

Sri Lanka: UNP cannot abandon its loyalty to the market economy

Friday 7 May 2010, by [KARUNARATNE Vickramabahu \("Bahu"\)](#) (Date first published: 5 May 2010).

There is a serious debate within the UNP. It amplified to a verbal clash after the recent parliamentary elections. They all want to know the reason for the continuous decline in performance of the party. The majority view is that it is a problem connected with the organisation; hence they want to recondition the party and the leadership. None has raised the question of political programme and there is no discussion on political theory of the party. If it is a fault of the leadership, then why not the measures made to improve the setup that would bring about positive results? After all, Karu Jayasooriya is an entirely different person to Ranil Wickremesinghe. The former worked hard to make a contribution to the working of the party. If Ranil could not approach the grass root level then Karu clearly bridged the gap. Not even Mahinda could match the negotiating ability of the UNP deputy leader. But his efforts also did not arrest the deceleration of the party. I think it is necessary to look at the politics of the UNP and its historical development before blaming this or the other person.

Conservative property owners

The UNP emerged in 1947 as the party of the conservative property owners. It was dominated by the capitalists who wanted to compromise with the British imperialism and to continue with the culture left behind by the British. DS, the founder of the party wanted to build the Lankan nation within the cultural set up left behind by the masters. In that sense it was definitely a class oriented party, that did not exclude the Tamil or the Muslim privileged sections. Of course, the Sinhala nationalism was used to counter the proletarian power of the Sama Samajists. But that racism was only a shrewd ploy for the consolidation of the bourgeois state. Estate workers were disenfranchised not because they were Tamil. No, they were marginalized because they backed the Sama Samajists who could have established a left government.

SWRD broke away and established a liberal capitalist party in order to claim the middle ground and defeat both the UNP and the left. With the capitalist boom, the time was ripe for the SLFP. There was room for reforms and social welfare. Populism of SLFP shared the common international economic revival with other such populist currents world over. Gandhi, Nkrumah, Sukarno, Peron and the like, created similar populist reforms in their respective countries. For several decades they dominated the developing world and some thought this has opened a third way out for emancipating the suffering masses. But the development of world economic crisis has removed these illusions. The UNP made use of this crisis of populism to introduce neo liberal market economy in this country. The 1977 JR regime was the last success of the conservative UNP policies. The decimated SLFP had to abandon their false image of a socialist party and take to market economy as its programme but, with a humane face. This was literally true.

The Mahinda regime is in fact the regime of JR with a soft plebian facade. In other words SLFP to-day is the second coming of the UNP of JR. So, how can the UNP challenge this new formation of its own soul? I believe Ranil has realized that.

He has seen that Mahinda regime is no enemy of the privileged classes or the market economy. What is left for him is to guide Mahinda in dealings with international forces and global capitalism.

Politically speaking Ranil accepted Mahinda as his prodigal brother.

Privileged class

I do not think any other leader of the UNP could do better. The UNP cannot be transformed into a social democratic party based on trade unions and mass organisations. When Ranil says that he has to listen to the senior UNPers then it means that privileged class lobby has to be consulted; particularly, the Tamil and the Muslim business men and traders who constitute the solid base of the UNP. If one cuts that off, it will cease to be the UNP. However much UNP spokesmen talk about the suffering of the plebeian masses it cannot abandon its loyalty to the market economy and the business world.

P.S.

* From lakbimanews column.