

Sri Lanka: LSSP recalled to life

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The New Town Hall was full to overflowing, the corridors crowded, the overflow went into the grounds outside; they came from Colombo, they came from the outstations (Sammanthurai, Trincomalee, Hambantota, Anuradhapura, Kandy, Puttalam, Kurunegala, Matale, Kegalle, Galle and Kalutara), young men and women I had never seen before, dozens of old leftists (not just Samasamajists) who I had not met for decades. It was quite something and if the new leaders can hang on to and build on the strategic advantage they have scored, a significant Left entity will surface. While cries of “Samasamaja Pakshayata Jayaweveva” and youthful calls for a renewed golden age echoed from speaker to speaker symbolising the enthusiasm of the gathering, I will caution later in this essay that while nostalgia is a tonic, this is the twenty-first century and the tasks of a revitalised LSSP are different from those of a bygone era. Now recalled to life, the Party must reset its targets in ways some readers may find outlandish and different from anything they are accustomed to, but the ‘moving finger writes, and having writ moves on’. There is only one way forward for the Left in Lanka; but before that let me describe the day’s events.

The convocation (or convention, not a formal Party Conference) was summoned by LSSPers who Tissa Vitarana expelled or suspended. I will not repeat the storyline dealt with in my piece of 15 February except to say that the events leading to the expulsions reported there were confirmed by many speakers. The proceedings were in two sessions; the first open to visitors, invitees, and Samasamajists; the second limited to the latter only. Guests included Rev Sobitha, Sumanthiran, several from the CP, JVPers, NSSPers, SLFPers, FUTA, trade unionists, DLF members, civil society activists and well-wishers. Speakers: Raja Uswetakeiyawa (CP), Sumanthiran (TNA), Kumudu Kusum Kumara (FUTA), Wasantha Samarasinghe (JVP) the first time the JVP has sent a speaker to the convention of another party, Bahu (NSSP), Dharmasena Pathiraja and others. Since New Town Hall overflowed into the grounds there must have been 1,500 at the opening session and about 1,000 to 1,200 in the reserved session.

Felicitation messages from President Sirisena and Mrs Chandrika Kumaratunga were read and greetings received from Wimal Rodrigo in hospital. Keerthi Kariyawasam opened the proceedings with a welcome speech and Jayampathi Wickremaratne made the keynote address; Vijaya Kumar did the keynote in Tamil. They dwelt on the wrongful way Tissa had driven out 17 of them, the euphoria of defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the task ahead of abolishing the Executive Presidency and cleaning the corrupt Mafia State. The enthusiasm of the invited speakers was encouraging. (Sumanthiran: “You spoke of uniting the left in the north and the south. Among Tamils look no further; we are leftists, we will work with you”. Bahu: “The racists came to Nugegoda; by coming here in such large numbers you have replied. Now let us smash these fascists”. Kusum Kumara underlined the importance of democracy – etc, too many to summarise).

The message of the convocation and its enthusiasm was that Tissa has missed the bus. Since the closed second session more than filled the hall the organisers’ claim that the gathering represented a majority of the LSSP; Tissa retains a lower quality rump. The only real asset he clings to is the HQ building in Union Place, but I wonder for how long. The convocation called upon Tissa and his acolytes to put an end to Stalinist methods, accept that Lanka changed on 8 January, and heal the rift in the party. It would be good if the rump drive sense into Tissa and reunification along these lines is cemented. Naturally Tissa will have to concede leadership to representatives of the majority

assembled at the convocation, but the rights of his minority faction will be protected.

From rebirth to renewal

There is no way forward for the Left movement in Lanka, revitalised LSSP included, if it remains fragmented, shattered, scattered and divided into powerless, sectarian, scraps. Let's count; there must be a dozen Trotskyite sects including Siritunga, Bahu, the Linus faction, Socialist Equity and so on; then there must be another dozen shoots from the CP, shades of post-Sanmugathasan Maoism, and the Peratugami and Kurutugami offal shed by the JVP. Central of course is the JVP itself. (Don't count the three blind mice of the Dead-Left; Tissa, DEW and Vasu). This is in the Sinhalese South; but there are plenty of Tamil groups within and outside the TNA which consider themselves socialist and Marxist.

Leaving aside this sectarian swarm, none of whom with the exception of the JVP can attract more than a handful of votes, there are loads of intellectuals, students, trade unionists, and a miscellany of old-timers eager for a home if there is credible place to come to. But fragmented, the left is an unconvincing third force behind the SLFP and UNP, and that too thanks to the JVP - actually fourth behind the TNA. As for the JVP, if it fails to overcome its intrinsic limitations, it may trail the JHU and Fonseka in coming years; but more on the JVP later.

If the revitalisation of the LSSP is to have any lasting significance the objective it must set itself above all else must be unification of the left. I say unification (a single unitary party) not bogus left-fronts and alliance where everyone has one leg here and one leg there; when problems crop up, they jump back into their old sectarian caves. Existing structures (CCs, PBs, Secretariats) must be dissolved and parties must immerse and integrate into a new structure. It is difficult, it will take time, but it is the only way; or the left will forever remain in the shadows.

This is just what Syriza achieved in Greece. The Greek left was more loony and sectarian than Lanka's, if you can imagine such a thing! But over a three year span of open democratic dialogue about 20 entities merged into a single party. From 3 to 4% of the vote in 2003-5 Syriza rocketed to 37% and governmental power six weeks ago. Now the full weight of European and German capitalism is mobilising to crush Greece and the anti-austerity plan. Syriza has to gird itself for a revolutionary response as the European financial counterattack is brutal, threatening strangulation if it does not surrender abjectly. Will it dare nationalise the banks and dump the Euro? That remains to be seen. But Syriza would not have even been able to place such tasks on the agenda had it not first taken power. Currently, far from losing support its popularity has risen to 47% in polls and street demonstrations echo defiance.

All the powers of European capitalism panicked because Podemos ("We can" in Spanish) has shone in copycat style. Podemos is a union of left, democratic, syndicalist, anti-capitalist, social activist and trade union currents. Its rise phenomenal; from formation in January 2014 to February 2015 membership has grown to 350,000. It is now the second largest party in Spain and may win end of year elections. Massive corruption scandals involving the nation's leading political parties, largest banks, and even the Spanish Royal family paved the way for its rise. Its core agenda is anti-austerity, like Syriza; its outlook encompasses populism, soft euro-scepticism, alter-globalisation (modern internationalism), participatory democracy and democratic socialism. Mutatis mutandis a tailor-made formula for Left unification in Lanka if only our buffoons could discard sectarianism.

It is an age of youth; Syriza leader and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras is 40; Podemos leader and possible next Spanish Prime Minister Pablo Turrion only 37 - both are Marxists. Our 46 year old Anura Kumara is a senior citizen in comparison! It is not youthfulness in years but freshness in ideas

and boldness in execution that counts. The message to the new-LSSP and the JVP is crystal clear: “Unify! Or perish as frustrated old men!”

It is obvious where the new-LSSP should begin. Those who the CP and DLF spat out and a layer of intellectuals and trade unionists impatient for a new home must be the first targets. Assimilation calls for more than nostalgia for LSSP traditions. CP people have their heritage of Pieter and Dr SA Wicks; there are those who owe fealty to Shan, social democrats have perspectives. Trumpeting “Join the LSSP and become a Trot” is meaningless to them. Creating a unified party calls for a new culture and political calculus to accommodate a massively wider spectrum. I have examined the processes that led to success in Greece and Spain; the core consists of a socio-economic programme that relates to the people, genuine internal pluralism, democracy and transparency, and high political consciousness; all within our reach.

If that’s the starting point, then the second stage must be negotiations with parties seeking merger. Maybe the NSSP, maybe Siritunga’s USP, may be others who I will not name for fear of giving offence at this early stage. They need to be persuaded that the way of the Left in the 21-st Century must be democratic unification. There will be huge obstacles, the most serious are personalities-egos (who will be in the CC, who on the PB, why not me) and property. Given time and flexibility these problems can be overcome.

The third and final stage, which can be broached only after this process has reached a credible critical-mass, is negotiation with the JVP. The JVP has grown arrogant as it is the leading left entity in the country. It won’t stop to so much as give the time of day to another leftist! For this reason Wasantha Samarasinghe’s participation is reassuring, it may signal a new trend. His speech was short, clear and well received. The JVP leadership does not grasp that growth under its current organisational model has reached its logistical limit. It may win more seats at the election in June, but the hope that it will take power in 2020 is vain. It needs to grasp that the structural logistics of further growth requires an organisational revolution into unification of many left currents.

The convocation elected an interim committee to draft a Resolution and summon a formal Party Conference. The overriding immediate objective, not only for LSSP-Left and JVP, but also for Ranil and Sirisena is the unconditional imperative of never allowing Mahinda Rajapaksa to return to power again. In addition and apart from this, I am hopeful that a root and branch rethinking of the fundamental theoretical proposition that I have raised in this essay, will find a place for discussion in the Resolution.

Kumar David

P.S.

*http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=120891