POLITICS OF THE CEYLON NATIONAL
CONGRESS 1900 - 1930

R.H.R. GUNAWARDENA

Several aspects of the Ceylon national Congress have already been
examined by K.M. de Silva and P.V.J. Jayasriker. Based on the develop-
ments that followed the riots of 1915, P.V.J. Jayasekara has dealt with the various
factors that led to the formation of the Congress. ¹ K.M. de Silva has traced
the development of the Congress with special reference to its character, paying
attention to the factional disputes between the Sinhala politicians and the Tamil
leader Arunachalam, and the attitude of Governor Sri William Manning towards
this organization. ² The purpose of this study is to analyse the nature and
composition, the character, the conflicts among the elite members and the
political role of the Congress up to 1930.

The oldest of the national political associations founded on a national
basis was the Ceylon National Association. The parent society of this association
was the Ceylon Agricultural Association which was founded in 1882 by
C.A. de Soysa, the well-known millionaire and philanthropist.³ The object of the
latter association was primarily to safeguard the Ceylonese plantation and
agricultural interests. In 1884, there was a general feeling among the English
educated elite that the association should widen its activities and that an earnest
effort should be made to obtain a substantial measure of reforms of the
constitution.⁴ Meanwhile the great interest shown in 1888 regarding the Sinhalese
seat in the Legislative Council resulted in the reorganization of the Agricultural
Association as the Ceylon National Association. C.H. de Soysa, the President
of the Agricultural Association was succeeded by P. Ramanathan as the
President of the Ceylon National Association. The demand for increasing
Ceylonization of the Civil Service was one of the main demands of the Ceylon
National Association in its first years. ⁵ It also started an agitation against the
grain tax.⁶ The Ceylon National Association had one positive achievement to its
credit, namely its notable contribution to the campaign for the abolition of the
Grain tax in 1892.⁷

After the first few years since its formation, the Ceylon National Associa-
tion was a rather inactive body until its revival in 1905.⁸ An active part in
resuscitating the association was taken by the Burghers and the Ceylon Inde-
pendent. It was during the Presidentship of Arthur Alwis, a Burgher, that the
association forwarded the memorandum on constitutional reforms in 1905.⁹