

Sri Lanka: Worms in UNP want internal election

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The leadership crisis has negated itself; according to UNP MP Ravi Karunanayake. Apparently there were four worms within the party hierarchy that could not stop turning and twisting! They want internal elections to select the leader. However, when confronted with a proposal for an election where all party members would participate they lost their balance and stopped at that. Actually parties are not open entities where anybody can say anything. Parties are based on a certain set of ideas and limited principles. Only those who are conversant with this should have the right to select the leadership. Each party represents a class interest; sometimes even a sub class interest.

Political principles

The political principles accepted in general by the party represent the basic interest of that particular class or the segment of the class. The UNP is the party of open economic policy and conservative politics. That is how it was and that is how it will be, in spite of cries of Sajith Premadasa. Sajith vehemently emphasizes that it was and it should be the party of the small man and it should not be the property of the Colombo 7 elite. This is a very populist slogan, good to attract lumpen and radical street sellers. Maybe his father utilized it to counter the politics of the JVP insurrection. In fact president Premadasa got the opportunity to lead the UNP because of the instability created by the insurrection. UNP leaders such as Lalith and Gamini hesitated to build a counter to the politics of the JVP. It was left to the 'man from the downtrodden' to create a set of slogans that could knife through the campaign of the JVP.

Premadasa started his political carrier with the original Lankan working class leader A.E. Gunasinghe. Gunasinghe built the Labour Party of Ceylon, following his guru the British Labour party leader Ramsey McDonald. As Ramsey became the prime minister of England, Gunasinghe was absorbed into the reactionary compromise of the British Labour party. Then the leadership of the working class in Lanka was snatched by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party. After Gunasinghe, Premadasa became the leader of the Ceylon Labour Party. Though there was an attempt by the LSSP leadership to get Premadasa into LSSP politics, it did not work. He became the strong arm of the UNP in the Colombo municipality area. Small men in the Colombo area were with the Left, until the coalition government of 1970 extinguished their hope. Then in a massive wave they went behind Premadasa. He continued to enjoy

their support, even at the time of the second JVP insurrection in 1989. In fact, even the JVP considered him as a man from the oppressed section of society, a counter to the Goigama-Radala politicians. Up to that time the leaders of the UNP were of the latter type. In addition they went either to Royal or to S. Thomas'. Even if they failed to achieve academic excellence, they were good at accepted sports activities. Premadasa had none of that background material of high society; but he had energy and determination to by pass all that. He had self confidence and within limits he was self-consistent.

Thus he became the UNP choice for that historic moment. Given the chance, he did what the party wanted him to do. Having won the presidential elections with indirect support of the JVP, he first tried to achieve a compromise with the JVP. I believe he had a genuine desire to come to an agreement with the JVP. He knew that if the rebellion was crushed, then the opposition within the party lead by the conservatives, the Goigama-Radala elites, will throw him to the dogs! Well that is exactly what happened after the elimination of the JVP leadership. So the UNP became again the party of the conservatives similar to the British Conservative party.

Ranil could be compared to David Cameron though the Lankan certainly has a better sense of humour. Before he became an MP, David worked in business and government. He worked as a Special adviser in government, first to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and then to the Home Secretary. Afterwards he spent seven years at Carlton Communications, one of the UK's leading media companies, and served on the management Board.

Ranil comes from a foremost media family in Lanka. He graduated from the Peradeniya law faculty and worked as a lawyer at Hulftsdorp. Sajith also studied in Colombo and was brought up as a son of a UNP president. He cannot claim the humble beginnings of his father, unless he gets out of the UNP and really works with the down trodden. As it is his speeches are incongruent to the existing political frame work of the UNP. So, it is unlikely that Sajith and his three musketeers will be able to take over the party of the conservatives, and turn it upside down to create a populist social democratic party. Very likely they may get kicked out to become political refugees and prey to Mahinda regime.