

## THE 1956 GENERATIONS: AFTER AND BEFORE\*

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### I

The electoral victory of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) led by the SLFP has been described as a "cultural revolution", "a radical shift of power in Sri Lanka's politics", and a landmark in Sri Lanka's history.<sup>1</sup> Some authors went so far as to speak of "the dethronement of the westernized elite" or the "replacement" of "the westernized bourgeoisie" by the "national bourgeoisie".<sup>2</sup> We know, now, that this was a gross overestimate. As early as 1962, Hector Abhayavardhana reminded us of what should have been obvious: that the westernized political elite remained a dominant political force and were in the process of adapting themselves to the new trends.<sup>3</sup>

But having cast this sort of qualification, very few would deny that the events of 1956 constitute a significant stage in our island history; that they mark the upsurge of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in ways that have continued to influence the course of events, political and otherwise. Particular significance is attached to the constellation of social forces which powered the victory of the MEP. In those days these social forces were popularly described as the *Pancha-Mahā-Bala-vāgaya*: that is, *Saṅga-Veda-Guru-Govi-Kamkaru*. In association with the landslide victory of the MEP such descriptive generalisations should not be allowed to mislead us. It must be recalled that the UNP received 27 per cent of the total electoral vote as against 40 per cent for the MEP and 10.5 per cent for the two Left parties,<sup>4</sup> and the UNP vote

\* G.C. Mendis Memorial Lecture, 1981, Colombo, reproduced with the permission of the G.C. Mendis Memorial Trust. The opening paragraph has been deleted.

1. Mervyn de Silva 1967; G. Obeyesekere 1979: 308; G. C. Mendis 1957: 117-24; and A. J. Wilson 1977:309.

2. S. Arasanathan 1964:26; and Denzil Peiris 1958:5&7. In producing a major work on the subject, however, Howard Wriggins did not indulge in such sweeping statements.

3. Abhayavardhana 1962:7.

4. From A. J. Wilson 1974:171.