



ENGULFED BY THE DARKNESS OF A YOUTH INSURRECTION: PERADENIYA EXPERIENCES OF THE LATE 1980s*

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the period of youth insurrection in Sri Lanka during the 1980s, with a focus on the experience of the University of Peradeniya. It maps the gradual build-up of the student movement, its confrontation with the administration, and the consequences of these developments on both the academic and administrative functions of the University. The paper also explores causal linkages between intra-university political dynamics and national politics, and presents a comprehensive picture of how the interplay of these factors led to the bloody milestones that marked the trajectory of the 1980s youth insurrection within the university premises.

Keywords: Insurgency, student politics, JVP, military, University of Peradeniya

THE CRISIS OF 1988-89¹

With some guarded optimism we are perhaps entitled to hope that the future historian will see the late 1980s as the darkest phase of Sri Lanka in the 20th century. The despair and horror of these years are still fresh in our memories. What is attempted in this essay is to place the University of Peradeniya in the context of the larger crisis, and to examine from microcosmic perspectives the experiences of the University at that time.

At the University, as indeed in the country as a whole, the crisis of 1988-89, even if one were to ignore its root causes, could be seen as the culmination of a long-drawn out process, the beginnings of which, given the restricted scope of this essay, may be placed in the early 1980s. The economy at that time was booming, and Sri Lanka seemed on the verge of a break-through towards joining the ranks of the 'Asian Tigers'. The mood among those who ruled the country was one of arrogant self-confidence. All opposition

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had been tamed; and except for the minor irritations caused by a small band of militants in the far North, there appeared to prevail a level of political stability which the country had never attained since the halcyon days of early independence.

For several years after the change of government in July 1977 the University of Peradeniya functioned smoothly, with those in authority over its affairs concerned mainly with streamlining its administrative procedures, reviving the long lost 'traditions' of the University, and inculcating a sense of discipline among those of the university community, in the hope that the university could now devote its energies to the tasks of teaching, learning, and research. Their record of achievement, however, was by no means flawless. There were the obviously 'politicized' actions and reactions, and the usual quota of errors of judgement which, in fairness, must be viewed in the context of the ethos that prevailed at the time.

By the early 1980s the dominant force in student politics on the campus was the pro-government *Samawādi* (lit. egalitarian) group whose influence was due not merely to the monopoly of the party to which it was aligned, but also to the fact that, ever since the spectacular electoral victory of the United National Party in 1977, the group had been pampered by the authorities of the University. This period was, however, also featured by the gradual emergence of a radical political group among the students, one which called itself the *Samājawādi Shishya Sangamaya* (SSS, lit. Socialist Students' Association). It is likely that even at this stage the SSS was linked formally or informally to the JVP (the party that led the ill-fated youth uprising of 1971, proscribed for a time thereafter, but allowed in 1977 to re-enter the mainstreams of national politics). What seems more definite is that the leadership of the SSS at Peradeniya, from the time it appeared on the campus scene,

comprised a few undergraduates who were prepared to defy authority, risk their university careers in the process, and pose a challenge to the *Samawādi* group, if not with popular support in the student community, then with intimidation or even brute force.

There were several factors that contributed to the growing strength of the SSS at this time. It appears, first, that the SSS did receive some sympathy and support from other 'anti-establishment' segments of the campus, especially those that had leanings towards the parties defeated at the Parliamentary election of 1977. The summary punishments meted out by the university authorities to the activists of the SSS whenever they were found guilty of misconduct also evoked some sympathy on their behalf. More significantly, the SSS had the opportunity of building up a support base among the disgruntled segments of the student community – for example, Arts students who were 'banished' to the Dumbara Campus in 1978, and the many who failed at examinations of the faculties in which the medium of instruction was English – who would undoubtedly have perceived themselves as being discriminated against by the 'system'.²

Several years after 1978, there was a steady build-up of friction between the Samawadi and SSS groups, usually in the form of accusations and counter-accusations made in posters on public display. There was also the occasional brawl or fisticuff, especially around the time of annual elections to the student assembly which both sides appeared to have contested on the no-holds-barred principle.

In this process of escalating rivalry, the student assembly elections of December 1982 marked a decisive stage, first for the 'victory' recorded by the SSS group, and secondly for the serious post-elections violence, both of which were unprecedented. Lethal weapons were used in the clashes. Several students from both sides sustained

serious injury. There was also considerable damage to university property.

At the official inquiry that followed – conducted for the University Council by a Committee (the ‘Udalagama Committee’, so named after the retired judge of the Supreme Court who headed it) – a large number of students were found guilty at varying levels of culpability. The Committee also recommended various punishments, including the expulsion from the University of four of the guilty students belonging to the SSS group. The voluminous report submitted by the Committee to the Council leaves no room to doubt that its investigation were as thorough as they could have been, given the understandable fear of potential witnesses to involve themselves in this conflict. However, for two reasons, both of which the Committee does not appear to have placed much significance on, justice did not appear to have been meted. In the first place, there were distinct indications that the initial provocation for the series of clashes was provided by the *Samawādi* group. Secondly, the four students recommended for expulsion were those found guilty of the same type of misdemeanour committed by a few other students as well, including those of the UNP-aligned *Samawādi* group whose identity (for reasons which the report does not clarify) the Committee pretended to be uncertain of. Thus, the condign punishments that were eventually meted out appeared in the eyes of many in the University community as yet another blatant exercise in political discrimination.

The radical SSS group now had more legitimacy than before to perform a leadership role on the campus. They also began to receive greater sympathy, indications that they were more adept at intimidation and violence than their rivals notwithstanding. The student elections of December 1982 thus marked the onset of a new phase in the long prelude in the ‘Crisis of 1988-89’.

In the years 1983 and 1984, the University of Peradeniya experienced a plethora of troubles in which two distinct strands could be identified - one, relating to the upsurge of the Sinhala-Tamil conflict, and the other, to the increasing strength of the SSS group.

The ‘communal’ strand of disruptions witnessed during this two-year spell could be traced from around May 1983, when, on the 11th, 12th and 13th of that month, there were several sporadic assaults on the Tamil community reported from different parts of the campus. Given the obvious contextual links of these incidents with the deteriorating ethnic relations in the country, they were serious enough to cause a mass exodus of the Tamil students from Peradeniya, and for several university teachers’ associations to decide, on ethical considerations, that they should refrain from conducting classes for a ‘Sinhalese only’ student population. Thus, despite the University being kept open, its academic programmes came to a virtual standstill, until the Tamil students were persuaded to return to the campus, which they did by the end of the month. The whole of June and the first half of July were featured by a fresh wave of disruptions by the SSS (to be discussed presently) which culminated in the official closure of the University with effect from 15 July, followed by a police operation on the night of 16 July to “flush out of their rooms” the students who had defied the closure order. Barely a week later, there was the calamity of mob violence unleashed on Tamils living in the Sinhalese-majority areas which resulted, *inter alia*, in the University being kept closed until the end of that year.

The other strand of troubles was represented by a campaign of agitation mounted by the SSS following a leak of the Udalagama Committee findings. The central theme of this campaign was the victimization of the SSS leadership through the allegedly partisan findings of the Committee. Throughout June and early July

1993, there was a series of strikes and protest demonstrations accompanied by various acts of defiance and humiliation targeted on the Vice-Chancellor. The campaign reached a climax on 14th July when a group of students (with activists of the SSS among them) abducted the Dean of the Faculty of Science, held him hostage at a prominent spot on the campus (made inaccessible with barricades) inflicting upon him abuse and other forms of harassment, and used his captivity as the lever in their negotiations with the Vice-Chancellor regarding their demands including those pertaining to the Udalagama Committee findings. In order to obtain the release of the Dean, the VC agreed to grant these demands. Thereafter, following the release of the Dean, the 'agreement' was declared null and void on the grounds that it had been obtained under duress, and a decision was made to close the University with immediate effect, with the campus being made out-of-bounds to students.

Over the latter half of 1983 during which time the University remained closed, there were several developments to which some significance must be attached. One of them was the decision to establish a permanent police post on the campus before re-opening it. Another was the clumsy handling of the inquiries relating to the 'communal' disturbances on the campus in May 1983. The third was the attempt by certain leading politicians of that time – the yuppies of the Jayewardene administration – to give a new lease of life to the dying Samawadi group.

That in times of 'troubles' the Peradeniya campus becomes an enclave of anarchy with its own internal security staff totally incapable of maintaining law and order has for long been known to anyone familiar with the University. Past experience had also demonstrated that, on occasions, when the police are brought into the University to quell student riots, the police are invariably compelled to wield the

sledgehammer, resulting in disaster. Hence, in the context of the troubles that had occurred over the previous months, the decision to establish a police post on the campus and to bring the campus within the purview of ordinary law enforcement of the country was a perfectly rational one. Unfortunately, modalities of its implementation were defective – for instance, the physically vulnerable site selected (by the police themselves), and its manpower arrangements. Thus, in retrospect, the decision itself came to be regarded as yet another tragic blunder committed by the government.

The inquiries into the 'communal' disturbances of May 1983 constitute a sad story which could be explained, if at all, only with reference to the widespread insanity of that time. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on Tamil undergraduates, the Director of Student Welfare (DSW) submitted a report to the Vice-Chancellor on the basis of which the latter punished two of the identified culprits with suspension of studentship. Soon thereafter, the University Council found the DSW's report unacceptable (allegedly, it was not based on a proper judicial inquiry) and requested two of its own members to initiate fresh inquiries into all student disturbances that had taken place in May and June 1983, and lifted the punishments that had been imposed. An interim report submitted by this latter committee to the Council was also found to be unacceptable, evidently because in the course of its inquiries the committee had resorted to the technique of recording some evidence on camera, and giving an undertaking to the witnesses concerned that their identity will not be divulged. It must be noted here that the DSW and the two members of the committee of inquiry were all senior members of the University's academic staff, whose integrity there could have been no doubt about. The Council then appointed yet another committee of inquiry, among the members of which there had developed

intense friction during its investigations. Finally, in November that year, the Council once again decided to 'reject in toto' the report based on this third inquiry, thus resulting in no action whatsoever being taken against those responsible for the assaults, whose identity and whose deeds were, of course, well known to the student community.

The attempts made by certain politicians of the ruling party to revive the *Samawādi* group had elements of comedy in the naivety displayed. The students who had been selected for admission to the University in the coming academic year were written to individually by a Member of Parliament who called himself the "President of the *Samawādi Shishya Peramunā*" requesting their support. Those who responded (which appeared to have included the majority among the prospective new entrants) were then sent a letter of thanks for their *sahayōgaya* (cooperation) by a senior cabinet minister, who also promised to meet them "in the near future". This promise was fulfilled by the Minister and several others of the party at the time when the students concerned had been brought to the University for the pre-entrance 'orientation course' while the campus was still out-of-bounds to other students. The prospective 'freshers' were also taken on a three-day guided tour of the Mahaveli Development Area during the course of which they were lavishly wined and dined. When the University re-opened in January 1984 much of the good work on behalf of the ruling party was nullified by the simple SSS message: *ōvata revantenda epā* (do not be taken in by all that).

Following the re-opening of the University in early 1984, sporadic protests that took the usual form (strikes, processions, posters, etc.) were staged by the SSS leadership. The grievances voiced at this stage included alleged attempts by the government to suppress the 'progressive student movement', the unsatisfactory state of affairs on the

Dumbara Campus (which the students had named the *dukbara* campus, a pun on 'duk' or sorrow), the inadequacy of the *Mahapola* scholarship support, the rising prices of food at university canteens, and the like. These, however, did not cause a serious disruption of the University's academic programme for several months. Even the students affected by the anti-Tamil onslaught of July 1983 had resumed their work.

This atmosphere of uneasy calm was shattered once again in July that year by a bolt from the blue which took the form of a student riot at the newly established police post, in the course of which, evidently in self-defence, the police opened fire, killing one of the students. This incident does not appear to have been planned or premeditated. It also appears that, if the police post was adequately manned that fateful night, the death could have been avoided.

The incident precipitated yet another long closure of the University prompted by the need to avoid retaliatory violence on the part of the students. Curiously enough, the incident also resulted in the immediate dismantling of the police post. It could be argued that the lesson which ought to have been drawn from the few months of police presence on the campus was not that the campus should be left alone for anarchy to prevail, but that the police, if they are to be stationed on the campus, must possess the capacity in terms of manpower to discharge their duties with minimum recourse to the use of force. This, of course, was not the lesson which the government learnt. The withdrawal of the police post thus came to be seen not only as an admission of a costly error, but also as a clear indication of cold feet. The dead undergraduate was made a martyr of the SSS-JVP cause. A statue erected at the place where he fell remained for several years a monument to which the students paid 'revolutionary' homage.

In comparison to the earlier years, 1985 and

1986 were relatively peaceful. Despite the sustained attrition, academic programmes were somehow maintained intact, largely by giving way at almost every turn to the SSS leadership which was, by then, the power elite on the campus. To illustrate, there was an occasion when the SSS leaders, wishing to meet the Vice-Chancellor, telephoned him, and demanded that he sends his official car across for them to travel to his office. This demand was meant obviously for setting the stage (the students concerned had only a couple of hundred yards to cover), and those that followed at the meeting were readily granted. This was the kind of price that had to be paid to keep the University running – running towards the crisis.

In the foregoing account of the various episodes of ‘troubles’ at Peradeniya during the years leading up to the crisis of the late 1980s, the delineations were deliberately confined to the microcosm of the University. That the episodes need to be looked at in the wider context of the trends of that time – the onset of the Eelam War in the North, the proscription of the JVP and the rise of terrorism in the South, the economic recession, and the erosion of the government’s credibility – is assumed as understood. It is well known that by early 1987 the country as a whole was on the brink of crisis.

The period immediately after the re-opening of the University of Peradeniya on 16 January 1987 was featured by relative calm on the campus. This was in sharp contrast to the atmosphere which appears to have prevailed at the ‘metropolitan’ universities (described vividly in C.A. Chandraprema’s *JVP Insurrection 1987-89* (1991) where serious clashes are said to have taken place between the JVP-aligned Socialist Students’ Union and its most formidable rival at that time, the Independent Students’ Union. Over these few months, at Peradeniya, with the JVP-aligned students having no serious challenge from

anyone, what the campus experienced were merely the echoes of the troubles elsewhere.

On the nature of the links that prevailed between the JVP and the student activists at Peradeniya, I have to rely almost entirely on Chandraprema (1991), who says:

The student wing of the JVP, the Socialist Student Union, was an entity which pulsated with a life of its own. The controlling body of the SSU was known as the Headquarters Committee. This comprised nine persons - the politbureau nominee, the five zonal leaders, the Colombo district leader, the leader of the *Nimal Balasuriya Balakāya* (a glorified hit squad) and the representative of the Inter-University Students’ Federation.

Chandraprema proceeds to explain that the Socialist Students’ Union controlled the Inter-University Student Federation which, in turn, controlled the so-called ‘Action Committees’ on the different campuses - “loose and informal bodies of student activists.” This description, however, does not reveal a formal ‘chain of command’, for, as Chandraprema himself points out, among the JVP ‘high command’ (i.e. politbureau, zonal leaders, etc.) there were quite a few university students. The names of two Peradeniya undergraduates appear in the related lists presented by Chandraprema. It is of interest that they were not among the *identified* student leaders of this time at Peradeniya. The process appears to have been one which accommodated considerable initiative on the part of the ‘Action Committee’, operating within a stipulated strategy framework that also prescribed the general campaign themes.

Gradually, troubles increased. 14 one-day ‘token strikes’ were staged through March, April, and early May of 1987, mostly as protests against the government’s failure to tame the ‘Tigers’ in the North, and against

the anti-JVP military operations in the deep South. The defiance of authority and violations of the law became more and more open. For instance, the SSS engaged in mobilizing support for its cause among school children in the Kandy area, instructing them in both revolutionary ideology as well as techniques of mass protest. Again, on 5 May 1987, when 29 undergraduates were taken into custody by the police at the townships of Wattegama, Hanguranketa, and Galagedera, allegedly for JVP fund-raising, a large crowd of SSS activists stormed into the University Registrar's office the following morning – the Vice-Chancellor being absent that day – and staged a *gherao* operation that lasted until the arrested students were released and brought back to the campus about 10 hours later. 28 among those who participated in the *gherao* were identified. No action was taken against them.

The campus was closed on 10 May, re-opened on 6 June, and closed once again shortly thereafter due to the increasing virulence of the 'troubles'. The widespread rioting that followed the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord in July 1987 delayed the re-opening of the University until 21 August, after which there began, once again, the usual spate of strikes and other disruptive activities. This time, the University continued to be kept open.

A giant 40-foot poster displayed on the outer wall of the Senate Building proclaimed the JVP message to university students of this time: "*Palamuwa Mawbima, Devanuwa Upādiya*" (first the motherland, and then the degree). The basic SSS strategy at the University over the period which followed was encapsulated in this brief message. Academic programmes came to a standstill. Examinations were postponed indefinitely. The campus, it appears, became a major centre of JVP operations in the Highlands while the authorities looked on with helplessness.

Table 1 presents a glimpse of what happened over the few weeks following the re-opening of the University on 10 January after the Christmas vacation. At the end of February 1988, authorities of the University finally decided to abandon the pretence of keeping the University open. It could well have been that the 'pretence' was prompted by two considerations – the idea that a closure of the University would result in the student activists being dispersed all over the country where they would strengthen the ongoing subversive activities, and the perceived need to retain some 'linkages' to facilitate a negotiated settlement. An open university without academic work was, of course, exactly what the SSS leadership wanted. It was at the University rather than in the obscurity of their homes that they wielded real power and were almost totally immune from law enforcement. Whenever the security forces interfered with their work with an arrest outside the campus, the attitude prevailed that 'the Vice-chancellor is always there to get you off the hook.'

The Senate of the University decided in early April 1988 to hold the long delayed examinations of the Special Degree final year students on a staggered basis, starting with the Faculty of Science on 3 May, while keeping the campus out-of-bounds to all other students. In response to an announcement made by the University, the examination candidates began to trickle into the campus from 20 April onwards. This was an obvious test of strength for the SSS whose battle cry had continued to be "first the motherland, and then the degree". Many of the candidates were contacted at their homes and warned (sometimes with death threats) that they should not appear for the examination. There was mounting tension, especially after two bomb explosions in the vicinity of the campus on 27 and 28 April. The latter which caused the death of three undergraduates (believed to have been SSS activists) was widely considered an accidental explosion of a bomb

meant for the examination venue.

The examination began as scheduled amidst tight security provided by the army and the police. On the first day there were only four absentees (50 men and 23 women candidates were present), indicating, perhaps, the extent of popular support which the SSS could muster. While the examination was in progress, there

were further acts of intimidation directed at all its participants including teachers and other employees. The pressure eventually became far too intense, and by the second week, attendance was reduced to a defiant trickle.

Emboldened by this partial success, the University attempted to repeat the exercise in June with the final-year Arts students. With the

Table 1 - Peradeniya University Calendar, January - February 1988

| | S | M | T | W | T | F | S |
|----------|-----|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----|
| January | 10* | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15* | 16* |
| | 17* | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23* |
| | 24* | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30* |
| | 31* | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | S | M | T | W | T | F | S |
| February | | 1 | 2* | 3 | 4* | 5 | 6* |
| | 7* | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13* |
| | 14* | 15 | 16* | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20* |
| | 21* | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27* |
| | 28* | 29 | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |

'token strike' days are shown in 'bold' font

* Public Holidays

arrival of the students concerned on the 8th of that month, the SSS activists reappeared on the scene, and, despite certain concessions granted (for example, the re-opening of the campus to all students on 4 September 1988), the SSS remained adamant in its campaign to boycott examinations. Many students who had returned to the campus in the hope that they would be permitted to sit their examinations (on 15 September, there were 2,208 students residing in the halls) began to return home, making the campus more or less the exclusive habitat of the SSS and its supporters.

On account of the continuing stalemate regarding university examinations, students were given official instructions to leave the campus by 14 October 1988. The immediate

cause for the closure was the death of a school boy in Nugawela, close to Kandy (due to shooting by the police) on 12 October 1988, which was followed by some massive protest demonstrations on the campus. There was reason to believe that undergraduates had a hand in some of the 'school riots' of this time. Thereafter, University authorities generally turned a blind-eye to the continued presence of SSS leaders on the campus. In fact, Action Committee members were permitted to use their row of officers at the Students' Centre.

The period leading up to the Presidential elections of December 1988, as many would readily recall, was one of intensifying chaos, with repeated disruptions of normal life in many parts of the country in the form of 'curfews' declared by the JVP and by

trade-union strikes. The hardships which the campus community suffered at that time were more or less identical to those experienced by others, with the difference that, given the enclave design of the campus, periodically, serious difficulties were encountered in respect of domestic water supply and livestock feeding at the 'Animal House' of the Faculty of Agriculture. This, it must be remembered, was a time of terrorist activity of unprecedented ferocity when many believed that there will be no turning of the tide. Among the major incidents on the campus during the pre-election period were the murder of a University employee near his home in Rajawatte, bomb explosions at the

water pumping station and near an electricity transformer, and a raid on the Rajawatte co-operative store, all believed to be the work of the terrorists, and a somewhat comic police 'confrontation' with the indefatigable agent of the British Empire, His Excellency David Gladstone – then British High-Commissioner in Sri Lanka.

After the Presidential elections, there was relative calm at the University for nearly a month. Although many killings were reported from the rural areas around Kandy, as indeed from rural areas of the country as a whole, the University authorities were prompted to make yet another bid to resume academic

Table 2 - Peradeniya University Calendar, October - December 1988

| | S | M | T | W | T | F | S |
|----------|-----|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----|
| October | | | | | | | 1* |
| | 2* | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8* |
| | 9* | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15* |
| | 16* | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22* |
| | 23* | 24* | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29* |
| | 30* | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | S | M | T | W | T | F | S |
| November | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5* |
| | 6* | 7 | 8* | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12* |
| | 13* | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19* |
| | 20* | 21 | 22 | 23* | 24 | 25 | 26* |
| | 27* | 28 | 29 | 30 | | | |
| | | | | | | | |
| | S | M | T | W | T | F | S |
| December | | | | | 1 | 2 | 3* |
| | 4* | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10* |
| | 11* | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17* |
| | 18* | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22* | 23* | 24* |
| | 25* | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31* |
| | | | | | | | |

The numbers in 'bold' font denote the days on which the functions of the University were substantially or fully disrupted due to 'curfews' and 'strikes' enforced by the JVP.

* denotes public holidays

programmes by the end of January 1989, this time by inviting the Final Year Part III students of the Engineering Faculty to return to the campus on 19 January. Although about 105 students responded to the invitation, a SSS decision was conveyed to the authorities that they will not attend lectures. On 2 February, they were asked to vacate the campus.

Yet another spell of intense terrorist activity commenced with the approaching parliamentary elections scheduled for 16 February 1989. It was around this time that the JVP began to target its attacks on the families of those attached to the security forces, thus escalating the intensity of retaliatory action to unprecedented heights. The period after the parliamentary elections was featured by massive cordon-and-search operations and mass arrests by the security forces, and summary executions carried out by unidentified killer squads. The JVP's terrorist activity also continued largely unabated, now taking an almost imperceptible turn from an offensive to a defensive stance.

It was against such a background that the University was re-opened once again on 8 May 1989. The decision had been preceded by a series of meetings between the Minister of Higher Education, University authorities, and representatives of the JVP-controlled Inter-University Student Federation. At the same time, however, as the crack-down on the JVP heightened, and JVP-aligned undergraduates were being arrested and abducted from their homes, the Action Committee stalwarts preferred, no doubt, to return to the haven of the campus where they could, if not re-group for further action, at least pressurize the University authorities to provide them some protection.

By 15 May 1989, 784 men and 703 women undergraduates (approximately one-third of the total number) had reported at their halls of residence. The SSS was still not prepared to abandon the struggle. It organized vigilant

squads to protect itself from 'police spies'. It staged several token strikes to demand the release of arrested undergraduates. Among the most brutal incidents on the campus at this time was the cold-blooded murder of three persons travelling through the campus in a Pajero jeep (the type of vehicle frequently used by the security forces and senior government officers) around mid-day on 22 June 1989. The vehicle was stopped and set fire to. The three passengers were pulled out and beaten mercilessly by a large mob of undergraduates. The Vice-Chancellor (a reputed surgeon) who arrived on the scene pleaded that he be allowed to dispatch the victims to hospital. He was asked to quit. The victims were killed shortly thereafter.

This situation was obviously not one that could have been allowed to last. Barely three weeks later, in a massive operation initiated at dawn on 12 July 1989, the army occupied the campus and ordered its immediate closure. According to official records, 31 undergraduates were taken into custody on the campus. Reportedly, quite a few others were arrested outside over the days that followed. After evacuating all students from the campus, the army mounted a 'clean-up' which involved, among other things, the removal of hundreds of posters carrying revolutionary slogans, taking into custody all equipment in the Action Committee offices, and the symbolic act of demolishing the 'Pathmasiri' monument. It established well manned check-points and maintained close vigilance over the campus, ignoring the University officialdom altogether for nearly two months.

The gradual relaxing of military control over the campus, however, paved the way for yet another episode of heart-rending brutality – the murder of the Senior Assistant Registrar just outside the Senate Building while he was on his way home for lunch on 4 October 1989. The victim this time was an alumnus of

Peradeniya, an officer of the University well liked for his charming and helpful ways, and a part-time (volunteer) captain of the Sri Lanka Army. Apparently, it was for this last named 'offence' that he was killed. The reprisals were swift and horrifying. Early next morning at a central spot on the campus there was a pile of headless corpses, the heads forming a neat circle at the 'De Alwis roundabout' about a 100 yards away, and yet another corpse placed exactly at the spot where the killing had taken place on the previous day. Many on the campus believed that this was a fulfilment of the then well-known army pledge: "Twenty of theirs for one of ours".

The story of the collapse of the JVP and the restoration of normalcy in all parts of the country during the closing months of 1989 is recent history with which everyone is familiar. The impact of this change on the University was almost immediate. The first batch of students arrived on the campus in eager anticipation of their long delayed examinations on 7 January 1990.

According to a preliminary audit report prepared in early 1991, the crisis period of 1988 and 1989 cost the University about Rs.1.75 million in the form of losses and damage to property. It has also been estimated that the non-academic segments of the University lost about 60 working days during these two years as a result of curfews, strikes, and other disruptions. Academic programmes were almost totally non-functional from around mid-1987. Large as these losses were, they were perhaps not the real losses. There was, for instance, the frustrating stagnation which thousands of students (including those expecting to enter the University) had to bear, the fact that many among them were past 30 years of age at the time of graduation, the financial hardships that had to be borne, the ever present fear, and the poor quality of the education they received at the University due to the eventualities of the time. Among the

other incalculable losses were the departures of various members of the academic staff (Table 3) for many among whom the hopelessness of the prevailing situation was the main inducement for leaving. Even more important than these were the experiences of the students who were arrested or abducted (Table 4), among whom, even by December 1990, there were 81 whose whereabouts were not known. There is reason to believe that the large majority of these missing ones are dead. Thus, although the crisis itself was over, its impact on the University will obviously continue to remain.

Table 3 - Resignations from the Permanent Academic Staff during and after 1983

| Faculty | Number of Resignations |
|---|------------------------|
| Arts | 40 |
| Science | 18 |
| Agriculture | 22 |
| Medical, Dental, Veterinary Science | 63 |
| Engineering | 56 |
| Total | 199 |
| Note: The table does not include those who have retired, and 14 persons deemed to have 'vacated post' | |

Source: Peiris (1995)

The crisis period was not entirely devoid of individual and collective efforts that reflected exceptional determination and courage in the face of almost insurmountable odds. The attempt made in May 1988 to conduct examinations in the Faculty of Science was an example for which those concerned - students, teachers, and others - deserve our admiration. There was yet another similar act of defiance of terrorism by a small group of women undergraduates who, in February 1988, attempted to mobilize opposition against the Action Committee's edict to boycott examinations. Reportedly, they obtained the signatures of almost

Table 4 - Status of the arrested/abducted students as in December 1991

| | Number arrested/abducted | released, and whereabouts known | currently in custody | missing* | missing number as % of total arrested |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|----------|---------------------------------------|
| Arts | 55 | 2 | 28 | 25 | 45.5 |
| Science | 16 | 4 | 4 | 8 | 50.0 |
| Agriculture & Vet. Science | 23 | 9 | 7 | 7 | 30.4 |
| Engineering | 44 | 17 | 16 | 11 | 25.0 |
| Medical & Dental Faculty | 48 | 5 | 15 | 28 | 58.3 |
| Faculty affiliation uncertain | 6 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 33.3 |

The 'missing' category refers to those whose whereabouts are unknown to the University authorities despite sustained efforts made by them to obtain related information. In the majority of cases in this type, though the University has received information from parents or relatives regarding their 'arrest', the security forces have not confirmed the veracity of the information. Some have been reported missing after their release from custody. In a few cases, the persons concerned are reported (by parents, relatives, etc.) to have been killed. Similarly, it is possible that the 'missing' category also includes those who have been released and whose whereabouts have not been intimated to the University.

Source: Peiris (1995)

all students at Sangamitta Hall and the majority of students at Ramanathan Hall to a petition addressed to the Vice Chancellor requesting that examinations be conducted as scheduled. While the signature campaign was in progress, however, the petition was forcibly taken away and destroyed by the Action Committee leaders. At a meeting organized by the Action Committee shortly thereafter, to which the sponsors of the petition were brought and compelled to make public "confessions", the leader of the Action Committee, in the course of a long harangue, is said to have declared that the petition was an attempt to destroy the Student Movement, made in connivance with the authorities, and that if such a dastardly act is ever repeated, those responsible will have to pay with their lives. The courage and tenacity displayed by some of the Vice-Chancellors and more particularly the senior officers around them

also deserve appreciation, for this was a time when holding the post of VC itself could have been considered a capital crime (in 1989 the VCs of the Universities of Colombo and Moratuwa were assassinated by the terrorists).

In many ways, the events and episodes discussed above could be considered as no more and no less than 'the university helplessly drifting with the tide'. Yet, there are certain aspects of the 'Crisis of 1988-89' on which we could ponder, not with the illusion that what can be learnt from the experiences can avert future crises, but in the hope that the lessons might be useful at least marginally to the running of the University in 'normal times.'

One of the most pronounced features of the crisis was the manner in which the authorities pampered and, indeed, helped the leaders of the Action Committee, suffering, in the

process, many personal hardships and indignities. The Action Committee was given the type of facility – a row of offices with various accoutrements of comfort, televisions and video-decks, photo-copiers, Roneo machines, public address systems, electricity generators, and large quantities of stationery – which the Committee put into unrestricted use. The leaders of the committee were given the license to insult the Vice Chancellor and intimidate others of the University community, and the right to issue orders to University officers and commandeer University property. In many instances, they were also given a measure of protection against ‘law enforcement’. The rationalization for all these might have been the need to protect life and University property; but no such protection was available. It could also have been ‘the need to maintain the ‘dialogue’ at any cost’, but no effective dialogue was ever maintained. What in fact did happen was that the student leaders recognized the ‘favours’ lavished upon them for what they really were – ‘bribes’ for which they did not see a need for any reciprocal concession. Of course, the bribes strengthened and legitimized their cause, and enhanced their stature among

fellow students, and also generated among them unconcealed contempt for those who gave them these bribes.

In the old days there was a widespread belief that the Faculty of Arts was the breeding ground of ‘troubles’ in the University. In fact, several measures implemented in those times – the student council reforms of 1966, and the establishment of the Dumbara Campus in 1978 – were based largely on this belief. Whatever validity the belief might have had in the past, it does not appear to hold true for recent times. There is evidence - admittedly inconclusive - to suggest that the participants in the troubles of the late 1980s were drawn more from those faculties in which the students are believed to suffer relatively less from uncertainties regarding their future (Table 5).

In examining the data presented above there is reason to assume that, although there may have been instances of ‘wrongful’ arrest, by and large the arrests were based on information regarding some involvement of those concerned with subversive activity. If such an assumption is valid, and if it could

Table 5 - Peradeniya students taken into custody classified by Faculty

| Faculty | Total undergraduate enrolment in 1988-89 1 | Number of under-graduates ‘Arrested’ 2 | Rate of arrest (2 as % of 1) |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|
| Arts | 2,283 | 55 | 2.4 |
| Science | 895 | 17 | 1.9 |
| Agriculture* & Vet. Science | 1,075 | 23 | 2.1 |
| Medical* & Dental | 1,029 | 49 | 4.8 |
| Engineering | 1,535 | 48 | 3.1 |

‘Arrested’ denotes: ‘Taken into custody by the security forces or abducted by unidentified persons’. The data exclude those released shortly after their arrests and also six students whose faculty affiliations are uncertain. Under ‘Faculty’ the tabulation has combined the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science with Agriculture, and the Faculty of Dental Science with the Medical Faculty.

Source: Peiris (1995)

be assumed further that the 'rates of arrest' (Column 4 of Table 5) in the different faculties bear some relationship to the extent of involvement in subversive activities by the students of the respective faculties, then, clearly an explanation is required for the exceptionally high 'rates' recorded by the Faculties of Medicine and Engineering.

To say that those responsible for the arrests had a special bias against the Medical and Engineering students does not sound plausible. The 'North Colombo Medical College' issue (on which there were fierce protests by both medical students as well as doctors) could have been an inducement in the case of the medical students who participated in the 'troubles'. But there might have been other inducements as well - those that acted upon the students concerned in both faculties - on which it would not be inappropriate to speculate.

I have already made reference to the persistently high failure rate at examinations conducted by these two faculties and its likely effects on student attitudes and aspirations. It is possible that the wide variation in the criteria that form the basis of their admission to the faculties (the 'cut-off points' that vary over a range of more than 100 marks among those admitted each year) results in some among those admitted being unable to cope with the rigorous standards expected at the University. It is also possible that, to many of these students, what is taught in these faculties (in English only) is incomprehensible. While this essay avoids venturing into controversial academic issues, there appears to be sufficient grounds to suggest that the problems referred to here deserve the serious attention of those who exercise authority over the University in 'normal times'.

The improvement of living conditions of the undergraduates at Peradeniya is yet another issue which needs attention. The argument that already a great deal is being

spent on higher education or the assertion that residential facilities provided on Peradeniya campus are better than those of undergraduates elsewhere, cannot hold much conviction. The essentially 'residential' character of Peradeniya cannot, and should not, be changed. If this is accepted, there is a strong case to attempt a reversal of the past trends of deterioration.

One final lesson from the experiences of the Crisis and its prelude: For several decades now the pious pronouncement that "politics must be kept out of the University" has been heard from many quarters. But in reality what tends to be objected to is the 'politics' with which one does not agree. Past experiences indicate, in fact, that it is not possible to keep politics out of the University. What seems possible and desirable is to keep the decision-making processes of the University free of political prejudice and bias.

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NOTES

1. This section is based on a variety of records relating to the period available at the University (including University Council minutes, reports prepared by various Committees of Inquiry, and 'log books' maintained at the Security Office), as well as many personal discussions with employees and past and present students of Peradeniya.
2. While the Faculty of Arts persisted with Sinhala,

Tamil, and English as media of instruction, the other faculties had, by this time, given up even the pretext of teaching in the local languages. With instruction at school level being conducted almost exclusively in Sinhala and Tamil only (and with one or the other of these languages being the medium of communication at home in the case of the overwhelming majority of undergraduates), a large number of students admitted to the University had hardly any competence in the use of English.

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