

## **Sri Lanka: Silan Kadirgamar (1934-2015) – reflections on his life and politics**

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The passing away of Silan Kadirgamar last Saturday has left an unfillable void in the lives of many who knew him and appreciated their association with him. Silan's circles of associations went far beyond the usual circles of family and friends that most people have. Those of us who were willingly trapped in Silan's intersecting circles of commitment and action will miss him dearly, but we also owe it to him to reflect on his life for its many accomplishments and the manner in which he accomplished them. Silan was a bearer of a famous last name in Tamil and Lankan society, but he became known by and has now bequeathed a first name that is as famous, if not more, as his last.

A man of many facets, Silan Kadirgamar was a historian by training (specializing in international relations) and a university teacher; a Christian by conviction and socialist by persuasion; an affable mentor to younger generations - not only his students, but also others, especially those caught up in the uneasy translation between Sri Lankan swabasha and globalized communication; a political intervener always in furtherance of progressive principles but never in pursuit of positions; and in the context of living in a politically divided island for almost all his life, Silan was a tireless and perpetually optimistic bridge builder, but without being co-opted by the establishment - be it state or non-state. A forceful communicator, in writing and speaking, Silan was at his best in collegial company or seminar-sized gatherings. He was as deeply political as he was religious, but he democratized the Galilean's dictum - always striving to render unto the people (and not Cesar) that which is theirs, and render unto God that which is his.

There was also more to Silan's life than politics. He enjoyed the good things in life, had a sense of humour, was witty in his conversations, and was ready to laugh out loud without hesitation. He was a man of many lands, receptacle of many cultures - born and raised as a child in colonial Malaya; educated, employed and settled in marriage in pre and post-independence Lanka; spent decades living in Japan and India; and travelled frequently after returning to Sri Lanka in the evening of his life. Through it all, Silan was a Jaffna Tamil, but one who crystalized the virtues of Jaffna society and not its vices. Silan's immediate ancestors were associated with every significant development in the genesis and the growth of the Christian Church in Jaffna -the founding of schools and hospitals, the 19<sup>th</sup> century launching of the influential Morning Star newspaper, and the establishment of Jaffna's own Christian Church. Silan was steeped in that tradition and in his later years vigorously fought to preserve its integrity.

At the same time, Silan exemplified the deep seated religious tolerance that has always been a welcome feature of Jaffna society, its other habitual intolerances notwithstanding. Like his mentor and the subject of his significant historical writing, Handy Perinpanayagam, the founding leader of the Jaffna Youth Congress in the late 1920s, Silan in his own way stood with respect for the faith of his forefathers, the Saiva Siddhantha, Jaffna's own manifestation of Hinduism - perhaps not quite the way St. Paul would have meant it in the Biblical context: "I stood among the Jews of my generation for the faith of my forefathers."

Lovingly known for his peripatetic ways, it became a joke among Silan's university friends that he

built a house in Jaffna to settle down. They credited Silan's wife Sakunthala for the accomplishment and Silan readily concurred. It was, and is, a beautiful house, in which Sakunthala and Silan were to live and raise their two young sons, Ajayan and Ahilan. But they did not get to live long in that house. Repressive political circumstances and the explosion of 1983 forced the family to extend their stay in Japan where Silan had gone on sabbatical leave from the University of Jaffna. They dedicated those years of involuntary sojourn to the education of their children, sending them to India to study and qualify as professional engineers. Both Ajayan and Ahilan did their parents proud. Besides becoming engineers, they also became conversant in the Japanese language and landed jobs in Japanese companies operating in America. While Ajayan has been busily pursuing his engineering career in North America, Ahilan has moved beyond engineering into political economy and the social sciences, and into political praxis itself, in his own right in Sri Lanka. It would be 17 years before Silan and Sakunthala could return to Sri Lanka to buy a house in Dehiwela and become neighbours to Kumar David. It would be another 10 years before Silan could go to Jaffna to see his house and visit the Jaffna University, after leaving Jaffna and Sri Lanka in July 1983.

### **The long shadows of politics**

I first saw Silan before I knew him. That was in 1978, when Silan was teaching at the University of Colombo, and was the only speaker in Tamil at Bernard Soysa's Colombo West by-election meetings. The by-election had been called to fill the vacancy created by JR Jayewardene's ascension as Executive President. Bernard lost the by-election to Anura Bastian, a political nondescript chosen by the UNP hierarchy as successor to JR Jayewardene. The Tamils in Colombo West voted for Bastian mostly out of fear after the 1977 riots, while laughing out loud at the Bastian anecdotes, such as: Question: "Are you a Christian?" Answer: "No, I am Bastian"! Bernard's defeat would have been one of Silan's many unsuccessful election efforts for the LSSP starting from 1952, all of them in Jaffna except the 1978 by-election in Colombo. So it was with more than a touch of poignant irony that Silan joked, two days before this year's Presidential election on 8 January, "I think I am going to be on the winning side in an election for the first time in my life." We were at Kinross. That was the last I saw Silan.

I first met Silan in July 1979, in Jaffna two weeks after it was brought under Emergency Rule by President Jayewardene. By then Silan had joined the University of Jaffna, History Department, and I was visiting Jaffna from Colombo as part of a MIRJE (the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality) fact-finding delegation that included Rev. Paul Caspersz, Kumar David, Jayaratne Maliyagoda and Yohan Devananda. Our mission was to report on the state of affairs in the Peninsula following the imposition of emergency rule, in particular the abduction and killing of six young men by police officers in one night (July 13/14) immediately after emergency was declared. Silan was one of the key citizens of Jaffna we met and he soon became the nucleus for starting a MIRJE branch in Jaffna. Our findings in Jaffna were published as a monograph in English, entitled - Emergency '79. It was soon translated and published in Sinhala and Tamil. The Tamil translation and publication of the monograph became a quiet form of political protest against the Emergency Rule. Silan was the moving spirit and the main organizer behind it.

The launching of MIRJE in Colombo and its most active branch Jaffna provided an alternative forum for politically inclined individuals and groups who were not at home with the dominant-state politics in the South and its emerging non-state counter-politics in the North. Those of us in the MIRJE and similar organizations were not at the margins of Sri Lankan politics, but were purposefully active in its interstitial spaces. MIRJE was not the only forum, for there were others such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Tamil Refugees Rehabilitation Organization, who were precursors to MIRJE. And for those of us who were active in MIRJE, MIRJE was not our only activity. The CRM, TRRO and

MIRJE at that time were nascent NGOs that depended on political voluntarism and not on non-profit employment creation. To Silan the launching of the Jaffna Branch of MIRJE coincided with a spurt of social and political activities in Jaffna, all of them springing between July 1979 and July 1983.

There was the emergence of the Jaffna Citizens Committee, which Dr. Colvin R de Silva would later (1984) describe in a discussion with a delegation of the committee, as the only hope for sanity in the island. The Saturday Review hit the newsstands as a stirring political weekly that would win a grudging praise from the Supreme Court for its high editorial standards, even as the Court endorsed the government's ban of the paper for its provocative politics. The government eventually lifted the ban fearing endless appeals by the indefatigable S. Nadesan Q.C. The Jaffna University, despite the pun in Jaffna that one did not know where the market ended and the university started, became a veritable market place for controversial ideas, debates and discussions. Outside the University, the Chelvanyakam Memorial Lectures became a regular feature, with three of them delivered in four years by three of Jaffna's most outstanding scholars, AJ Wilson, Rev. Thani Nayagam, and S. Arasaratnam. Silan was directly or indirectly involved in this whirlpool of social and political activities. In addition, Silan also wrote a weekly column on international affairs in the local Tamil daily, Eelanadu. Politically, Silan maintained an excellent rapport with all the parties, groups and organizations that were active in the Peninsula. He was close to and had the ear of all the TULF leaders in Jaffna.

But Jaffna and the country itself were being overtaken by bigger storms during those same four years. Jaffna became the site of a triangular power struggle between the armed might of the Sri Lankan state, the parliamentary advocates of Tamil separatism, and the political violence of the impatient and intolerant Tamil militant groups. The TULF leadership was taken for a ride by the Jayewardene government, and had its political project hijacked from it by the Tamil militants. The outer manifestations of these struggles began as disastrous and ended in catastrophe. The fiasco of the 1981 DDC election in Jaffna ended with the tragedy of the burning of the Jaffna Public Library by the guardians of the law. The prematurely held 1982 Presidential election, the postponement of the parliamentary election through the chicanery of a referendum, and the militant ambushes in Jaffna triggered the conflagration of 1983. No one escaped that fire but most of us did not see it coming.

Silan was scheduled to leave Colombo for Tokyo with his family on the morning of Sunday, July 24, 1983. Late that Saturday night (July 23) he visited me after dinner for a night cap and chatter. We talked seriously, passed light hearted judgements on others in absentia, and joked and laughed out loud into the early hours of the morning. Silan and family left Katunayake as planned later in the morning, and I was mildly rebuked by my wife for likely disturbing our quiet neighbourhood.

None of us had any inkling of what was already going on in Jaffna and what was about to explode later that evening in Colombo. Silan was in Singapore on his way to Tokyo when he heard about the events in Sri Lanka. I had no clue until I got stuck in traffic on Havelock Road around seven o'clock in the evening. It was thirty two years ago but we are still in the long shadow of July 1983, and perhaps even the longer shadow of July 1979.

As members of the MIRJE delegation to Jaffna in 1979, we wrote a letter from Jaffna to President Jayewardene expressing our grave concern based on our findings and requesting an impartial inquiry into the events in Jaffna, and a re-structuring of the Police in the North in regard to its ethnic composition and its answerability to the people. The President acknowledged receipt of our letter but ignored its requests. After the catastrophe of 1983, however, he could not ignore the interventions of others infinitely more powerful and consequential than MIRJE, and Sri Lanka's national problem became internationalized. Within the country, the TULF was politically isolated and its separatist demand was illegalized by the Sixth Amendment. Separatist politics gave way to separatist war. War became not merely the continuation of politics, but the very determinant of

politics. The best laid plans of the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement and the Thirteenth Amendment were smothered by the war. India, the mediator, became embroiled in the war.

1994 proved to be a false dawn despite the best intentions of Chandrika Kumaratunga. The 2002 peace process ended in frustration. If the LTTE had made up its mind on a fight to the finish, it met more than its match in Mahinda Rajapaksa after helping him win the 2005 presidential election by ordering the Tamils to stay away from voting (for Ranil Wickremesinghe). The end of the war raised hopes of a new beginning, but the manner of its ending and the intransigence of the government after the war dashed those hopes. Things got worse after 2010, in the second term of the Rajapaksa presidency. The government set about to systematically weaken and even destroy the institutions of democracy and constitutional government. The country was awash in corruption and the rule of law gave way to presidential family rule.

The antithesis to the antics of the Rajapaksa regime came from within the regime itself, as it was bound to, in the person of Maithripala Sirisena who broke ranks to become the common opposition candidate. Silan was very excited about the politics of the common opposition candidacy despite its limitations and its compromises. The limitations and compromises had become inevitable after 35 years of political metamorphosis under the presidential system of government. The effects of the metamorphosis became transparent in the functioning of the new minority-government after the January presidential election. Their perverse persistence is manifestly evident in the efforts to reincarnate a former president as a new prime minister.

“Every left movement would have to be defined in the specific situation both in time and place where it emerges and functions,” Silan once wrote. The political priorities of today, democracy and good governance, are a far cry from the priorities that preoccupied Silan and the progressives of his generation. But having lived a long and full life, Silan, the historian, was able to see changing priorities in perspective and understand their importance. Equally importantly, he had cultivated the art of aging gracefully, accepting the inevitability of aging, spending time with his wife, children and grandchildren, reading at random without the pressure of studying, enjoying the small things in life such as watching cricket on a big screen, and meeting friends for serious talk and jovial banter. He passed away a happy man, at peace with himself and with the outside world in spite of its political turmoil.

**Rajan Philips**

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\*[http://www.island.lk/index.php?page\\_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code\\_title=129275](http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=129275)