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JUNE 25, 2017 / AUTHOR: UDAN FERNANDO / 18 COMMENTS

Saman Kelegama (1959-2017): A Thinker Of A Think Tank

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By **Udan Fernando** –

The totally unexpected and devastating news of the untimely demise of Dr. [Saman Kelegama](#) on Friday 23rd June has left many people shocked and sad. I have not seen such an outpouring of messages of condolences from a wide spectrum of people on the death of an Economist. Indeed, Saman was a very gentle and amiable person who earned respect and admiration as a humble and modest human being. While saddened by the realisation of the fact that he is no more, as my professional paths crossed very frequently with



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people who grieve Saman's passing, this note is not an obituary but an attempt to understand Saman's role as a leader of a Think Tank.

Kelegama emerged as an Economist upon receiving an illustrious training at Oxford. His father, Deshamanya Dr. J. B. Kelegama, was an eminent scholar and civil servant who was much respected in Sri Lanka. As such, Kelegama had all the credentials and the pedigree to embark on his career as an Economist. However, he did not choose a conventional academic career, like his father nor did he join the Central Bank or the public service to pursue a career at a place like the Treasury. Instead, Kelegama chose to work for the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) which was called a Think Tank at a time when only a few people knew the purpose and function of a Think Tank. Kelegama's name is intrinsically enmeshed with the IPS, the Colombo-based Think Tank, which he gave leadership to since 1995 until his untimely demise.



Dr. Saman Kelegama

I think it was Kelegama who made Think Tanks an operative term in the Sri Lankan context. In fact, it was not Kelegama who founded IPS. However, Kelegama was undoubtedly the singular person who made IPS so well-recognised in Sri Lanka, as a premier Think Tank that offers research and policy advice on economic affairs and related subjects. The emergence of IPS marks a salient milestone in Sri Lankan contemporary history as a direct corollary to the water-shed transformation in Sri Lanka when an aggressive economic policy shift liberalised the economy in 1977. I am privy to an anecdote shared by Dr. Howard Nicholas, an eminent Economist of Sri Lankan origin, now domiciled in The Netherlands, about the conception of IPS. As I recall, the then Finance Minister Ronnie de Mel has stressed the importance of having an independent Think Tank to generate ideas and offer policy advice to the new environment of the economy, business and trade under what was popularly called an ‘open economy’. Howard has been entrusted with the task of doing the spade work of this novel venture which took the name of IPS in 1988. Howard himself led IPS in the years of its infancy albeit maintaining a low-key.

Kelegama joined IPS in 1990, initially as a Research Fellow whose work coincided with the last few years of the consecutive UNP governments since 1977, a period that witnessed the liberalisation of the economy and the Structural Adjustment Programme. Coincidentally or otherwise, Kelegama took over the leadership of IPS in 1995 in the immediate aftermath of another watershed in Sri Lankan contemporary history. The year 1994 marked the end of the seventeen-year rule of the UNP and the establishment of a new regime under the leadership of Chandrika Bandaranaike-Kumaratunga of the SLFP and a few small coalition partners. The significance of this period goes beyond Sri Lankan politics. This was the time of the reformist economic policies of the governments of Tony Blair (in the UK), Francois Mitterand (in France) and Gerhard Schroeder (in Germany) which took place along with the second wave of the drastic changes in the Communist-bloc and China. While Blair’s Labour

with a human face'. This was essentially a continuation of the liberalisation of the economy promoted by the UNP government albeit with a few clams of reforms, probably to attract the electoral support and definitely to appease the Leftist parties who came as a numerically insignificant (perhaps symbolically useful) coalition of the so-called Peoples' Alliance (PA) government. The most pertinent feature of this historical juncture was the continuation of the economic policy after a regime change and re-emergence of the SLFP which was till then largely Socialist in its economic policy, particularly in the period 1970-77.

IPS was not the only entity that emerged in the aftermath of the economic liberalisation in Sri Lanka. The Social Scientists Association (SSA) can also be traced as a corollary to the economic liberalisation albeit as a critical force. The SSA was formed by a group of academics and largely Left-oriented intellectuals in 1977. This was followed by the emergence of another prominent organisation which can be called a Think Tank in retrospect, the International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES) by Dr. Neelan Thiruchelvam, a lawyer and scholar. However, the ethnic conflict which unraveled since the eighties for nearly three decades, over-determined the Sri Lankan intellectual discourse. As such, SSA and ICES as well as a few pioneer advocacy-oriented research institutes such as the Center for Society and Religion (founded by Fr. Tissa Balasuriya in 1971) and Satyodaya (Founded by Fr. Paul Casperz and Bishop Leo Nanayakkara in 1972) were preoccupied with conflict-related issues focusing on issues of human rights, devolution and ethnic harmony. This left the intellectual discourse on the economy in the hands of a very few actors such as the IPS, Sri Lankan Economists Association and individual scholars. Perhaps a precursor to IPS in a Think-Tank style was the Marga Institute which was established in 1972 by a prominent bureaucrat Dr. Godfrey Gunatilleke. He was in active public service and holding a senior position in the realm of development planning in the initial years that liberalised the economy. Marga, for whatever reason, did not emerge as a 'Think Tank' on Economics in the new liberalised economic environment. It is in this context that IPS enabled stand out as a prominent Think Tank in the new economic policy environment and continue to maintain its prominence, recognition and acceptance. Due to the semi-governmental nature of its incorporation and legal status, IPS secured the credibility and patronage from state agencies and multi-lateral agencies as well as international financial agencies.

Kelegama's intellectual contribution unraveled in this 'classical' Think Tank environment with IPS's unique interface with the state while ought to be intellectually independent but structurally quasi-governmental. I think Kelegama played a pivotal role carving a niche for IPS as a Think Tank by navigating this unique but difficult terrain. IPS' policy-oriented research on trade, migration, labour, *inter alia*, filled the needs of state agencies, multi-lateral agencies and international financial agencies as well as the general public discourse. IPS's hallmark annual intellectual product, the 'State of the

the Central Bank Annual Report and many such products of the Department of Statistics warrant due recognition and appreciation. Kelegama's work did not undermine the routine products of the Central Bank and other state agencies, Rather, he built on them and brought out an analytical element as well as a thorough scrutiny from a policy perspective.

A systematic appreciation and assessment of the critical edge of Saman's work is a task he leaves with us as he bids goodbye to us in an unexpected moment. However, at this stage, I can empathise with Saman on the challenge of performing the difficult role of a Think Tank while keeping the state as a key stakeholder. Given his intellectual prowess/integrity and his temperament as a gentle, soft-spoken person, Saman could play a somewhat balanced role as an analyst and a communicator. Saman's messages found its way to policy circles and decision makers in both state and private sector. Though he had an able team of colleagues and an institutional framework, Saman, to a large extent, personified the IPS. He nurtured it, expanded the scope of it and took it to new frontiers within and beyond Sri Lanka. Creating a rationale, a need and role for entities called Think Tanks as a legitimate and constructive actor in society is, in my opinion, the largest legacy Saman leaves behind. As such, Saman has etched a prominent position for himself in contemporary history as an Economist and a Policy Analyst.


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