Sri Lanka’s independence

Shadows over a colonial graft

Nira Wickramasinghe

Introduction

Sri Lanka’s independence process is generally described as “the conversion of a colony into an independent state by peaceful means”\(^1\) or as a “transfer of power” from British administration to the representatives of the new independent state of Ceylon, a phrase that implies considerable continuity with a colonial era that lasted 400 years.\(^2\) Portuguese and Dutch rule left an imprint but not as marked as the British (1796–1948), the first power to conquer the entire island. The British attempted to intervene at the level of what Eric Stokes calls “society itself.”\(^3\) The exceptional depth of the colonial impact on Ceylon, particularly in the coastal areas, radically modified the social and economic structures of the island. In some respects, the colonial impact oriented the economy outward, overturned traditional streams of trade, and distorted links with India, while introducing into society new elements of heterogeneity: Christianity, the languages of the conqueror, new communities such as the Burghers (mixed European and native descent) and, later, Indian immigrant plantation workers. It also imposed unifying factors: modern modes of communication, a unified administrative system, a common language of domination, and monetarization of exchanges. However, this depth should not be overestimated: family structures, the caste system, and Buddhism were maintained, especially in the center of the island where foreign domination was resisted for three centuries. Traditions were transformed by reshaping or adapting to features of modernity.\(^4\)

There are many ways of reading the moment of the foundation of the state of Ceylon on 4 February, 1948: few would see it as a fundamental disjunction from colonial rule, the image of a continuum or a nexus being more suitable. When reflecting on this critical moment one needs, however, to go beyond the conventional reading of Ceylon in 1948 as a “satellite of Britain,”\(^5\) or as the theater of a consensual transition to independence. What I hope to provide in this chapter is a more shadowy picture of a state whose legitimacy was weak as it derived neither from a political body bound by nationalist sentiment nor from a nationalist struggle against colonial autocracy in the name of deeply felt democratic principles.

The transfer of power, occurring, as it did, in two stages (1931 and 1948) took place within the institutional framework of a dominion. This chapter will first look at the years immediately before independence that
paved the way for independence and witnessed the nurturing of leaders for the new state. It will then analyze the institutional continuities in practice between the British colonial state and the newly founded state. Finally, it will address the legacies of unsolved issues—dominion status, citizenship, ethnic mistrust—that persisted into the following decades.

Towards independence: The democratic graft of 1931

The two decades that preceded independence constitute a formative period for the future statesmen of independent Ceylon: they gained experience in statecraft in the state councils and introduced important and lasting legislation in areas where power was delegated: namely agriculture, industry, education, health care, and local administration.

The Donoughmore experience in self-rule

Since 1915, the year of violent intercommunal riots, the island had been enjoying a relative calm, unlike its larger neighbor. In the decades that followed, the island’s westernized elite was introduced to the ideals of parliamentary debate within the confines of a system similar to that of India, with limited franchise and communal representation. In 1926, Sir Hugh Clifford, Governor of Ceylon, sent a dispatch to the Colonial Office that contributed to convincing the Under-Secretary of State of the urgency for sending a small royal commission to examine on the spot the actual effect of the constitutional changes already granted. The arrival of the Donoughmore Commission had the effect of stimulating political activity in the country and spawned a number of new associations based on region, caste, and community as well as yearnings for greater political participation. Within a year following the sittings of the Donoughmore Commission, a report was drawn up and published. Instead of the expected cabinet system, a scheme for executive committees modeled on those of the League of Nations and the London County Council was proposed. The Executive Council was abolished. Instead of a ministry and an opposition, the unicameral legislature, the State Council would divide into seven committees, each of which would be concerned with a particular public department. The main recommendation of the commission was the abolition of communal representation and the extension of the franchise to all males over 21 and females over 30 domiciled in Ceylon. Eventually universal suffrage was adopted, with some restrictions. The abolition of communal representation and the adherence to the principle of equality between individuals signified—in effect—Sinhalese rule. The aim of the commissioners, in accord with the view prevailing at the Colonial Office, was most probably to ensure a gradual and limited transfer of power to the moderates of the Ceylon National Congress, while keeping a strong minority group which was apprehensive of any more advances towards self-government as a safety valve against any potential radical moves by the majority. It was also a way of reinforcing the power of the conservative leaders of the Ceylon National Congress, many of whom were rural notables, at the expense of the labor leader A. E. Goonesinha who, the British felt, was gaining too much prominence in the political life of the country. The project exceeded the demands of the Ceylonese elites, who had asked for less democracy, but more autonomy. However, Britain retained authority over finance, justice, law and order, and foreign relations.

During the Donoughmore period the transfer of power to a moderate Ceylonese leadership was accompanied by a similar transfer of power in the administration. The period of the second State Council from 1936 onwards saw the near completion of a program of Ceylonization of the administration. There was no formal policy of
“Sinhalization,” although the number of Sinhalese increased dramatically in the administration. A possible explanation is the increase in the English literacy rate for the whole population and consequently a higher output of English-educated Sinhalese than Burghers and Tamils. It is also possible that many Sinhalese turned to employment in the public service as a result of economic trends in the 1930s. More importantly, however, the officials who first served in the Ceylon Civil Service were inculcated with a sense of the public domain that transcended belonging to particular communal groups.

The Donoughmore years entrenched the idea that the state had a responsibility towards its citizens. In the late 1940s, the principle of collective provision for common human and social needs through state intervention was firmly established through the implementation of the Education Act of 1943 and the establishment of the department of social services in 1948. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, some initiatives relating to labor welfare had been forthcoming, motivated essentially by the need of the state to safeguard the highly profitable plantation sector by giving special treatment to indentured Indian labor. In 1927, for instance, minimum wage legislation was enacted for Indian estate workers.

The origins of welfarism can be more clearly traced to the Donoughmore years when social legislation laws relating to a wide number of issues such as child and family welfare, poverty alleviation, education, and health and social security were promulgated. The commitment to improving living standards through education and health policies surfaced in these transition years of semi-self-government as a concomitant of universal franchise. However, the 1930s were especially hard on the poorer sections of the population, as those years were further plagued by a severe drought and a devastating malaria epidemic. Thus, it was necessity too that sparked a number of measures, among them the introduction of a Poor Law in 1939 following the Wedderburn Report of 1934, which attempted to deal with poverty by recommending state assistance, a measure that was not, however, continued in the years that followed. During the Second World War, except for a food subsidy for the entire population, social welfare was accorded little priority.8 The Kannangara Report of 1943 recommended a system of universal and compulsory free education from kindergarten to university that led to a national system of education founded on the principle of equal opportunity.9

Another important welfare measure directed at a particular segment of the population, namely the peasantry, needs to be mentioned. Under the leadership of Don Stephen Senanayake, Minister of Agriculture and Lands and Leader of the State Council, an important program of state-sponsored land colonization was initiated to provide landless peasants with opportunities to settle in the “dry zone,” the old Rajarata, or Land of Kings.10 This issue would later become a thorn in the relations between Sinhalese and Tamils, since the latter saw this measure as an attempt by a majoritarian state to conquer lands where they themselves had lived for a number of generations.

The nationalist movement

The British transferred power in 1948 to a conservative multiethnic elite that had spearheaded a reformist nationalist movement. The British felt that this group would offer the best resistance to the forces of cultural nationalism and Marxism then gaining momentum in the country. The westernized elites had, on the whole, been willing partners of the British.

What resistance there had been had occurred in the first two decades of the century when the temperance movement rallied Sinhalese Buddhists against the imposition of Christian values. It was also a means through which the newly emergent middle
classes could challenge the social values of foreign Christian rulers and British rule as a whole. The social and religious reformers, Anagarika Dharmapala and Walsisinha Harischandra, led a campaign to protect places of Buddhist worship. They were also leaders of the temperance movement. This endeavor, which peaked first in 1903–05 and, more importantly, in 1911–14, had a dual purpose: first to reassert Buddhist strictures against alcohol, which amounted to the renewed assertion of the validity and relevance of Buddhist values in general after years of acquiescence in the values of foreign rulers; second, on the political plane, to attack excise duties as an important source of British revenue. The impact of this movement was not confined to the urban intelligentsia, but spread to the rural middle class and urban workers. Dharmapala appealed to the middle classes when he stressed the doctrinal tradition and rejected peasant religiosity, especially the worship of deities. After severe Sinhalese–Muslim rioting in a number of locations in 1915, the British colonial authorities clamped down on men associated with the temperance movement, arbitrarily arresting many members. Subsequently, the pattern of political agitation underwent a distinct change. The shift started with the death of W. Harischandra in 1913 and was consolidated by the exile of Anagarika Dharmapala to India. From this time, the constitutional reform movement adopted a secular outlook and religion became of secondary importance.

Reform and state councils, 1931–36

During the 1930s and until the mid-1940s, the political space was occupied by a multi-ethnic elite group that belonged to a variety of political formations: the Ceylon National Congress was essentially a Sinhalese moderate movement with a few minority Muslim and Tamil members; the Sinhala Maha Sabha created by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the heir to a line of wealthy landowners from the Colombo region was a more virulently Sinhalese nationalist organization. Bandaranaike had received an English and Protestant education, but learnt Sinhala and converted to Buddhism on his return from Oxford. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party, a Marxist organization formed in 1935, was nonsectarian in nature and led by members of the Sinhalese elite. Minority groups were represented by vocal individuals such as G. G. Ponnambalam. There was, however, no united front of minorities to combat the increasingly majoritarian features of the State Council era. In 1944, the minority coalition was restricted to the Ceylon Tamils and Ceylon Indians (plantation Tamils, often referred to as Estate Tamils).

On the whole, the state councils saw an under-representation of minority communities. In 1931, a Tamil boycott of the elections instigated by a Tamil radical group called the Youth Congress further aggravated the situation. This was rectified in 1934 with the entry of four northern members. The relations between communities soured further when, in 1936, all seven ministers elected were Sinhalese. From then on, minority leaders presented their own solutions for political reform—such as balanced representation for minorities—quite separately from the reform demands which the State Council, under the leadership of D. S. Senanayake, were crafting.

D. S. Senanayake was heir to a rich family whose fortune came from graphite mines and coconut plantations. He was very popular with the peasant class, to whom he distributed lands as Minister of Agriculture after 1931, as well as with the upper classes who were reassured by his social conservatism. The British saw him as an ideal ally.

It would be incorrect to suggest, however, that the political space was limited to the conservative native elite in the State Councils. Many young village monks, who had studied at seats of monastic learning such as Vidyoda Pirivena and Vidyalankara Pirivena, returned to their villages with high ideals of uplifting
the lot of the peasants. In the 1947 elections many would work under the banner of the Marxist parties.\textsuperscript{11}

**Lineages of the colonial past:**

**Soulbury constitution and continuities in political practices**

In July 1944, Lord Soulbury was appointed head of a commission charged with the task of examining a new constitutional draft that the Sri Lankan ministers had proposed but that was, in fact, the creation of Sir Ivor Jennings, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ceylon and the unofficial advisor to D. S. Senanayake. After the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, under pressure from Sri Lankan politicians, the British finally agreed to concede full participatory government after the war, which meant full responsible government in all matters of internal civil administration. The Soulbury Report, published in September 1945, provided a bicameral parliamentary government based on the Whitehall model. Universal suffrage was retained. The executive committees and the posts of three officers of state were abolished. Executive power was to be vested in a prime minister and a cabinet appointed by the governor-general but responsible to the lower house of the bicameral legislature. The governor-general was given overriding powers in matters of defense, external affairs, and constitutional amendments, but on all other matters could only act on the advice of his ministers. He would also appoint 15 of the 30 members of the senate or upper chamber. The first chamber or House of Representatives would consist of 101 members, 95 of whom would be elected, with six nominated by the governor-general. The London *Times* quite accurately described the treatment of the issues by the Soulbury Commission as “unimaginative.”\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, except for the addition of a second chamber, it amounted to an endorsement of the main principles of the constitutional scheme formulated in 1944.

Provision was made in the Soulbury Report and in the Ceylon (Constitution) Order in Council for the protection of minority rights, but the assumption was that the minority communities constituted a large and powerful enough bloc to be able to counter majoritarian initiatives. The Soulbury Report ensured that the governor-general would exercise his discretion on any bill that evoked serious opposition by any racial or religious community and that, in his opinion, was likely to involve oppression or serious injustice to any such community. The Soulbury Report contained a clause, which later became Section (29)\textsuperscript{2} in the 1946 Constitution modeled on clause 8 of the ministers’ draft constitution, that prohibited legislation infringing on religious freedom or discriminating against persons of any community or religion. The incorporation of the principle of weightage in representation was the chief safeguard against majority domination. Area, as well as population, was taken into account in the delimitation of constituencies so that minorities scattered in various parts of the country would be represented. Minority rights were also to be protected by the requirement of a two-thirds majority in the house for any change in the constitution or any piece of legislation aimed at discriminating against a racial or religious minority. There were multiple checks: if by chance such legislation came to parliament, the two-thirds requirement provided another check against it. The concurrence of at least 68 members in a House of 95 elected members and six nominated members was thus needed. The second chamber could check and revise legislation of a discriminatory character but not obstruct a bill.

The institutional safeguards for minorities embodied in the Soulbury Report lagged far behind the demands put forward by the minorities at the commission’s sittings. While other minorities gradually ceased their protests and prepared to collaborate with the
majority, the Ceylon Tamil and Ceylon Indian leadership remained aloof.

**Hazards of instability: Strikes**

In the years following the end of the war, after the publication of the Soulbury Report and the subsequent framing of a constitution, political activity was renewed with the holding of elections for a new parliament. The end of the artificial prosperity that had prevailed during the war years when troops were stationed in Ceylon, together with the announcement of future elections, created conditions of social unrest throughout the island, instigated in the main by the three Marxist parties. Although the widely felt fear that the moderate leadership of the nationalist movement was being submerged by the left had no real substance, it had a double effect. First, it led the moderates of all ethnic groups to join hands and form the United National Party (UNP) in April 1946. The UNP rallied non-Marxists of all communities except the Tamil Congress. Second, it acted as a bargaining card for D. S. Senanayake, the leader of the State Council, to compel Whitehall to make a decisive statement regarding the status of Ceylon in order to reinforce the position of the moderates. The British, indeed, had no desire to see Ceylon ruled by what they considered “extremists.” Class politics then made a shattering entry into the otherwise dormant political scene of post-war Ceylon. Unrest started in October 1946 with the bank clerks’ strike led by the Ceylon Bank Clerks Union. The Union was more influenced by Goonesinha’s ideas than by the Marxist parties. It then spread to government workers and municipal employees, paralyzing essential services. The government treated the strike as a major emergency. The hartal was eventually suspended but it acted as a warning to the Board of Ministers.

At the beginning of 1947 agitation for an increase in wages among government daily paid workers reached another climax. The military was eventually called in; on 5 June the police opened fire on a crowd of strikers near Kolonnawa, killing one of them, a government clerk by the name of Kandasamy. The strike was broken after a month.

**Elections 1947**

The general elections of 1947 for Ceylon’s First House of Representatives was the third held since the bestowal of universal suffrage by the Donoughmore Constitution in 1931. The main parties that contested the elections were the UNP, the Lanka Sama Samaj Party (LSSP), the Bolshevik Leninist Party (BLP), the Communist Party (CP), the Labour Party, the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC) and the Tamil Congress. There were also two minor parties, the Lanka Swaraj and the United Lanka Party. The 1947 elections were the first in which class conflict was a factor, taking the form of a UNP-Left duel in the Sinhalese areas of the country. The Lake House newspapers, the country’s major written media, joined by the nationalist Sinhala Jatiya and Sinhala Bauddhaya (founded by Dharmapala) constituted the main forces opposed to Marxism. In the two decades preceding these elections, numerous Buddhist societies—the Sri Sanandhara Society (Society for the Support of the Buddhist Priesthood), Buddhagaya Defense League, and the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress were some of the main ones—had emerged in response to the newly felt need for organizing the largest religious community in the island. These developments prepared the terrain for Bhikku involvement in politics. The conservative forces were supported by the rural petit bourgeoisie and many monks inspired by the Vidyodaya Pirivena (Vidyoda monastic school), who travelled around the countryside with a message of disaster should the Marxists capture power.

The left, with the help of Vidyalankara monks, had succeeded in winning to its side
a significant number of radical Buddhists, who believed socialism was not alien to the spirit of Buddhism as the sangha was a community in which private property was non-existent.

The election results were a disappointment for the UNP, which secured only 42 of 95 seats. The LSSP won ten seats, the BLP five seats, the CP three seats and Labour one seat. Left-wing parties, which secured 20.5 percent of the votes, dominated the low country, from Colombo to the southwestern coast to Matara at the southern tip. At the time, the success of the left was explained as a consequence of the post-war economic slump. There was also a caste dimension to the Marxist power base. The coastal fringe of the country contained a heavy concentration of the Karava, Salagama, and Durava castes, castes that occupied an intermediate place in the social hierarchy dominated by the majority Goyigama (farmer) caste. The left did not make any headway in non-Sinhalese areas. Interestingly, the northern part of the country was the only area where the LSSP won fewer votes than its Marxist rivals. Clearly the nonsectarian language of the LSSP was not attractive to the Tamil voter.

Independents had secured 21 seats while the Tamil Congress and Ceylon Indian Congress gained seven and six seats respectively. As the UNP had not secured a majority, anti-UNP forces gathered to try to form a government at what is known as the Yamuna Conference. But no agreement was reached and D. S. Senanayake lured enough independents in support to form a cabinet. The left parties would never come closer to forming a government.

**Economy, bureaucracy, army**

At Independence, the island remained heir to a colonial system in which the economy was tied to the export of tropical goods and the import of food products such as rice. First established with cinnamon, the export trade turned successively to coffee in the 1840s, tea and coconuts in the 1880s, and rubber in the 1900s. The plantation structure remained, based on the exploitation of an Indian labor force in vast plantations of several hundred hectares, overseen by a British managerial class, and with well-established commercial networks: “Over 40 percent of the Gross Domestic Product in 1948 came from agriculture and the share of tea, rubber and coconut in the agricultural output was over 60 percent.” The smallholding sector produced mainly for the domestic market at relatively low levels of productivity. At Independence, economic indicators were largely favorable. The balance of payments recorded a sizeable current account surplus while external reserves were sufficient to finance imports for about one year. The standard of living, owing to well-entrenched welfare policies in education, health, and food, was among the highest of the South and Southeast Asian countries.

Although legislation passed in 1949 authorized the creation of the Royal Ceylon Army, Royal Ceylon Navy and Royal Ceylon Air Force and although, in the years that followed, an independent military force was established, the organization of the armed forces in existence during colonial times did not change. Most officers continued to be trained in military academies in Britain. The basic structure of the colonial forces was retained, as were the symbolic trappings—the flags, banners, and regimental ceremonies. At that time, the army served a purely ceremonial function and took up less than 4 percent of the national budget.

The Ceylon Civil Service had been Ceylonized to the extent of 90 percent by 1949, but a small minority of administrative officers remained as a vestige of colonialism and social privilege. After independence, its 200 members continued to enjoy special advantages and status. The new middle classes continued to feed into the Ceylon Civil service for another decade and a half. This anomalous status would last until 1963 when the Ceylon
Civil Service was incorporated into a unified administrative service of 1,030 officers.\footnote{18}

### Unfinished legacies: The citizenship issue

While the Soulbury constitution avoided all matters relating to citizenship, three pieces of legislation, namely, the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, the Indian and Pakistani Residents Act No. 3 of 1948, and the Ceylon Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act No. 48 of 1949, clearly demarcated those considered sons of the soil from those considered aliens. The first law deprived the Estate Indian Tamils, constituting 12 percent of the population, of their citizenship, the second made it possible for those with property and education within the community to obtain citizenship, and the third deprived those without citizenship of the right to vote.

The Ceylon Citizenship Act No. 18 of 1948 created two types of citizenship: citizenship by descent and citizenship by registration. In both cases, documentary proof was required for applicants, a procedure that disqualified the majority of Indian Tamil workers who were illiterate. Citizenship would be given only to those who satisfied the government concerning the intensity of their desire to adopt Sri Lanka as their home.\footnote{19} Citizenship by descent was restricted to persons who could prove that at least two generations had been born on the island. Citizenship by registration was open to those residents who could prove that either parent had been a citizen by descent and that the individual had been a resident of Ceylon for seven years, if married, or ten years, if unmarried. The minister in charge was given discretionary power to register 25 persons a year for distinguished public service.

The Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act No. 3 of 1949 was based on Senanayake’s proposals at the December 1947 negotiations, the only change being the decision to take 1 January, 1948 as the qualifying date for completion of residence. Senanayake had proposed stringent conditions, including a residence qualification of seven years for married and ten years for unmarried adults, calculated since 31 December, 1945, together with proof that the applicant had adequate means of livelihood and conformed to Ceylonese marriage laws. Application would have to be made within two years of the date of legislation.

The new citizenship and franchise laws altered the balance of power between the various communities and helped consolidate a majority within the polity. Through these laws, Estate Tamils were defined as an alien and marginal group. The laws in many ways also embodied a class position on the part of a group in society which was closer in cultural terms to a middle- or upper-class Briton than to a Sinhala or Tamil worker. Documentary proof such as registration of birth was required for applicants. In this sense it was not surprising that the elites in Ceylon had absorbed one of the main myth models of European cultures, which implied that writing epitomized learning, civilization, and all that distinguished the west from the rest.

The urgency for passing such stringent laws lay in the links that had been forged between the estate population and the Left parties before Independence. This became a concern for the conservative elite to whom power had been transferred. The laws just described had shattered any possibility of stronger interethnic and class alliances by excluding the entire Estate Tamil population from participating in the polity. They also pandered to fears of the Kandyan constituency that they would be swamped by the ever-growing Tamil population. D. S. Senanayake’s position was consolidated both within the UNP, where the threat of his rival, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, a favorite of the Kandyans owing to his marriage to a Kandyan woman, lessened, and in the state as a whole at the expense of 10 percent of the population that was cast out as not belonging to the nation state.\footnote{20}
The trade unions that represented the Estate Tamils in the late 1940s and early 1950s—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Democratic Workers’ Congress (DWC)—issued conflicting instructions to members. Tales of application forms that were requested but never arrived because of the connivance of postmasters, and of a climate of suspicion and fear on the part of illiterate workers, are part of the collective memory of plantation labor workers. The result was that most estate workers became stateless.

The citizenship acts spelled the end of any sort of trust between the Estate Tamils and the Jaffna Tamils. Indeed, the leader of the Tamil Congress, representing the Jaffna Tamils, accepted a ministry in the UNP government that had just disenfranchised nearly one million Tamil plantation workers. The stand taken on behalf of the Estate Tamils by the newly created federal party leader, S. J.V. Chelvanayakam, did not create much of an impact among the isolated Estate Tamils. The relative isolation of the Indian Tamils from the rest of society, whether Ceylon Tamil or Sinhala, as well as their low caste status and poverty, ensured their lack of political representation and mobilization and their rapid marginalization in national politics.

**Ethnic issues: Divide and rule?**

The reconquest of political power by the Sinhalese majority was supported by the British and excesses on their part did not lead the British government to adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards minority demands. This was in keeping with the Colonial Office preference for gradualism. An overview of the Soulbury Report’s treatment of minority grievances issued in 1945 is revealing. On the whole, it appears that the Soulbury Commission felt the minorities were exaggerating the precariousness of their situation. They agreed that there had been minor instances of discriminatory action by the Sinhalese. However, the report on discrimination concluded that there was no substantial indication of a general policy on the part of the government of Ceylon to discriminate against minority communities.

Apart from remaining closed to the political demands of the minorities, the British played a role in the process of Sinhalese national affirmation which was not negligible. During the 1930s and 1940s, the colonial rulers participated in defining what they thought was the uniqueness of Sinhalese civilization. The study, preservation, translation and publication of Sinhalese texts were encouraged. State sponsorship was given to indigenous systems of medicine. Thus, in the last decades of British rule, a “divide and rule” policy designed to suppress nationalism by fostering ethnic tensions was more mythic than real. The urgency was on another plane: left-wing parties such as the LSSP were fomenting social unrest and threatening the old order. The British policy of alliances was one supporting moderates against “extremists.” The main concern of the British was to hand over power peacefully. The near completion of the program of Ceylonization of the administration was motivated by the same concern.

**Dominion status: A flawed independence**

On 18 June, 1947 the British government made the official announcement that Ceylon would receive “fully responsible status within the British Commonwealth of Nations.” Contemporaries as well as scholars in the decades that followed have debated whether dominion status meant the continuation of colonial rule under another name. Among the main critics of dominion status in the 1940s were supporters of the leftist parties of Ceylon. On Independence Day they made sure that black flags were displayed in various parts of the island as a protest against the Rs
800,000 allegedly spent on the celebrations. The leftist newspaper Nidahasa (freedom) recalled occasions when students were caned by their teacher for refusing to participate in Independence Day festivities or to bring flags to schools. Historians of the immediate post-independence decades took positions on the issue, although today few people would feel it is something worth debating. K. M. de Silva, for instance, argued that D. S. Senanayake’s emphasis on moderation and pragmatism was tactical and that Sri Lanka only followed the constitutional approach of memoranda and talks that had brought Australia, Canada, and New Zealand to independence status without the bloodshed that, he argued, had occurred in India where independence was said to have been won by a mass-based nationalist movement. It was, however, the Defense Agreement signed by Ceylon and Britain in 1948 that was most criticized by the leftists, who called D. S. Senanayake a traitor for allowing the British to continue to maintain naval, air, and land forces on the island and use naval bases, airports, and other facilities. Leftists also regarded the agreements as “badges of inferiority” and “checks on full sovereignty in external affairs.” By this agreement the government of Sri Lanka and the government of the United Kingdom would give each other “military assistance for the security of their territories, for defense against external aggression and for the protection of essential communications.” Wriggins makes the important point, however, that Ceylon retained the right to terminate the arrangement. Further, Jennings notes that D. S. Senanayake signed the Defense Agreement rather as an inducement to Britain to hasten Sri Lanka’s independence than for any military purpose. These agreements that gave credibility to the argument made by Marxists that Sri Lanka’s independence was flawed must be understood as an integral part of the independence package of the British that aimed at keeping Sri Lanka free from Soviet influences as far as possible. The regime of the 1950s would not disappoint its proponents: it would be the most conservative and pro-western regime Sri Lanka ever would know.

Conclusion

In 1948 the colonial power departed Ceylon, but left behind real and important traces. The transfer of power within the framework of a dominion allowed the country to avoid the necessity or human costs of struggling for a national cause, but it also denied its ruling class a founding myth comparable to that which accompanied the birth of the Indian Union and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan. For a founding myth, politicians would look back to a much more distant past that did not embody democratic ideals but conjured up images of violence, exclusiveness, and parricide. The Sinhala myth of Vijaya and the people of the Lion would fill the symbolic void created by an ineffective nationalist movement.

The vestiges of colonialism remained in the army, the civil service, the constitution, and the Anglicized middle class, whose members continued to rule in all walks of life. The island’s dominant political models and idioms, including Marxism in its most intellectual form, were also imported from the west. The absence of legitimacy of politicians, who cut themselves away from the culture of the rural people, led to the institutionalizing of a system of vote catching that emphasized dynastic loyalty with regard to the Senanayake and Bandaranaike clans. In the next decade, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike would ride the rising wave of dissatisfaction of the common man with a regime from which he felt alienated and leaders for whom he had little regard.

Notes


7 The Ceylon National Congress formed in 1919 was constituted by notables belonging to all ethnic and religious communities of Ceylon to push for reforms of the constitution. See Michael Roberts (ed.), *Documents of the Ceylon National Congress and Nationalist Politics in Ceylon 1929–1950*, 4 vols (Colombo: Department of National Archives, 1977).


12 Cited in *The Hindu Organ* (a daily English-language paper published in Jaffna) Seneviratne, pp. 228–43.

13 Seneviratne, pp. 228–43.


17 http://ieweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cs.


