

CSA Colombo Chapter General Meeting

Thursday 22nd February 2024

at the Sasakawa Hall

Colombo

SPEAKER: K.K.S. Perera

TOPIC: After Commo has Roosted: The story of Sri Lanka's only Coup d'etat

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The Abortive or Abandoned Coup d'état of 1962, triggered by the introduction of social reforms under 'Bandaranaikism' in its early stages and the weak economic management, was perhaps an epic tale of an encounter between the de Sarams and Dias Bandaranaiques; where the latter pursued a transition to a new era, whereas the former craved to sustain the 'Status-Quo.' The plot was to overthrow Prime Minister Sirimavo and to establish a military "Junta".

In the coup conspiracy code-named, "Operation Hold-fast", CC Dissanayake DIG intended to seal off Colombo at 10 pm on Saturday, the 27th January 1962, announcing a midnight curfew. Willie Abrahams ASP was to take over Temple Trees and arrest the Prime Minister around 10 p.m. Col FC de Saram would inform Governor-General Sir Oliver Goonetilleke at Queen's House, that the Army and Police had taken control of the government.

"After Commo Had Roosted" was the code for arrest of Navy Commander. In the critical six-hour period from 5:30 to 11:30, pro and counter powers were engaged in intense discussions, shifting between city locations. John F. Barker, the last European Commander of the Air Force, oversaw security operations in the city and vulnerable spots. Navy Chief Rajan Kadirgamar, donned in blue battle attire with a sub-machine gun, patrolled Temple Trees. Uncertainty prevailed regarding the coup's status as 31-year-old Minister Felix R. Dais Bandaranaike led a defensive team with civilian IGP, Director CID S.A. Dissanayake, and Army and Navy Commanders. Simultaneously, unaware of the leak, conspirators held parallel meetings led by Col F C De Saram, CC Dissanayake DIG, Sidney de Zoysa DIG (retd), Col Morris de Mel, Rear Admiral Royce De Mel. The public were unaware of what was happening until disclosed by Radio Ceylon on the afternoon of the following day.

Port strikes, rising living costs, and escalating unemployment severely affected the country. The economy deteriorated rapidly amidst military involvement in quelling civil unrest over SWRD Bandaranaike's "Sinhala-Only" policy. For the first time, armed forces were deployed in Tamil areas against a civil disobedience movement. The entrenched elite faced tensions with civilian authority when efforts were made to increase Sinhala-Buddhist representation in the officer corps of the armed services and police. Simultaneous-

ly, there were endeavours to boost the influence of this demographic in the administration of both the armed services and the police.

Daily brewing displeasure and frustration extended to all sectors. DIG Sidney left the Service in disgust, forced into retirement for commenting on a speech by Minister Philip Gunawardena, following a warning by Dr NM Perera in Parliament. Sidney de Zoysa perceived this retirement as unjust. Douglas Liyanage, an efficient CCS in Colombo, faced an overnight transfer to Government Agent Mannar, considered a demotion. He didn't protest and accepted the move. Navy Chief Royce de Mel was demoted and suspended due to the detection of contraband items in a naval craft. Sri Lanka faced the early stages of the Sinhala-Tamil language conflict and tensions between Buddhists and Roman Catholics regarding school takeovers. Coup leaders linked the adverse effects of populist policies, including ethnic riots, economic decline, and political instability, to the ruling party.

In every gathering and drawing room, the lingering question remained: How long will this decline persist? Is there no way to halt it? Many saw the failed attempt as a desperate move by the military elite to retain their waning influence. Fuelled by a pervasive sense of power loss and diminishing prestige, some perceived it as a final effort to cling to authority. Factors contributing to this included Defence Secretary N.Q. Dias advocating for the 'Sinhala-Buddhist' cause and influential Minister Felix Dias Bandaranaike endorsing an authoritarian system in his early January speech. The first Coup meeting occurred at a Senior Army Officers Mess, while the police first met Douglas Liyanage and FC much later at Longdon Place.

The Army conspiracy was led by Colonel Maurice de Mel and Colonel F.C. 'Derek' de Saram, Deputy Commandant, Volunteer Force, and originated in the artillery, with Deputy Commandant of the Ceylon Volunteer Force, Lt Col Willie Abrahams, initiating it. In the Police, two chains of command emerged: Cyril Cyrus, "Jungle" Dissanayake – DIG range 1 directed metropolitan officers, and former DIG Sidney de Zoysa oversaw provincial officers. A special telephone line on Jan 25th connected Army headquarters to Echelon Square barracks. The coup leaders aimed to clear all city-bound roads of traffic within 30 minutes. Military vehicles with radios facilitated efficient communication and coordination, enabling quick responses to security concerns or emerging threats.

The other leaders were Don John Francis Douglas Liyanage, CCS – Deputy Director of Land Development, Colonel Maurice De Mel – Commandant, Ceylon Volunteer Force and former Chief of Staff of the Army. Rear Admiral Gerard Royce Maxwell de Mel, OBE, who had been relieved as navy Commander by then and designated as Captain over a controversy regarding smuggled goods being discovered in a naval vessel.

On the crucial morning of January 27th, referred to as D-day, CC briefed Stanley Senanayake SP Colombo about a conspiracy planned for the same night. Stanley, however, disagreed with his superior on the 'illegal act'. The delay in informing Stanley might be linked to his connections with his father-in-law, P de S Kularatne, a prominent Buddhist leader and former principal of Ananda College. Realising his misjudgment of Senanayake, Dissanayake contemplated a contingency plan or 'Plan B' to counter potential retaliatory action from pro-government forces, while Stanley leaked the facts to government through his wife and father-in-law.

Maurice was to position at Army headquarters, FC at Temple Trees, CC at Queen's House, and Sidney de Zoysa at the Depot Police. FC was scheduled to reach Temple Trees by 10:00 pm, using the password "*British Grenadier*". CC and Sidney were to move to Police HQ around 11:00 pm, with CC using the password "*Dowbiggin*". He would give the second signal at 11:00 pm when moving from Queen's House to Police Headquarters. After the successful first stage, all four plotters were to gather at Queen's House around 3:00 am on Sunday, the 28th morning.

Senior ministers, including Felix, officials like N.Q. Dias, DIG-CID S.A. Dissanayake ("Jingle"), acting Navy chief, and SP-CID John Attygalle, along with commanders of three forces and 20 others, were intended for detention in an underground bunker at the armory and ammunition dungeon at Army HQs. The Central Telephone and Telegraph Exchange would be shut down; Police headquarters, CID offices, *Times of Ceylon*, Lake House, and the only electronic communication institute, "Radio Ceylon," were to be taken over by 11 p.m. The initial plan to arrest the PM in the Deep South went awry due to a sudden cancellation in Mrs. Bandaranaike's trip to Kataragama. The conspirators were anxious, fearing that the PM had come to know of the coup.

After a protracted trial, 11 out of 24 were found guilty, but subsequently discharged by the Privy Council in UK, which ruled in their favour on issues of legality of the new Act and other technical issues. Minister Felix in a statement to Parliament on February 13 revealed that some suspects had revealed the involvement of two former PMs, Sir John Kotelawala and Dudley Senanayake in the conspiracy. "Dudley rose at the end of the speech and vehemently denied any involvement and even volunteered to face an inquiry. Everybody including some government Parliamentarians pooh-poohed the idea as a fabrication by Felix who directly handled investigations."

The *Criminal Law Special Provisions Act No. 1 of 1962*, passed with retrospective effect, introducing a Trial-at-bar with three Supreme Court judges, also made draconian provisions in accepting a statement by a suspect as valid evidence against any of the suspects indicted.

New Laws: post-hoc and ad hominem

The government, resorting to desperate measures, introduced a bill in Parliament to create special courts and fix the accused which broadened offences examined by three judges appointed by the Minister of Justice without a jury.

The defendants were charged on three counts by the Attorney General on November 21st, 1962. The Trial-at-Bar found 11 guilty.

However, the Privy Council slammed the new law, and acquitted all eleven. In its ruling given in December 1965, it held the *Special Act of 1962*, is ultra vires of the Ceylon Constitution. It said that the Act had denied fair trial. The law had been specially enacted to convict the men. The men under trial did not have the protections that they would have had under general criminal law. The law's intentions were suspect, Ex post facto and Ad hominem. "Legislation directed against selected individuals or against the individual is not law, it said."

Not only Felix D.B, the son of a Supreme Court judge, but most lawyers learnt a few intricate technical specifics in Criminal Law.
