

The Parliamentary Left of Sri Lanka and the Nationalist Trap

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The Sri Lankan left has several features that distinguish it from the left in India. The first Marxist party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), formed much later than that in India in 1935, was Trotskyite dominated. The Communist Party of Ceylon (CP) was formed following the expulsion of 'Stalinists' in 1940. Hostility to Stalin also meant that the LSSP would not support the war against fascism when the Soviet Union was dragged into World War II. Also, the CP was less under the influence of the Communist Party of Great Britain than was its Indian counterpart, a factor that is said to have helped in the struggle against revisionism in Sri Lanka in the early 1960s. The CP, although weaker than the LSSP in electoral politics, had a strong working class base and more influence than the LSSP among the Tamil and Muslim left intellectuals and oppressed masses.

The LSSP and the CP were a world apart from their social democratic predecessor, the Ceylon Labour Party with roots in the fledgling trade union movement and an anti-communist agenda that deteriorated into chauvinist politics aimed at workers of Indian origin by 1930. The LSSP had a split in 1945, and a merger and a split in 1950 so that there were two Trotskyite parties until 1956. The weaker, VLSSP (revolutionary LSSP), went into an alliance called Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP or People's United Front) with the Sinhala chauvinist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1956. The alliance fell apart in 1958, but the VLSSP inherited the name MEP as well as its Sinhala chauvinism.

The opportunism of the VLSSP may seem the first betrayal of the minority nationalities by the left, but its roots lie in the remarkable performance of the left in the elections to the first parliament in 1947. The hopes that the LSSP leaders nurtured about being elected to power faded since the elections of 1952, partly because the Citizenship Act of 1948 disenfranchised the Hill Country Tamils, constituting around a tenth of the population. Although the left as a whole opposed the Act, the left leadership, the LSSP in particular, since then, began to neglect political work among the Hill Country Tamils, constituting a backward but the most numerous section of the working class. The political weakness of the LSSP leadership has been traced to the propertied class origin of the bulk of its leadership, and it took less than two decades for the LSSP to switch from ultra-left Trotskyism to parliamentary social democracy.

While there is no doubt about the opportunism of the left parties, the charge that the left betrayed the Tamils on the language issue is not quite correct, since the LSSP and the CP voted against the Sinhala Only Act in 1956. The shift in language policy towards one of protection of Tamil language rights within the framework of the Sinhala Only Act occurred well after the Federal Party, the main Tamil nationalist party then, expressed willingness in 1957 to find a solution within the framework of the Sinhala Only Act.

The real betrayal was the class betrayal in 1963, when the LSSP, CP and MEP formed the United Left Front (ULF) and planned a powerful trade union campaign based on twenty-one demands, which put fear into the national bourgeois SLFP government of the day. The LSSP leadership was tempted in 1964 by a cabinet post for its leader; and the ULF fell apart as did the trade union

campaign. The LSSP split later in the year, but the rebels who formed the LSSP(R) were politically weak. The CP also split in 1964, based on the international debate on the road to socialism, and the Marxist Leninist faction that rejected the parliamentary path was politically strong and had with it the bulk of the party's trade union membership. Although subsequently weakened by a combination of factors including the rise of nationalist politics, Marxist Leninists remain a significant political force among the Tamils and the Hill Country Tamils.

The degeneration of the LSSP and CP was inevitable since their opportunistic alliance with the SLFP, which eroded their vote bank and their trade union base. Squabbles with the SLFP led to parting company in 1975-76 and contesting the elections as a left alliance in 1977. The result was a humiliating defeat for the SLFP and the decimation of the parliamentary left, which crawled back to the SLFP nest in the late 1980s to ensure its parliamentary presence. The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) - its subsequent factions included - split from the LSSP only after the electoral disaster of 1977.

The case of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, meaning People's Liberation Front), mistakenly or mischievously dubbed Marxist, is different. Despite the origins of several founder-leaders in the two factions of the CP, it rejected the working class as a revolutionary force. Its chauvinism was so blatant that it labelled the Hill Country Tamils an extension of Indian expansionism. It attracted a sizeable section of left-inclined youth whom it misled into the misadventure of April 1971. It was revived as a political force in 1978 with help from the pro-imperialist United National Party (UNP) government, which wielded unprecedented power from 1977 until its defeat in 1994, and the blessings of a Trotskyite Fourth International. With the planned aggravation of the national question by the UNP government, the JVP became increasingly chauvinistic. It rejected the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 to stage an uprising because the Accord offered some autonomy to the Tamils, and murdered left and centre-left leaders who supported the Accord for its positive features in addressing the national question. Marxist Leninists, it may be noted, criticised the Accord for its inadequacies and its accommodation of Indian hegemonic interests, issues that the JVP was not in the least concerned with.

The decimation of all but one member of the JVP Politburo by state terror in 1989 meant that the JVP had to wait until the defeat of the UNP in 1994 for its second resurrection. The JVP grew at the expense of the old left in the South which was by then a spent force, but slowly. However, the combination of a chauvinistic agenda and an opportunistic coalition with the People's Alliance led by the SLFP in 2004 helped it to secure 34 (or 15%) of the 225 parliamentary seats, despite a less than 7% share of the vote nationally when it contested independently. The emergence of the right-wing Sinhala chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya as a political force with 9 seats has made the JVP even more chauvinistic and obstructive in its approach to the national question.

In fairness to the CP and the LSSP, they cannot be said to uphold a chauvinistic ideology. But they have consistently failed to protest in the slightest against the chauvinistic agenda of the SLFP, their major political partner, or against the pursuit of war by the present government in which they are partners.

The lesson for the left movement as a whole is that opportunism of any kind only morally weakens a left party and inevitably leads to its degeneration into a centre-left reformist party that would participate, passively or even actively, in acts of national oppression and compromise with imperialism. Even worse, it could be compelled to do the dirty work for a repressive state in the name of combating 'terrorism' and separatism.

P.S.

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