA... boys of 15 or 16 were just massacred, massacred. They are also our Sri Lankan boys... And also to fight the IPKF — not only to destroy the TNA, but to fight the IPKF.

Didn't Mr. Premadasa realise, when he armed these fellows with all this powerful equipment and arms, that they were going, some day, to turn round on us? Now with India having blocked the arms coming into Sri Lanka from India, from where are they getting their stuff? I'm still not sure... I wouldn't be surprised if they were still supplying them with arms!

► A supply of arms from Sri Lanka?

I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if that's happening. This man is quite capable of it! He might not have told the Cabinet. Nobody knew about it. It was kept a great secret. Only a few knew about it. I'm told that the Army officers who took these things, who were forced or asked to take them, some of them cried. They said they knew what was going to happen. But they had orders and had to carry them out.

► Madam, when you started this impeachment, did you expect that this issue was going to come up and become so important, in fact, the prime issue?

We didn't know about the seriousness of it at that time. At that stage, Lalith and others, they knew about it, they didn't tell us the details. Only later on, when Lalith set it out in a meeting, did we also realise... till then, we didn't know the details. They probably were also not sure at that stage... they knew something had happened, but the Cabinet had not been told. Maybe (A.C.S.) Hameed (Cabinet Minister) knew it, and Attygale... I'm told Attygale objected to it. No Army man could not have objected!

► They say Ranjan Wijeratne opposed it.

Ranjan must have. Must have — he didn't like the LTTE at all!

► Because at that time, this was the allegation made by the IPKF and by Indian Government officials... that somebody here was arming the LTTE. This came in Indian newspapers, but there were no details...

I see. Who can arm them? Not we! We don't have arms. It is the Army, the Government. And this equipment that was imported for the Army — or specially imported for this probably! Some of it came straight from the harbour. A man has written a letter to me, in his own handwriting, that he was one of the ten people who had to take these arms to a certain camp in whatever month and year... he says they took it in two jeeps and handed it over in the jungles... and they were well treated (by the LTTE) and sent back.

► What is your political relationship with the group within the UNP which is fighting Premadasa?

We have a fairly close relationship now and we are in touch with each other. We have to. From day to day, you've got to plan your strategy. So we are in touch with them, either directly or through one or two others whom we both trust, who carry messages. It is very important because day to day things are changing, as you can see.

Even on Parliament day, there was a weak attempt to win back these people. I was told that 50 MPs had gone and told the President or the Ministers that... they were going to make statements in Parliament. So Ranil (Wickremasinghe) took them to his room in Parliament and kept them there and was talking to them to prevent them from going in (laughs). He and Hameed and all of them talking to them, keeping them in a sort of hu-

mour till Parliament was over. And Lalith was brought in, I think, and Lalith had laid down his terms. The Times, of course, carries a big story, I don't think this is correct.

Now the latest game is this. Now the President is playing this... he is a very clever manipulator, there is no doubt about that, I must give him the credit for it. Like J. R. (Jayewardene). We don't have that type of manipulator in our party, I'm sorry to say! I wish we had one! (laughter). He is a better manipulator and schemer.

He is now spreading a story through his men, he has a lot of them... they send a message to Gamini that "Lalith is trying to cut your throat." They send a message to Lalith to say that "Gamini is going to cut your throat, he is joining hands with Mrs. Bandaranaike to cut your throat." Then they send messages to me, "Those two are going to let you down. They have come to a deal to be back in the Government." They send a message to Anura (Bandaranaike) and Anura got excited, you see. They said, "There is a dialogue, there is a deal."

It's true they are having discussions... (M.L.M.) Aboosally (State Minister for Plantations) started that. You see, he is running here, running there... there is an article in today's Times. Aboosally is supposed to have said that very soon there will be a settlement of this. I told Lalith and Gamini, "Please don't let us down... We have given you 74 signatures. You have no right to have any deal without telling us. You have to inform us about any deal. Because it would be very unfair by us." They said, "What nonsense, there's no such thing. It is true: we have to talk to them, we are talking to them, but there is no such deal." They are categorical; both he (Lalith) and Gamini denied... to me yesterday. We have to take precautions, our lines are tapped 24 hours a day! Now I know the truth and so, I don't believe it.

► What next? If there is a secret ballot, your no-confidence motion on the supply of arms to the LTTE will go through?

Yes... that is entirely in the Speaker's hands, on the no-confidence motion. People are afraid to go in because the LTTE is coming in, no? It is going to be there.

► The LTTE?

They are coming right inside (Parliament).

► The EROS MPs?

It's not the EROS, it's the LTTE which is coming in!

► Can you tell us something about that? How do you see the EROS move into Parliament...

Why this sudden urgency to bring in the EROS at this stage? All these years they didn't bother about them. Why just at this stage is the EROS being brought in? For what? To get their vote. And I'm told they are supposed to have demanded an unconditional ceasefire. Though there is no officially-declared ceasefire, I'm told that the troops have withdrawn from certain areas. We are told that they have finished operations, but if you finish, you don't leave, they come back there! I saw one Army officer and he said, "If they want, they can go back there." What is this? Why did they fight? Why did 70-odd soldiers die, including five officers, within the last one month?

► And these are LTTE people in EROS uniform?

I'm told so. Prabakaran had to give permission to Edward (Sebastianpillai) to come. Edward was kept in Jaffna and elsewhere. And finally he was allowed to come on condition that these men were going to go in. And one is supposed to be a diehard LTTE cadre. I hope they won't turn their

guns on us inside Parliament!

► *You think President Premadasa has agreed to a ceasefire?*

Possible, possible. He will do anything to get their vote. Anything to keep himself in power. Now he is shaky, I have no doubt about that ... He was very badly shaken on that day in Parliament.

On Parliament day, we said we wouldn't go in before he came in because we would have to stand up and we didn't want to stand. But we have to stand for the Speaker and the Mace, we have to respect the Speaker and the Mace. So we thought we would stay out. We stayed outside the door... after he went in, we went in. The signal was there and we went in on the other side and sat down...

And there is another interesting thing. He is supposed to have brought two Malayales and done some witchcraft.

► *To do some 'black magic'?*

He is supposed to have applied oil on our chairs and sprinkled dust all over the place and... he (Premadasa) is supposed to have sat on his chair and I don't know quite what they did... drew something round his feet, various things. Why should the President go at that ungodly hour when the place is all closed up? He had gone in around 6-30 p.m. (on the previous day) with his Secretary and two others ... they don't know who these two others were. These were the Malayales. So the Secretary admitted, when I asked him, that the doors were opened because they asked him to open it (the parliamentary chamber).

► *For some rehearsal?*

He (Premadasa) didn't say what it was for. He said, "I want to go in." He has been in this Parliament before. He doesn't have to go in to see it specially for this. This was not a rehearsal. Why did he go in on that day? If it was a rehearsal, then there would have been a whole paraphernalia. He went in because he believes in it, does a lot of this stuff. He engages in this type of thing.

► *These "Malayales" probably came from India?*

Yes, from Kerala. Famous for this, no? How effective they are, I don't know. Couldn't have been very effective, because they couldn't solve his problems that day. But we all went in and wiped our chairs (laughs). And with holy water, we rubbed our chairs. All their (UNP) MPs were wondering what all this was for. They were all so shocked. We all knew about it, but they didn't know (laughs). The President would have known, he must have thought, "How on earth did they come to know about this?"

Imagine the President of this country, a man of that stature, stooping to this type of thing! And in Sri Lanka, you can't keep a secret, you know. Somebody has to leak it.

► *If this no-confidence motion is adopted, either through a secret ballot or openly, then the Government will have to resign. And then the natural question is what are the possible alternatives? Mrs. Bandaranaike...*

No, I won't take it. My one objective was to see that this (presidential) system must be done away with. In fact, in 1972, when we were bringing in our Constitution, we turned Parliament into a Constituent Assembly. J. R. Jayewardene's party was also there. He told me, "Why don't you have this presidential system?" I said, "No. That's a dangerous thing. In a country like ours, we don't need a system like that." I said, "Listen, suppose Rohana Wijeweera becomes President of Sri Lanka. What happens then?" I said I didn't want this, I was going to stick to the old (parliamentary) system with a few more seats in Parliament.

As soon as he (Jayewardene) came in, he amended one clause in that and he became President automatically, without an election. He came in as Prime Minister and he became President by changing the Constitution. Of course, later on he had an election, two years later, and prevented me from contesting by taking away my civic rights. The purpose of that was to keep me from contesting him.

So anyway, we have been against this right through. In the 1982 elections also, when Hector (Kobbekaduwe) contested, we said we were going to do away with it. In 1988, in our DPA Manifesto — five parties signed that — we said that if I came into power, I would change the system. If I wanted to... if I was really for power, I wouldn't say that. If I won, the first I would have to do was to do that. Because this system is dangerous. We realised this and now we have realised it more.

When we said it at that time, we were only thinking of what happened in other countries. That had not happened in our country. Now it has happened here. You see, from the experience we had from other countries, like the Idi Amins and so on, it is virtually a dictatorship. It is a one-man show, isn't it? He (Premadasa) has himself declared it a one-man show. Therefore it is a dangerous system. Any other person who comes in can be the same. Even if I go there. I mean, you get so much power, it's dangerous, dangerous.

► *You can't trust even yourself?*

I can't trust even myself (laughs).

► *When you were Prime Minister, didn't you have as much authority, as much power? That is what the UNP is saying.*

No, that was no so. We did not have this kind of power. I had a Parliament and a Cabinet, didn't I? I did certain things, it is true, but with Cabinet approval. They say I kept the Emergency too long. My civic rights were taken away for that. "Abuse of power," there is no such thing called "abuse of power" in any law book today. But they took away my civic rights for that. Why? Because "I kept the Emergency too long." Why did I do it? For the same reason they are keeping it today. Because we had thousands in camps (after the 1971 JVP insurrection)... If we removed the Emergency, all these persons were going to be released. We rehabilitated them. Some of them were hard-core boys and some were in custody, to be tried...

► *The JVP?*

All JVP. They were then known as the "Che Gueveras," later on they became the JVP. We could not release them. That was the very reason I kept the Emergency. They blamed me then and they are doing the same thing now. Their excuse is, "We have to release these persons" (if the Emergency is lifted). We accept that. That's why Lalith and others decided not to vote against it (the extension of the Emergency) because he said, "If these persons are all released and let loose..." Premadasa himself... will say, "Yes, these people went and did it and I had to release them." We had to be tactful there. They said, "You vote as you have been voting before, we will vote for it. To prevent the Emergency from being removed."

► *To come back to the question of alternatives if this UNP Government falls. You will not become Prime Minister if offered...*

No, no, not under this...

► *Under this system, under the Premadasa presidency?*

No. He (Premadasa) has said that, hasn't he? I'm glad he said that...

► *He then mentioned Anura Bandaranaike...*

Anura can speak for himself, but he (Premadasa) knows I will not accept it under Premadasa, under a UNP President. Why should I do so? I have been Prime Minister of this country for twelve years. I am not anxious to be here for power. If I can achieve this objective, probably I might even move out of politics. One aim is to see this system out because this is really dangerous. You can see what's happening: a one-man show; spending money as he likes; and doing things for his people... the impeachment motion spells it out. This is something we have to do and I will fight for it. But under no condition will I accept that (the Prime Ministership). Let them do it. Let them (the UNP dissidents and their supporters) attempt to carry on, we will give them support to implement certain things...

► *We learn reliably that neither*

Athulathmudali nor Dissanayake will accept it...

But they can find somebody else in their party. We can't propose anybody from their side. So let them propose... So that no one can say about Lalith and Gamini, "They are greedy for power, that's why they are doing this." It's wise of them. I have no intention of getting in under this system. If we change the system and we have our parliamentary democracy, at that stage we will consider whether I'm going to come in or not.

► *You're keeping it open...*

Yes, keeping it open, but most probably I won't. Anyway...

► *Do you foresee an election soon, a parliamentary election?*

If Premadasa gets desperate, he might do that. But then it will be unwise because all MPs are against it... So he's reluctant to dissolve Parliament at the moment and he also is not sure of coming back...

► *So, you are not in a hurry to get Parliament dissolved?*

We are not in a hurry, no. One in the hand is better than two in the bush!

► *Do you think the referendum is a good idea?*

Of course. We are asking for it. If you don't want to change (the system), leave it to the people. They are the jury. I said it at a meeting: "Why don't you submit it to a referendum? You had a referendum to keep the so-called Naxalites out of Parliament." Including my son-in-law, who was killed... They said they didn't want them in Parliament, J.R. said that, Premadasa said that. Therefore they held a referendum to get the extension of the life of Parliament. But that was not the reason. They were frightened after J.R.'s results (in the 1982 presidential election) were not all that satisfactory... the results he got against a "weak" candidate like Kobbekaduwe. He (Jayewardene) didn't do all that too well. So he felt, "My god, if I go for a general election I might lose." So he found a reason, an excuse — the manipulator — to say, "Well, I don't want these Naxalites in Parliament." Called them all "Naxalites" to frighten people and when they went to the polls, that was not an election, that was rigging, complete rigging — that referendum! I have said that publicly. If you read the Election Commission's report, you see that. Have you read that? What better evidence than that? So that is how they have been manipulating and managing the system. Terrible...

► *On the present situation. You are very actively speaking to the people, going out among them. And also Gamini and Lalith and (G.M.) Premachandra. What is the response?*

We have told them to have more meetings because they are getting the bigger crowds. They are drawing crowds, no doubt, because they are the rebel group. People are going to see them... inquisitiveness also. So that's what we want, the people to come. Our people go, UNPers, other parties, all go together. The Nugegoda (a Colombo suburb) meeting drew an unprecedented crowd. I didn't go, but all who went there said so. And even in other areas, in Kandy, they drew a good crowd. People want to hear them more than us. This is a rebel (UNP) group which is now talking to the people. Let them explain why they resigned (from the Government), why they did it...

► *Mrs. Bandaranaike, what can the Tamil people expect from this? Because they are hoping for some justice...*

We have to do something. We are not so bothered about the Select Committee proposal. I immediately appointed a committee of our people, about ten of them, to study this question. There are various proposals which have come from various people. The APC proposals, the B-C Pact (the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957) and our DPA manifesto, because there were a lot of Tamils who told me that Manifesto was good... I know that I got more votes in Jaffna than Premadasa?

► *Yes, in six constituencies?*

He (Premadasa) did not get a single one. I won six and Hector Kobbekaduwe (in 1982) got five... Anyway, the DPA Manifesto was accepted by the people there. Therefore we have to do something, there is no doubt about it.

We can't go on fighting. Our country can't progress at this rate. It's going down, down, down. Things may look all right at the surface, but beneath it is not at all satisfactory. It is true a lot of Tamils are living in India and here because they can't go and live in Jaffna. But they have their grievances, so we have to give priority to this question. If we can get together, at some stage... I told the TULF also, "We have to give this priority." I have already appointed this committee and they are studying the proposals. To go before the Select Committee if that Select Committee meets at all.

But behind (the back of) the Select Committee, sending Thondaman to Jaffna, what is all this? Up to date, the country has not been told what (A.C.S.) Hameed discussed with the LTTE, over fourteen months of discussion! Twice I asked him in Parliament, "What have you discussed? What is it the LTTE asked for? What is it that you said you can't give away? What is it that you offered to the LTTE? Then suddenly this thing broke up and they (the LTTE) went and 'arrested', kidnapped six hundred of our people. I said, "What happened? Why did this happen?" While the Government was talking to them, they went and abducted these persons.

I said, "What is it?" Hameed said, "I have given communications." I said, "Two-line communiques? What can we get out of that? Why don't you tell this Parliament? We have a right to know. This is not your personal property! Please tell us what is that you all discussed." Up to date, they have not told us. Lalith also said that they had not even told the Cabinet... what Hameed discussed for months. Fourteen months, keeping them in five-star hotels, with all the security, helicopters at their command!

► *Finally, what is your thinking on the hand behind Rajiv Gandhi's assassination? What is your impression here and from your sources?*

I'm not surprised that the LTTE is behind it. Nothing surprising because they were against him (Rajiv Gandhi), they did not agree to his proposal, the Rajiv Gandhi-Jayewardene Pact. They feared if Rajiv came to power, he would come down heavily on them.

► *So they had a real motivation?*

Definitely, definitely.

► *Here nobody has any doubt that they are behind it?*

I don't think so. Whether there is anybody else in Sri Lanka, others, I don't know. Unseen hands may be there. We don't know. Most of these things do have an unseen hand. In Ranjan's (Ranjan Wijeratne's) assassination, they say there are unseen hands. In the case of Rajiv's assassination, we don't know. But there is no doubt that the main actor is the LTTE. All the fellows who are caught are LTTE, aren't they?

► *Do you think President Premadasa wants to solve the ethnic crisis?*

Doesn't look like it. Over two and a half years, what has he been doing? APCs, this and that, fourteen months talking to them (the LTTE). Nothing has come out of it. I think it suits him to keep it like this, to let it fester. Suits him. Otherwise, why can't he help you, India, in this investigation? Why aren't they giving their full support? They should appoint a Special Team to help them (the Indian investigators) to solve this problem. If the LTTE is nabbed in this, that means they get weak here, don't they? If they are wise, this is what they should do. ■

aus: 'Frontline',
12.-25.10.91