

Sri Lanka: the 1971 insurrection and its legacy

Tuesday 19 April 2016, by [THIRANAGAMA Dayapala](#) (Date first published: 4 April 2016).

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The impulsion towards nationalist sentiment in politics, has in our view, exceedingly profound roots in the life style of the modern man, which makes for homogeneity of a single high culture within any political unit, and which condemns those not masters of the said culture, or unacceptable within it to a humiliating, painful second class status (Ernest Gellner, Nationalism, pp.102-03, 1998).

Introduction

A revolutionary mood gripped Sri Lankan youth in the mid-1960s, particularly our universities. There were half a dozen or so revolutionary groups that had sprung up but the movement later known as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), led by elusive and charismatic Rohana Wijeweera was unmistakably in the ascendant. It was the most successful, serious and determined organization amongst Sinhalese youth.

Their bases at universities were very active and they publicly argued in support of the oncoming revolution. It was more of a moral persuasion than political, either you were going to be a part of the revolution or against it. If you are against it you are noted and you will be on their death list. For me they had publically announced the death sentence because I had publically challenged them. Your friends all of sudden becoming enemies and the enemies of the revolution would be severely punished. The revolutionary wave was so powerful the JVP had just outnumbered other revolutionary groups in the university for the first time. The JVP leader in Kelaniya University declared at their student council election victory in 1970 that they were the future. He spoke passionately and persuasively, but he was doomed. One year later, he died attempting to free Rohana Wijeweera from Jaffna Prison. The movement he allied his name to the party no more successful than he was. Forty-five years later, they are banished from the terrain they wanted to occupy, a purely Sinhalese, Buddhist polity. It was a vision of a working class revolution that excluded minorities and even portrayed the hill country Tamil working class as fifth columnists and reactionaries loyal to India.

On the 5th April 1971 midnight the revolution began in earnest and it was confined to the areas where the Sinhalese lived. The simultaneous attacks on police stations went in line with the plan that had been drawn up years before as part of the revolutionary strategy.

Between 1987-89 the JVP's armed wing murdered left wing leaders and also trade unionists and

activists. Built on a foundation of Sinhalese chauvinism it remains hostile to dissenting political opinions and even the existence of human beings within Sri Lanka of other cultures and religions.

This exclusionary nationalism is deeply embedded in the JVP's DNA, marking their political practice even today. It leaves them with the dubious and contradictory position of upholding majoritarian ethnic nationalism while at the same time adhering to a 'proletarian internationalism'. Their answer to the great question of post-Independence Sri Lankan politics, the rights of ethnic minorities is simply to wait for the socialist revolution. Their political vision is untouched by the need to widen their electoral coalition, persuade voters or make any compromises with the real problems and challenges facing Sri Lankan people. Dissecting the JVP's ideological and political articulation explains why.

Roots of Ethno Nationalism

Since its inception the JVP has been trapped in this conundrum of irreconcilable and contradictory political positions. The prime responsibility of this theoretical muddle rests with its creator, inventor and undisputed leader Rohana Wijeweera, whose hold on the party is such that it is difficult to challenge his authority 27 years after his assassination by Sri Lankan security forces.

The long shadow Wijeweera casts over his party illustrates Gramsci's view that even sometimes it is essential in understanding the formation of a political party, its conception of the world and life, its present and future through even sometimes the political biography of a single personality.

Rohana Wijeweera's real name was Nanadasiri but he adopted 'Rohana' when he began his political appearance in public. The name 'Rohana' epitomizes the victory of the Sinhalese over Tamils in the Sinhala Buddhist ideological and political formation. King Dutugemunu of the Rohana kingdom defeated the Tamil king Elara after capturing Anuradhapura according to the Sinhala chronicle Mahawamsa. This choice of name and his instruction to his Christian wife just before he was captured in 1989 not to change his children's religion (as recently revealed by Chtirangani Wijeweera) are very revealing about the influence Wijeweera's faith and beliefs played in shaping his party. It is even more revealing when a 'Marxist' party bases its political programme on the basis of exclusion and racism, enshrining the discriminatory demands of the majority ethnic community at the heart of its agenda.

This process was accomplished through the formulation of its famous five classes of which the most controversial 'Indian Expansionism' castigated the Upcountry Tamils of Indian Origin as a reactionary entity and therefore were deemed as not worthy of taking part in the revolution. In line with the Indian Expansionist notion the Upcountry Tamils were seen as loyal to India and not to Sri Lanka. After the revolution it was to be decreed that they must return to India. The Up Country Tamils the most deprived socially, economically and educationally in this country were excluded from the revolution. This preposterous decision not only doubted their loyalty but also threatened their very existence as a community. This discriminatory and reactionary notion was further strengthened when they rejected doing any political work among the Tamil community who live in the North and East of the country.

That is why the April insurrection erupted only in the South of the country and not the upcountry areas, the North and East. The revolutionary epicenter had been firmly located in the South and the tremors, which emanated from it did not reach those areas. There was, however, an isolated and unsuccessful attack on Jaffna prison in order to rescue Wijeweera who had been imprisoned there at the time.

Wijeweera's conclusion that the Upcountry Tamils of Indian origin were a reactionary entity loyal to India was not an isolated argument. He developed a similar political stance to the wider Tamil community. The Tamil community has been continually oppressed and their democratic aspiration trampled violently whenever they claimed for equality within a united Sri Lanka. By the time the JVP was founded the Sri Lankan traditional Left had abandoned their struggle for the democratic aspirations of the Tamils in the North and East. However, the JVP was highly critical of the old left for their failures in abandoning the revolutionary struggle of the working class but never criticized the traditional Left for abandoning the struggle for the democratic aspirations of the Tamils. The JVP's political stance in relation to both the Upcountry Tamils of Indian Origin and the Tamil community in the North and East has developed ethno nationalist framework that has systematically ensured the interests of the majority community against a plural democracy in Sri Lanka.

The war against devolution

The JVP rebellion between 1987-89 showed how far it had divorced itself from fighting for the oppressed – they announced the formation of the Patriotic People's Movement (PPM), which was essentially the JVP's armed wing. This 'Patriotic' movement hunted down and killed those who supported the 13th amendment, devolving power to the Tamil community in the North and East. It murdered Left regional party leaders & trade unionists and activists without mercy. They declared war on the Government because it had introduced a devolution package to resolve Tamil grievances.

The government at the time annihilated the entire JVP leadership and murdered their armed cadres – but they were able to regroup themselves in the early nineties to reclaim their ethno-nationalist politics. The re-formed JVP became the militant representative of the Sinhala Buddhist political revival that came to the fore after the 1956 political upheaval. They supported the war in the North and East and opposed the possibility of having a negotiated settlement, even today after the total annihilation of the LTTE. At the very beginning of the Tamil liberation struggle progressive militant organizations were looking for friends in the South to form an alliance but the JVP's political positions in relation to Tamil liberation did not permit such an alliance. Such an alliance could have transformed political culture in Sri Lanka.

Instead, it was civil organizations and NGOs who advocated for an end to war and the importance of human rights. The JVP was not part of such a discourse and their efforts were focused on advising successive capitalist Governments on how to win the war. Even though the JVP was subject to some of the most repressive measures by the state, including judicial killings between 1987-89, they did not speak up when the security forces carried out the same kind of repressive policies on young Tamil people. This is not simply because they lacked the intellectual resources to assume such a role, but also because it would have been against their own interests.

The JVP still opposes any devolution of power to the Tamil community and do not believe there is a solution to minority grievances until the formation of a true socialist government. Without a deeply embedded democratic culture such assertions are hollow and frequently lead to yet more repression – as witnessed the world over.

The current government is taking steps to build reconciliation with the Tamil community in the North and East. These efforts are fraught with difficulties and will require major policy decisions to meet the democratic aspirations of the Tamils. The government is taking steps to introduce a new Constitution. The JVP appears very lukewarm and refuses to understand these initiatives. In a recent debate Mr. M.A.Sumandiran a moderate Tamil United Front (TNA) MP argued this situation in following words. 'I heard the Chief Opposition Whip, my friend, Hon. Anura Kumara Disanayake,

who stated that the problems faced by the Tamil People is not that of the Constitution, but day to day affairs, economic difficulties, lack of job opportunities and the like. Our people face all of that and more, particularly after the cruel war that they had to face for such a long time. Recovery from that has been very, very difficult. For lack of political will, for various other reasons, our people face an enormous amount of day-to-day problems. But that is not the fundamental issue faced by our people, and I am sad that a party like the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna which expounds such progressive thoughts and ideas on other fronts, is not able to see this" (Thoughts on Resolution to Form Constitutional Assembly, Colombo Telegraph 15.01.16). The JVP has never been able to recognize the Tamil community has specific issues arising out of language, religion and culture within a majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist state formation and the critical nature of the political violence Tamil people had to endure since Independence. These specific issues demand specific solutions.

The JVP and their breakaway group the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) have great suspicions of anything that originate from in India in line with the legacy of Rohana Wijeweera and their continuing adherence to a nationalist politics. This has been shown very clearly in relation to the recently announced Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement (ETCA) with India. The JVP and FSP with other racist Sinhala outfits including Mahinda Rajapaksa's joint opposition have opposed this even before seeing the full details or what the Agreement contains. Their opposition is not based on an opposition to neo liberalist trade liberalization but the fact of having any kind of agreement with India.

Conclusions

While the left should stand for the needs of ordinary people and social and economic justice for all, the JVP scapegoated vulnerable communities. While arguing for a socialist revolution, the JVP divided up the working classes of Sri Lanka by ethnicity and religion. While claiming to speak for Sinhalese working class people, they covered their hands in the blood of Sinhalese left wing leaders, activists and trade unionists.

The JVP cannot claim to be a party of proletarian internationalism as long as they are unable to distance themselves from Sinhala ethno nationalism. They have never questioned and confronted their recent history. Those who have done that remain as individuals outside their party structure. Even after their most recent split in 2011, the electorally insignificant Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) still hang on to Wijeweera's Sinhala racist notions. The worst is that the JVP carders had fought in the ethnic war alongside with the Sri Lankan security forces as reliable information indicates.

In Sri Lanka, politics has frequently been a matter of life and death and the gap between grand rhetoric and real action can be vast. Now, as our country looks to politics to build a new country, free from the cycle of violence that has engulfed us for too long, the JVP are still sitting on the sidelines. Now is the time for the left to provide intellectual, political and moral leadership. But all the JVP can say is to ask us to wait for the socialist revolution. Those of us who witnessed their attempts to capture power can only be grateful they have thus far failed to bring about their revolution – as it is clear that their answer to the national question is killing fields and gulags. More than anyone else the minority communities in this country have understood their bitter lesson that the so called liberators are oppressors – irrespective of where they come from, the North or South.

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P.S.

*<http://groundviews.org/2016/04/04/the-april-5-the-day-that-shook-the-south-and-its-legacy/>

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