

Sri Lanka: Fight for democracy before we are shackled

Tuesday 23 February 2010, by [KARUNARATNE Vickramabahu \("Bahu"\)](#) (Date first published: 20 February 2010).

I was told about the Sathyagraha, scheduled to be staged at Hulftsdorp, by Chamil who participated in the opposition discussion on 9th evening. There was no common appeal for mass participation. On 10th morning around 8am several media persons asked me about this planned protest and I told them what I knew about it. By 10.30 in the morning I was informed by Mahendran who was at the technical college junction that thugs were attacking people who were proceeding towards the courts complex. Naturally I was not prepared to be silent. With Chamil, Jayadeva and a few others I came to the technical college junction around 11.30.a.m. By that time, the police have put up iron barriers at the centre of the junction to stop people going from the technical junction to the courts complex.

Mostly women

There were several MPs, including Dr Jaylath Jayawardana and Dayasiri Jayasekara. The protesters, mostly women, surrounded me and complained about the thugs who attacked them. Several of them had minor injuries and they were in tears; yet they wanted to go pass the barrier. As I moved forward in that direction, police made an opening and allowed us to go through. Hundreds followed and many started running towards the Premadasa statue. Suddenly a gang appeared from behind the statue and started throwing stones at us. I was still beyond their missile range! We stopped and waited till the rain of stones subsided. Then, we started again and a large crowd passed me. They went after the gang of thugs like a set of disturbed buffaloes. Thugs, who were armed with clubs, rods, swords, etc., ran away in fright. Though a large crowd came with us to go towards the courts complex, others were hellbent on facing the thugs. The police used teargas and water cannons to save the armed gang from being attacked by the enraged masses.

I have witnessed in the past, many a mass protest action but, never have I seen, provoked people, mostly women, though unarmed, going after a pack of armed thugs determined to avenge and destroy them. It reminded me of what Trotsky said about the angry women of Petrograd, though hungry, still they came out with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on to face the Kornilov mutiny! Of course it was a gigantic mass action that changed history however, our agitation was a minor matter. But there is a qualitative similarity that should not be ignored. Women do come in when the situation is really serious. They may try to avoid violent confrontations. But once the lines are drawn they will be in the forefront. This is what I noticed in this campaign; women were very active. They became active leaders of the agitation.

Release the General

In the meantime, the crowd gathered opposite the entrance to the courts complex, and were restless. To get them into a formation I shouted "release, release! Release the general!" It became the slogan of every body and all gathered to vent their anger. Karu Jayasuriya, and other leaders arrived thereafter, and we had a meeting, using the high ground as our platform. Without loud speakers only the media people could hear what Karu and some others were saying. Maybe over 3000 were there at that stage. In my turn I raised my voice to address the crowd and said that we shall continue the campaign until the general is released. It went well with the crowd and my speech

was given publicity by the media. On the same day there were many demonstrations in other cities and towns throughout the country. The masses came out in anger not necessarily because they agreed with the politics of general Fonseka. Certainly I do not agree with his politics. But all of us who joined the protest felt that the government was undemocratic and oppressive. If we do not get together and resist today, tomorrow all of us could face the same fate as general Fonseka. At least I want to fight before I am shackled.

Vickramabahu Karunaratne

P.S.

* From LAKBIMANEWS 20 FEB 2010 COLUMN.