

# Paper 12

## The Reporting Culture and the Media Dynasties in Sri Lanka

by *Mr. Ponnambalam Kulendiren*

### 12.1 ABSTRACT

The reporting culture of the print media in Sri Lanka has impacted the human rights of the population, communal harmony, and the social and economic conditions of the country. In the last few decades, changes in the reporting culture have been aimed at undermining the Tamils' struggle for self-determination. These changes have been associated with the growth of the media and political dynasties. The changes have rewritten the code of ethics which governed journalism in the past. This paper reviews the growth of the media dynasties, the changes this growth has caused to the reporting system and the influence it has held on the people and the future of the country. The paper also examines the link between the political and media dynasties.

### 12.2 INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka, is a country with the highest literacy rate of 86% among its South Asian neighbors. The changes in the new reporting culture of the print media dynasties has played an important role in the country's social and economic factors, human rights and inter communal relationship. This document focus on following

areas:

- The emergence of a new reporting culture
- The impact of the new reporting culture on the issue of self determination of Tamils
- The emergence of Media dynasties after independence and how the media helped the Political Dynasties to attain Political power
- How the media dynasties are controlled by few families from Colombo
- The fate of many news papers in the hands of Media and Political Dynasties

### 12.3 THE REPORTING CULTURE

The press is the main center of information. If they do not have the freedom and the journalistic code of ethics to report the news without bias, distortion, any political alignment, or intimidation, then democracy is weakened. The Sri Lankan supreme court has held that the freedom of publication cannot be extended to matters of official secrets and confidentiality and the freedom to propagate one's idea may be restricted in the national economy and the principles of state policy. This later decision directly resulted in the take over of the Lake House groups of companies.

Judiciary too has limited freedom of speech and publication.

During the last five decades, the growth of the print media dynasties changed the culture of reporting to meet its own political and financial goals and to promote political dynasties to attain power. A variety of disinformation techniques are adopted to discredit the struggle for the self determination of the Tamil community and to hide the misdeeds of the state. The new reporting culture under the cover of the protection of state security, unity and press censorship includes:

- The publication of news items and articles that aggravate communal hatred between communities
- Black out news items relating to Human rights violations by the state and defense forces and distort facts to meet the needs of the interested parties.
- Harassment of journalists who are not prepared to toe the line of new media culture.
- Restrictions on their mobility of the journalist to the war zones areas with an aim of preventing them from real facts.
- Connections with the foreign media to further the campaign against the Tamil community and their struggle for freedom.
- Issue contradictory news reports with no facts to substantiate.

There are many trained journalists, who are specially financed and trained to write feature articles with scintillating headings using words such as "Terrorists in Drug Racket," "Extortion of Money," "Tamil Refugees involved in Shooting." These articles appear in local and foreign

media at regular intervals. The articles are mainly written by those journalists who never had the chance to research into the events but write on imagination and selective interviews. Many reports are not based on the spot investigation or gathering of real facts. The journalists dare to take risks against the restrictions imposed by the government. The state power of the Sri Lanka government makes it difficult to promptly verify these facts. However, with time the truth emerges.

### *12.3.1 Racism*

Promotion of racism is the main characteristics of the new reporting culture. During 1983 communal riots and all previous riots the media failed to high light the gravity of the situation and the sufferings the Tamil community. They went on focusing over and over again on the 13 soldiers who died in Jaffna in a land mine blast. The media failed criticize the atrocities committed by the Sinhala mobs and the indirect support given by the government by delaying the enforcement of curfew. They blacked out the publication many horrifying incidents against individuals and the destruction to the properties of the Tamil community.

The following tactics are adopted in promoting racism:

- High light only incidents such as killings, bombings in Sinhalese areas followed by stories of arrests of Tamils as suspects.
- Blackout of stories about atrocities committed the Sinhalese community. An example The media failed to condemn the recent Sinhala-Muslim riots in Pannala and Nochiyagama areas instigated by a group of Sinhala business organization.

- In 1956 Sinhala Only bill was introduced. The Federal party staged a *satyagraha*. The satyagrahis were beaten up and the Sinhala mob went on a rampage. About 150 Tamils were killed. The media was silent and never wrote about it.<sup>1</sup>

### 12.3.2 News Blackouts

News blackouts are another strategy adopted by the media dynasties to sweep the dirt under the carpet. The Emergency Regulations and "state security" help them in executing this strategy. For example, the amount of damage the government forces received in the Mullaitivu and Killinochi battles was blacked out. Neither the value of arms lost nor the number of soldiers killed were published by the state media.

### 12.3.3 Distortion of Facts

The news media dynasties have distorted facts on political killings and bombing incidents to safeguard the interests of the political families and are quick to point an accusing finger at the Tamil liberation movements. The reports are purely based on assumptions and baseless stories to increase circulation among the majority community. Here are few examples of this technique:

#### **Assassination of Lalith Athulathmudali**

On April 23, 1993, Mr. Lalith Athulathmudali, the then defense minister was killed by a gunman. The government and the Media accused LTTE of this assassination. The reports named the killer as Rangunathan alias Appiah Balasingham. Even the famous Scotland Yard became a party to this lie. A Presidential Commission

<sup>1</sup>Satchi Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka - The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle*, 1983.

headed by former Supreme Court Judge Tissa Dias Bandaranayake has said in its report submitted on October 7, 1997 that, "the assassination was carried out not by an LTTE suspect but by an underworld figure on contract ... premeditated murder was seen in the non-provision of proper security for the fatal Kirullapone meeting, the planting of evidence and wrong information given to the inquiring magistrate in an apparently planned and deliberate manner." The commission said it believed that the Tamil youth Rangunathan, was not the assassin but he had been killed elsewhere and his body dumped near the meeting site to present a false picture.

#### **Assassination of General Kobekaduwa**

The Sri Lankan army chief, Lt. Gen. Denzil Kobbekaduwa, was killed in an explosion in August 1992, in the northern town of Kayts. The Sri Lanka government and the media immediately blamed the LTTE for this murder. An International Commission appointed by President Premadasa concluded that it was a land mine planted by the LTTE that killed the general. A formal inquiry by the army also found the LTTE to be guilty. International newswire services (Reuters and Associated Press) repeated this claim in their news stories. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* was so sure that its caption on August 20, 1992 read, "Tiger's Prey." Even a Tamil publication, the London based *Tamil Times* (July 15 1993) repeated the story on its July 15, 1993 issue. This version of events was perpetuated for years despite rumors that it was an inside job carried out by others in the Sri Lanka army. There were witnesses who claimed to have seen a video-tape of a bomb being planted under the seat of the general's ve-

hicle. A British expert J. R. Wyatt, based on photographs of the crater left by the explosion, had concluded that the explosive device could not have been a land mine. This possible interpretations were silenced to keep the idea of an LTTE plot alive. A 1997 Presidential Commission found that it was not merely rival officers in the army, but the former President of Sri Lanka, R. Premadasa himself was responsible for the murder. The Commission also said there was reason to believe that the General was "killed by a bomb planted in his jeep and not by a land mine explosion as suggested by earlier investigations."

#### **Murder of Mrs. Rajani Thiranagama**

Nine years ago, when human rights activist Mrs. Rajani Thiranagama was killed, the LTTE was blamed. The LTTE's strenuous denials were ignored despite circumstantial evidence pointing to involvement by the Indian forces and Tamil collaborationist groups. Almost ten years later, the Sinhala newspaper, *Lakbima*, has disclosed that the gruesome killing was the work of the Tamil collaborationist group called EPRLF. It is well known that during the Indian occupation of the Tamil Homeland, the EPRLF operated in tandem with the Indian forces and was responsible for many atrocities. According to *Lakbima*, Thiranagama's killing was apparently carried out at the behest of the Indian Colonel Shashi Kumar who was alarmed by Mrs. Thiranagama's knowledge of the Indian army's role in many of the massacres. *Lakbima* named the actual killer as one Thomas who is now said to be living overseas.

**Assassination of Gamini Dissanayake** On October 24, 1994, the opposition candidate for

presidential elections was assassinated at a political meeting in Grandpass, Colombo. Immediately, the government and the media accused the LTTE for the assassination. A Reuters report on October 25, 1994 read, "the suicide attack was carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam . . ." An AP report on the previous day was cleverer: it just wove into the story unrelated news about the LTTE trying to make a connection, without actually accusing the LTTE. Barbara Crossette of *New York Times* wrote on October 25, 1994 in a report titled, "Latest Killing of a Sri Lanka Politician Fits a Familiar Pattern," trying to implicate the LTTE. The US State Department Country Report on Human Rights (1995) stated "the October 1994 suicide bombing that killed the United National Party's presidential candidate, Gamini Dissanayake, and 58 other people . . . credibly believed to be the work of the LTTE." The police produced the detached head of a 'Tamil looking woman' as the alleged suicide-bomber. The LTTE denied responsibility. In an election mired by violence Dissanayake's house was bombed a few days earlier, allegedly by Sinhala thugs belonging to the government party. No independent commission of inquiry was appointed, despite several pleas by the widow of the assassinated leader and others. Now the son of the assassinated leader, Navin Dissanayake, has said, "I don't believe it was only an LTTE operation . . . . My father had powerful opponents." In an interview with the *Island* (November 23, 1997) he said, "My mother wrote to President Kumaratunga requesting a commission . . . . They have appointed so many commissions . . . but there is no desire on the government's part to probe the assassination of a presidential candidate."

**Assassination of President Premadasa** President Ranasinghe Premadasa was murdered on May 1, 1993 in a bomb explosion in Colombo, while participating in a May Day Rally. Sri Lanka government and the Police accused the LTTE of having committed this murder. This was published as news by all newspapers in Sri Lanka and the newswire services carried them to the world media. Some newspapers used insinuations. Aziz Haniffa of *India Abroad* quoted unnamed diplomats as saying, "the killing carried the imprimatur of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam." Others were more direct. The police produced a photograph of the severed head of a man as that of the assassin, adding that, "a cyanide capsule was found embedded in the neck." Forensic experts who have examined this photo have scoffed at this insinuation<sup>1</sup>. The LTTE denied responsibility. About 40 people, mostly Tamils, were arrested in the immediate aftermath, on the theory that Tamils were the main suspects. Most were released, but eighteen of them were later indicted. More than four years later, on September 23, 1997, all eighteen were released, due to "lack of evidence."<sup>2</sup>

**Pannalai Massacre** On January 29, 1997, nine innocent Tamil civilians were killed in an explosion in the northern town of Pannalai (Karainagar). The Sri Lankan media and the international newswire services (Reuters, AP and the AFP), promptly reported the incident as "the LTTE exploded mines in a crowded area that killed nine civilians." It has subsequently been shown that the army threw grenades at a group of civilians walking on the causeway, and

<sup>2</sup>"Forensic experts examining the photograph have cast huge doubts on the police claims." *Eastern Eye*, May 11, 1993.

then opened fire. It is not coincidental that a group of British parliamentarians was visiting Jaffna at exactly this time and the US Assistant Secretary for South Asia was visiting Vavuniya.

**Kathankudy Mosque Massacre (1990) and Dehiwela Train Bombing (1996)** The aftermath of both these incidents are flagrant examples of the government's sordid practice supported by the media dynasties. The government quickly blames the LTTE. The government news bulletin is then published as 'news' by the press in Sri Lanka and the international newswire services. This type of attacks "by the LTTE" are frequently also 'timed' to coincide with certain government planned events. It is noteworthy that the mosque massacre in Kathankudy occurred during the Defense Minister Ranjan Wijeratne's visit to the Moslem countries in the Middle-East, where he was seeking assistance for the war effort against the Tamils.

**Lion Air Crash** In 1998 Lion flight from Palaly to Colombo crashed in the sea near Mannar. Immediately the media and a government funded bogus human rights group called the University Teachers for Human Rights-Jaffna (UTHR-J), in its report vividly described how an LTTE cadre shot down the passenger plane using a heat-seeking missile. But later, an investigation team from the Civil Aviation department said that all the evidence points to an internal explosion rather than a missile attack.

#### 12.3.4 Harassment of Journalists

Under previous Sri Lankan governments, a culture of self-censorship had become prevalent within government institutions and the wider society, due to systematic official censorship. In

its election promises, the PA stressed freedom of expression as one of its fundamental objectives. However, according to ARTICLE 19, under the PA government, harassment of the press has actually increased. Newspaper offices have been raided and editors charged over reporting on the President Reporters have been intimidated, detained and deported.

Harassment of journalists who write against the government policies or bribery and corruption of government officials and politicians has a common feature within past few years. This type of intimidation very seldom occurred in 1950s or 1960s. The government's relations with the independent media are troubled. Reports in newspapers and the six radio and TV stations, exposing cases of corruption and shady deals, including dubious tenders have riled some ministers who are privately pressing for curbs on press freedom. Under the cover of press censorship and emergency regulations the government in power expected the journalists to ignore questionable activities of politicians and VIPs. Here are few cases of harassment through Intimidation and judiciary actions and how the international media reacted to it.

1. Richard de Soysa, the Inter Press Service (IPS) correspondent in Colombo, was brutally slain and his body thrown into the sea by suspected policemen acting on the orders of government politicians in 1990.
2. Iqbal Athas, a defense analysis columnist, claimed that armed men, who were from the armed forces, broke into his home and terrorized his family.
3. Four Danish journalists who arrived to report on the fate of a Tamil refugee deportee from Denmark, Chitra Rajendran,

were themselves deported from Sri Lanka on November 13, 1998. Asylum-seeker Chitra, deported from Denmark was arrested in Colombo on November 3, 1998. The journalists who met her at the Dehiwela police station were detained by police under Emergency Regulations at a hotel in Mount Lavinia under heavy security before deportation.

4. *Virakesari* newspaper journalist Rasiah Selvarajah who wrote about the deportation of Chitra was summoned by police and questioned about his information sources. Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation journalist Sandung Jayasekera suspected of links with the Danish journalists was arrested in mid-November.
5. Four newspaper editors are embroiled in criminal defamation cases for reports on President Kumaratunga and her ministers.
6. Last year, Sinha Ratnatunga, editor of the widely-read *Sunday Times* was convicted for wrongly reporting that Kumaratunga had attended a midnight birthday party of a fellow politician at a plush hotel. A jail sentence of 18 months was imposed on Ratnatunga, but suspended for seven years.
7. The government also shut down a private radio station for incorrectly reporting that a curfew had been imposed. The ban order was later lifted by the government.
8. On 29 November 1997, three journalists of the Tamil language newspaper *Veerakesari* were harassed, threatened, and humiliated and their photographic record of events destroyed by the police. This incident took place when two reporters, Mr. Gajan and

Mr. M. Dunstan, and photographer Mr. S. Surendran were covering the transfer of detainees from the Welikada Prison in Colombo to another place of detention at Kalutara.

9. The Sri Lankan Police also raided the hotel room of Indian journalist, Ms. Sudha Ramachandran, of the *Deccan Herald* of India, forcibly seized photographs taken by her and questioned her for several hours about alleged connections with the LTTE. Ms. Ramachandran is a foreign journalist who had been duly accredited by the Department of Information and the Foreign Ministry, and had obtained clearance from the Ministry of Defense to travel to the Jaffna Peninsula in the North, which is under military control, and carry out her journalistic work there. Sri Lankan Government also expelled a Chinese journalist.
10. During March 1998 A group of unknown persons raided the room of Priyantha, who was working for a Sinhalese weekend newspaper *Lakbhima* and beat him up. The journalist was later taken in a van and left on the road side in a gunny sack
11. In February 1999 the associate editor of *Uthayan*, the only news paper published in Jaffna, was grilled over report about the human head found in a drain yesterday by officers from the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) of the Sri Lankan Police.
12. The editor of *The Sunday Leader*, Lasantha Wickrematunga's Nugegoda residence was attacked by unknown men on May 17, 1998. The gang sprayed the house with bullets and

the weapon used in the attack was identified as a T-56

13. *Virakesari* journalist Ponniah Manikavagam who was released on Monday after 21 days detention by the TID said although he was arrested, officially no reason for his arrest was given to him or his wife. After the completion of 21 days he was produced before the Colombo Acting Magistrate by two TID officers and released without any charges.
14. A prominent journalist and author, Mr. Mathusoothanan, is reported to have been abducted by unidentified persons on August 26 1998 at around 6.00 p.m. The incident happened while he was walking along the Gale road in Bampalapittiye with his two friends, Dr. Arasu and Rasanayagam, both visiting professors from Tamil Nadu.

#### 12.3.5 Access to the War Zones

The access to the war zone and areas not under government control has been denied to the press. Only a very strictly guided tour by the military of favourably disposed reporters, such as those of the *The Hindu* newspaper based in Madras, India, are conducted in the war zone.

#### 12.4 THE CURRENT NEWSPAPERS AND THEIR PUBLISHERS

The current papers fall under following main publishing groups.

**The Lake House** D. R. Wijewardane was the founder of this group of papers. Before the government takeover, the group was aligned with UNP. In 1973 the Lake house group of News papers were taken over by United Leftist Front

under the Prime minister of Mrs Bandaranayake. The aim was to curtail its support to the UNP. Lake house group of papers now function as the mouthpiece of the government in power.

**The Island Group (Independent News Group)** It was also one time called as Sun and Dawasa group. This group was owned by Sivalli Ratwatte, the brother of Mrs. Bandaranayake and the paternal uncle of the present President. This group was also called as Upali Group as Upali Wijewardane (who died in an Air crash in Malaysia) was the founder of this publishing group. He was also the nephew of D. R. Wijewardane and married a niece of Mrs. Bandaranayake. Upali was the son-in law of Seevali Ratwatte. On Upali's sudden death his father-in-law took charge of the press. Thus the family link existed between the one time owner of the Lake house group and the owner of The Island group.

**Wijeya Newspapers Ltd (Formerly the Times Group)** The Times group was once owned by Alfred Thambyayah. The editor's position of the Times was once occupied by popular journalists such as Regie Michael, Frank Morais. When the Lake house group was taken over by the government Ranjit Wijewardane started the Wijeya Newspapers Ltd. which was formerly known as Wijeya Publications Ltd. and was incorporated in 1979 with the primary objective of printing and publishing of periodicals and magazines. It also established family link between the Independent News Group and the Times group.

In 1986 the Company expanded its business further by acquiring the publishing rights of several Sinhala and English newspaper titles owned by the Government. This company bought the

Times of Ceylon Ltd., which was under liquidation. With this acquisition the Company moved in to national newspapers by first publishing Sri Lankadipa in 1986 and the The Sunday Times in 1987.

**Sunday Leader** Published by independent group headed by Mr. Hullugalle. It is more critical about the PA government and many news items are inclined towards UNP.

**The Veerakesari Publishers (Express News papers Ltd)** This group was one time owned by an Indian businessman Subramaniam chettiar and Kesvan was functioning as Managing Director. It was bought over by J R Jeywardane and Desomnd Wickremasinghe. They started publishing *Uthaya*, a Sinhala sister paper, which ceased publication after a short period. Due to conflict between the partners the ownership was sold to Ganam another Sri Lankan businessman with origin from India. *Veerakesari's* editor's position was one time manned by experienced and qualified journalists. But this policy is now changing now. This group now goes by the name, Express News papers Ltd.

**Other Tamil papers** *Thinamurasu*, issued weekly in colour, has the highest circulation among the Tamil papers issued from Sri Lanka. This paper is owned by EPDP, a Tamil political and militant group which broke away from EPRLF. With circulation as the major marketing aim the paper catered for the aspirations of majority of the Tamil readers in Sri Lanka and abroad by carrying scintillating news and articles about LTTE and also critical about the government actions against the Tamil community.



The Muslim Youth front with the help of Ba-keer Marker from Beruwella runs a Tamil paper named *Uthayam* and has many readers among the Tamil speaking Muslim community.

#### 12.5 THE MEDIA DYNASTY AND POLITICAL POWER

The policies, activities and achievements of a political party needs publicity through the press if it is attain the helm of political power. Through repeated publicity, people with diversifed ideologies may be influenced to change their views. When they become aware of the benefits they get by way of crime free society, employment, taxation, cost of living, housing etc. then they tend to change their negative attitude towards a political party and vote them to power. This is what happened at the last Presidential elections. The media projected Chandrika as an angel who will bring peace and prosperity to the country. That image building by the media cleared her way to achieve the political power. Different religions, languages, cultures play an important part in supporting or not supporting the actions and policies of the government and other Political parties. This is one of the main reason for the publication different newspapers linked to different political parties, ethnic communities and regions and raising issues directly affecting them.

The President of Sri Lanka, in addition to her various responsibilities as Minister of Finance, Minister of Defense, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces is now having an additional responsibility as the Chief Editor of the Government Media. Various President and Prime Ministers have in the past attempted to control the press either directly or by indirect means. Chandrika's mother Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike took over Lake House. Almost at the same

time the Sun Group of news papers was sealed while the Times Group was maneuvered into bankruptcy.

1. Late Mr. J.R. Jayawardena brought the notorious Parliamentary Privileges Act, which placed the media directly under the control of Parliament.
2. Mr. Ranasinghe Premadasa did not depend on subtle tactics. His press officers walked into Lake House and dictated not only the placement of news stories but their headlines as well.
3. Following the foot steps of her predecessors, President Chandrika Kumaratunge's latest move is in the long tradition of attempts to control and strangle the free and independent dissemination of news in the media. Government news is essential not only the Government controlled press but also to the independent media as well. In setting up the Policy Research and Information Unit (PRIU), the Government is in effect restricting access to Government Information. The relevant quote from the President is worth reproducing: "to ensure the accuracy, completeness, clarity and timeliness of information, the dissemination of information by ministries will have to receive prior approval of the proposed unit."

#### 12.6 CONCLUSION

This paper is based on the information gathered by interviewing various people involved in print media. The document has tried to establish the history of print media dynasties which are linked to political dynasties centered around Colombo. The opportunity to establish an unbiased news media in Sri Lanka which could focus

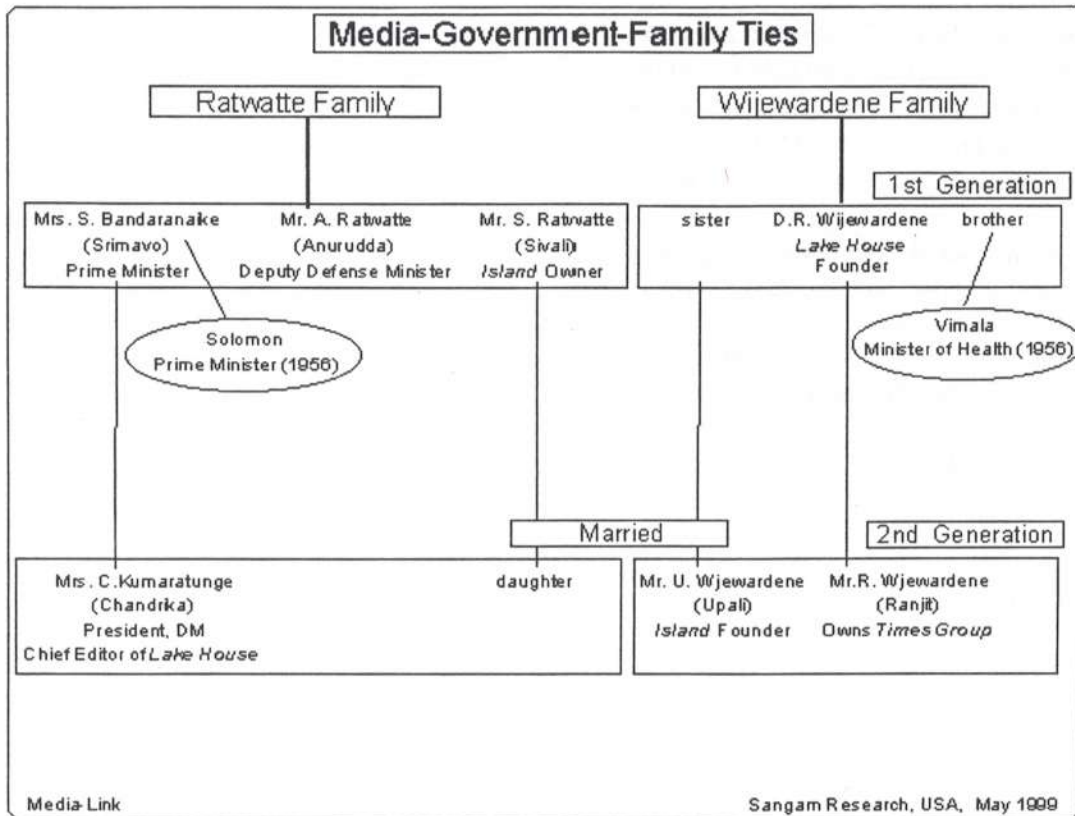


Figure 12.1: Media-Government Family Ties

on the peace, communal harmony and prosperity of the country is the dream of many true Journalists. The question is can they achieve their dream under the present political situation?

**About the Author:** Pon Kulendiren is a graduate in Physics from the University of Ceylon and subsequently he qualified as an Engineer from the Institute of Electrical Engineers in UK. He joined the Post and Telecommunication department of Sri Lanka. Under the Colombo Plan scholarship he was trained at the British Telecom London, UK.

In the 1970s, he contributed several short stories and science articles to the Tamil dailies *Thinkaran* and *Veerakesari*. His short story titled "Beauty" was selected for broadcast in Tamil section of Sri Lanka Radio. Kulendiren was also frequent contributor of children's dramas and features to the Tamil Children's Program.