

Sri Lanka: fake similarities between February 1917 and January 2015

Tuesday 28 February 2017, by [WIJETHILAKA Niel](#) (Date first published: 28 February 2017).

Prof. Romila Thapar once said that a serious historian should have the sharp eye of a detective gathering even minute details related to the phenomenon that she studies. Hence, she advises her research students start with reading Agatha Christie. Of course no historian can collect every necessary markers as she may miss many due to multiple reasons that are beyond her control. Hence lacunas may exist, but the next generation of historians may build on that collecting newly unearthed materials thus filling the gaps in the writings of their predecessors. Leon Trotsky writes the following on the task of the historians. “[H]istory ought first of all to tell what happened and how. That, however, is little enough. From the very telling it ought to become clear why it happened thus and not otherwise. Events can neither be regarded as a series of adventures, nor strung on the thread of a preconceived moral. They must obey their own laws. The discovery of these laws is the author’s task” (History of Russian Revolution). The presence of gaps may be understandable and such defects should be clearly separated from distortions, made wittingly or unwittingly, in history-writings. Distortions may happen due to total disregards of the facts that were intentionally placed under the carpet or in the back-burner. The historians subjective bias may creep in in their work generating partial histories. Hence, Trotsky warned that “the subjective tone .. is not permissible in a work of history”. It is interesting to note that the second kind of distortions may happen when reading history. We more often read history not to understand what had actually happened in the past but to legitimize and to understand the present. It is in itself not a crime. Nonetheless, in the process, we may see in many instances people tend to read the past in order to justify the present thus very often distorting the history. The classical example for this second kind of distortion is Prof. Kumar David’s article on the Russian Revolution in Colombo Telegraph (February 26) [1]. The argument put forward by Dr. Vickramabahu Karunaratne, the General Secretary, NSSP is basically similar. Both are trying to show that what happened in Sri Lanka on January 8, 2015 was similar to what happened in February 1917 in Russia. Hence Russian event is reinterpreted. Prof. David writes: “If you scale down from the world-historical to the national, then January 8 is our February. Two things are common; a despised autocracy was dismantled and secondly huge aspirations for a better future were unfurled”. Just accept for the moment the absurd idea that the Rajapaksa regime was similar to the rule of Tsar Nicholas 2. Then Prof David laments: “They reached their October; but we are still stuck in the mud sans a bourgeois democratic yahapalanaya.” What does it imply? January 8, 2015 had the potential and the capacity that would produce Sri Lankan October, placing the state political power in the hands of the Sri Lankan version of Bolshevik Party. Destroying all the hopes of Prof. David and the renegades associated with him, the proverbial pigs of the well-known English adage stubbornly refuse to grow wings, to look like giant bumblebees in order to fly towards Prof. David’s projected optimistic future.

The Professor of Electrical Engineering has misinterpreted history by telling us similar events took place in February 1917 and in January 2015. Why? The existing regimes fell and new regimes were formed. For his formal logic $A = A$. Does it mean that cheese and chalks are similar because the color of the both is white? In his own words this is what had happened in February 1917; “A Provincial Government of grandees and liberals was formed with Prince Gregory Lvov as prime minister. Far more important for posterity was that on the 27 February the popular councils of the

city united to form the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Soldiers deputies. A state of Dual Power (two parallel state powers in one country) came into being". Ha ha! February 1917 not only forced Tsar Nicholas 2 to abdicate but also led workers to form their own power structure, Soviets. Here, I have no intention to engage in a discussion on Lenin's astonishment to see this "unexpected" developments.

What began in February 1917 was revolution, not just a change of regime. As Trotsky vividly explained in the following quote in February 1917 history had seen, "forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny". Let me quote Trotsky at length. "The most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events. In ordinary times the state, be it monarchical or democratic, elevates itself above the nation, and history is made by specialists in that line of business—kings, ministers, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, journalists. But at those crucial moments when the old order becomes no longer endurable to the masses, they break over the barriers excluding them from the political arena, sweep aside their traditional representatives, and create by their own interference the initial groundwork for a new regime. Whether this is good or bad we leave to the judgement of moralists. We ourselves will take the facts as they are given by the objective course of development. The history of a revolution is for us first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny" (History of Russian Revolution).

The absurdity of the thesis that portrays the Presidential Election of January 2015 as a starting point of a revolutionary process can be further vindicated by defining rigorously the revolutionary situation. This is how Lenin defined it. "To the Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; ... For revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for 'the lower classes not to want' to live in the old way; it is necessary that 'the upper classes should be unable' to live in the old way; (2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses who .. are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis and by the upper classes themselves into independent historical action. (V. I. Lenin, Collected Works. Vol. 21)

In fact, since 2010, with the beginning of the second term of the Rajapaksha regime, we have seen the gathering clouds that such a revolutionary situation was in the process of emerging. To name only a few signs: anti-pension reform struggle by the FTZ workers, the trade union action by the university teachers, student campaign against privatization and commodification of education, water disputes in Rathupaswala, the struggle of the fisher folks. When their rule and power are at stake, the bourgeoisie is trying all the variants in its repertoire of action. The bourgeoisie and their imperial masters have realized that they need a regime change. January 8 was not a starting point of an emerging revolutionary situation but an attempt by the bourgeoisie to save the system. If Prof David wishes to get a small satisfaction by seeing some similarity between February 1917 and January 2015, we may cite some similarities between Maithreepala Sirisena and Prince Lvov. Trotsky would help him when he writes: "A prince, a rich man, and a liberal—that was very impressive to the average bourgeois. For that reason, Prince Lvov was marked for the premiership even under the tsar. To sum it all up in a word, the head of the government of the February Revolution was an illustrious but notoriously empty spot".

In Sri Lanka we have witnessed the use of parliamentary politics to contain and dilute what we call "mass politics", the forcible entrance of the masses into the political arena not as voters but as agents of change. Of course, when a new government comes to power, people naturally think it would fulfill its promises. Even before one year honeymoon period, they are now entering back to

the stage of direct action. How does Prof. David see these struggles of the peasants for their land in Keppapulau, Pudhukuduyirippu, Kilinochchi, and Jaffna, student protests against privatization and commodification of education, fisherfolks' struggle for fishing rights, Telecom manpower workers strike and peoples' fight for land and water? Is he trying to identify these struggles with the reaction of JO?

At one point, Prof. David has come up with a dangerous argument of crushing the opposition. "Thus I come to the moral of my story. There will no new constitution, no useful amendments, no economic programme, 'no peace, no rest' until the counterrevolution in full swing under the leadership of the Joint Opposition is confronted and crushed". In Mawanella, the Prime Minister himself told that he would mobilize his forces to confront on the streets the protestors. Fort OIC in fact told the striking workers that he was not hesitant to use "civil force" to remove the striking workers from the Lotus Road.

I have no intention reply to Prof. David on his contention on Kornilov affair. When the his thesis about similarity between February 1917 in Russia and January 2017 in Sri Lanka collapses, April incident, the formation of the coalition government, Kornilov counter-revolution have no meaning to interpret in Sri Lankan post January 2015 events. May be Prof. David's article is a part of the Ranil Wickremesinghe project to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

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P.S.

*<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/february-1917-january-2015-fake-similarities-reply-to-prof-kumar-david/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/centenary-of-the-february-revolution-in-russia-february-august-october-1917/>