

Bandaranaike coalition breaks up

From MARTIN WOOLLACOTT: Colombo, August 29

The Prime Minister, Mrs Bandaranaike, has broken with the Trotskyite Lanka Socialist Party (LSSP), her coalition ally for the last five years.

Unless the LSSP decides to accept terms that would amount to its demotion within the ruling coalition, Mrs Bandaranaike is expected to remove its Ministers from the Cabinet within the next few days.

The move is of major importance, for the alliance between Mrs Bandaranaike's moderate socialist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the LSSP, the biggest established left-wing party, has been the central factor in Ceylonese politics since 1964.

The split between the SLFP and the LSSP is seen here as the most significant political development in Sri Lanka since the 1971 insurrection.

The break has come after three weeks during which the split has widened, the Government has virtually ceased to function, and various efforts to patch up the quarrel have failed.

The quarrel came out into the open three weeks ago, when Dr N. M. Perera, Finance Minister and leader of the LSSP, and Mr Colvin de Silva, Plantations Minister and deputy LSSP leader, attacked Mrs Bandaranaike at a rally. They also made accusations against her husband, Mr S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who was the founder of the SLFP.

In letters to the two Ministers, the Prime Minister demanded apologies and when they failed to give "satisfactory" replies, Mrs Bandaranaike went beyond that.

She demanded instead that the LSSP give up the most important portfolios — Finance and Transport — and take instead two lesser ones. Since then she has refused to vary her terms, while the LSSP has also obstinately stuck to its guns.

Unless one or the other backs down, with serious loss of prestige, the alliance is over. Mr Anura Bandaranaike, the Prime Minister's son and now a strong influence within the party, said today: "The break is final. I cannot see any way to patch it up."

Mrs Bandaranaike's decision to go for a showdown with her LSSP allies had much to do with an issue that also affects Britain, the nationalisation of the remaining British-owned tea and coconut plantations on the island, plans for which were announced in May.

The Prime Minister's skilful handling of this question satisfied both the British and most Sri Lankans. Britain was almost glad to get rid of what had become both a dubious commercial asset and a source of embarrassment because of publicity at home about the deplorable condition of Tamil workers on the estates.

Sri Lankan public opinion was satisfied with what it saw as the reduction of the last bastion of foreign capital in the island. But the LSSP was angry because not only does Mrs Bandaranaike propose to retain professional managers of the estates but she intends to give general oversight of them to the Minister of Agriculture, an SLFP Minister, and not to the

Minister of Plantations, Mr Colvin de Silva of the LSSP.

But the hostility between the two parties goes deeper than that. The years since the crashing united front victory of May, 1970, have seen a steady infiltration into key areas of government and the economy by the LSSP and its supporters.

Initially, Mrs Bandaranaike tried to handicap the LSSP in government, divesting the Finance Ministry, its most important portfolio, of certain functions. These included its formal control, as with the British Treasury, of the Civil Service as a whole, and its authority on foreign exchange questions. The truncated Finance Ministry was initially known as the "Rupee Finance Ministry".

But the LSSP, a disciplined party whose leaders, while elderly, are all able men, made the most of its position all the same. The Finance Ministry was packed with LSSP men and these fanned out to key positions on the numerous boards that govern the island's economic life, and to the banks, like the National Savings Bank and the People's Bank, that control most small-scale credit.

There they were able to advance the LSSP cause and put party supporters into positions of influence and power. Through their control of the Transport Ministry the party made the railways and the buses both nationalised, into virtually a private preserve.

By a variety of means they achieved control of the Daily Mirror group of papers, which

supposedly had been taken over by the Government. The curious result is that in order to find out about Mrs Bandaranaike's views, people read not the supposedly "official" Daily Mirror which reflects the LSSP position, but papers of the Times of Ceylon group, recently brought under the influence of Mrs Bandaranaike's son, Anura.

The rapid build-up of the LSSP's power base was apparently what determined Mrs Bandaranaike to act. The Communist Party, her other coalition partner, was doing the same thing but in a much more cautious and discreet fashion.

The LSSP had "become too big for its boots," one journalist commented. She has also been incensed by police reports that the LSSP have been conducting training sessions for a red-shirted "People's Militia," even though these amounted to little more than Sunday afternoon drill without weapons.

The LSSP ideas on that direction were demonstrated last year when they suggested "arming the workers" and the "democratisation" of the island's small professional army as a defence against the possibility of a right-wing coup.

The LSSP has only 17 seats in the 157-seat parliament. So there is no danger to Mrs Bandaranaike's majority, and she is not due to go to the polls until May, 1977. But by breaking with the LSSP Mrs Bandaranaike will be changing the rules under which politics have been played since 1964.



Mrs Bandaranaike, daughter of Anura Kumara Dissanayake

From the early 'sixties it has been recognised that the SLFP needed the help of the LSSP and the Communists to defeat the Right, represented by the United National Party (UNP). It is not a matter of seats in Parliament but of the fact that in many constituencies only the Left-wing vote could give SLFP candidates the margin necessary to defeat UNP candidates. Mrs Bandaranaike no doubt hopes to win the next elections on her own, but if the prospects do not look good, speculation here is of an alliance with the UNP conservatives, rather than settling the quarrel with the LSSP.

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