

In Memoriam

K.R. Narayanan: A Strong Friend

by Ramtanu Maitra

On Nov. 9, former Indian President Kocheril Raman Narayanan breathed his last in New Delhi, after ailing for weeks. His last resting place will be in New Delhi alongside two other late Presidents of India, by the River Yamuna.

KRN, as K.R. Narayanan was known to many of his friends and relatives, was in many ways an extraordinary individual. Born in a very poor family in a small village in the southwestern state of Kerala, and a member of the Dalit community—the untouchables in the Hindu society—KRN was made of steel.

Because of his academic excellence, mixed with his toughness covered by an ever-present smile, he was hand-picked by India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who drafted him into the Foreign Office. In the late-1960s he was brought back to academia when Mrs. Indira Gandhi, then the Premier of India, appointed him vice-chancellor of the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Later, he became ambassador to a number of countries, most important of which were his ambassadorships to China and the United States. It was in the 1970s, when Mrs. Gandhi, having decided to start a rapprochement with Beijing, sent KRN as India's envoy to China. KRN, married to Usha Narayanan, a Burmese by birth who speaks Mandarin fluently, and has written books about China, was much liked in Beijing. In fact, KRN paved the way for the later thawing of relations between India and China. On the 50th anniversary of China's adoption of Panchsheel as the principle on which its foreign policy is based, KRN was the invited keynote speaker in Beijing. Panchsheel refers to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, first formally enunciated between India and China in 1954.

In 1980, after Mrs. Gandhi came back to power after a three-year hiatus, she sent KRN to Washington as India's envoy. Her objective was to re-build the bridge that had existed earlier between India and the United States, and which was so assiduously destroyed in the 1970s by Kissinger and company. KRN's role, along with others, led to the Reagan-Gandhi meeting at Cancun, Mexico in 1981, and subsequent development of relations between the two countries.

It was in Washington that KRN came in contact with Lyndon H. LaRouche, and came to respect him. Following Mrs. Gandhi's assassination on Oct. 31, 1984, when Mr. and



Office of the President of India

Indian President Shri Kocheril Raman Narayanan with Lyndon LaRouche in New Delhi, Dec. 5, 2001.

Mrs. LaRouche went to pay their homage to the fallen Indian leader, Ambassador Narayanan treated them with the full honors of a foreign dignitary. The relationship lasted throughout the next two decades. When Mr. and Mrs. LaRouche visited India in late 2001, President Narayanan saw them at the official residence of the President of India.

In 1984, upon his return from Washington, Rajiv Gandhi, then Premier of India, urged him to join the Congress Party and contest elections. He won his parliamentary seat from Kerala in all three elections (1985, 1989, and 1991) that he contested. In 1985, he joined the Rajiv Gandhi Cabinet as the Planning Minister. He served between 1986-89 as Ministers of Foreign Affairs, and Science and Technology.

KRN was elected Vice President of India and served in that position from August 1992 to July 1997. In 1997, he was sworn in as President; his term came to an end in 2002.

He made clear that he would remain a “working President” and not a figurehead. His tenure as President was at a crucial juncture of modern Indian political history, when the political scene witnessed a paradigm shift. The one-party dominance by the Congress Party came to an end, and there was a rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party, identified widely as a right-wing Hindu chauvinist party, at the local, state, and national level.

To the relief of all, during those difficult days, President K.R. Narayanan never failed in his duty and never bowed to pressure from internal and external pressure. And, to the joy of all around him, he never stopped smiling.