

# Sri Lanka: Social democracy and the turn it took

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Politics of social democracy in Lanka has a long history going back to the days of A.E.Goonesinha. Alexander Ekanayake Goonesinha (May 1, 1891 - August 1, 1967) was a pioneering trade union leader known as the 'Father of the Labour Movement' in Lanka. He was the founder of the Ceylon Labour Party (CLP), Sri Lanka's first labour organization and was the first ceylonese mayor of Colombo. Also he served as a minister of state and chief government whip in the first parliament of Ceylon. Goonesinha's political career marked the formation of the Ceylon Labour Party (CLP), in October, 1928, with himself as president, and Proctor Marshall Perera as Secretary, and Messrs. C.E. Corea, C.H. Fernando, C.W.W. Kannangara, George E. de Silva and the late President Ranasinghe Premadasa, in the Committee. The CLP was formed, after having had contacts with the Labour Party of Great Britain earlier. In fact when Ramsay McDonald, the British Labour Party Leader and Prime Minister visited Ceylon in 1926; Goonesinha received him on behalf of the Ceylonese labour movement. He also appeared on behalf of the labour movement at the Donoughmore Commission for Universal Franchise. The Labour Party was the first experiment with social democracy in Lanka but it rapidly became a failure. Unfortunately, it was from its inception a prodigy of the British Labour Party (BLP), though it stood firmly for universal franchise. By then the BLP has become an instrument of British imperialism. Hence Ramsey Mc Donald influenced A.E to oppose the demand for independence and instead to campaign for a federation. In that scenario the Marxist Left, in a few years, replaced the Labour party in the trade union movement.

In the first parliamentary elections in 1947, the Left put together faired well in spite of factional fights. There was a general mood and expectations for a social democratic government. Details of the elections were: The United National Party won 42 seats with 751,432 votes; the Lanka Sama Samaja Party won 10 seats with 204,020 votes; the Bolshevik-Sama Samaja Party won 5 seats with 113,193; the All Ceylon Tamil Congress 7 seats with 82,499; the Ceylon Indian Congress won 6 seats with 72,230; the Communist Party of Ceylon won 3 seats with 70,331, the Labour Party won one seat with 38,932, the Independents won 21 seats with 549,381; Total 95 with total valid votes being 1,887,364.

## Strike waves

This was partly due to the fact that the LSSP and the BSP were both at the helm of the strike waves that occurred in the post-war period. In 1946 there was a brief reconciliation between the two factions. Hence the LSSP emerged as the main opposition party, with 10 seats. The BSP obtained 5 seats. They also had the support of the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC - which later became the Ceylon Workers' Congress) of Natesa Iyer, which had six members in parliament and of various independent members. Thus there was an opportunity to form a social democratic government. But the Left could not agree to form a passive Left block government. Thus the first opportunity for a social democratic government was lost. The Left came together again in 1963. The Communist Party, Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna formed the United Left Front. The ULF broke down in 1964 when then Prime Minister Bandaranaike offered ministerial posts to the LSSP and the CP.

## **Mobilize the masses**

However, the ULF formation was able to mobilize the masses in a formidable manner. On May Day 63, addressing the huge crowd in Colombo Dr NM Perera said that if this could go on then a socialist regime could be established in a short time! While such extremism was expressed, they were not able to continue with the social democratic front, the ULF. Mass support could be seen in the Vivienne's victory at the Borella by election in 1964. She defeated both the UNP and the SLFP candidates to gain a seat, for social democracy. This time, the turn to coalition politics from the past sectarianism, demolished the march of social democracy.

The last attempt for a social democratic alternative came in 1987 when the left forces united to form the United Socialist Alliance under the leadership of Vijaya and Chandrika. The support could be seen in the by-elections for Polonnaruwa and Kundasale. Vijaya got defeated only by a very narrow margin. However, he was shot in the head with a Type 56 Assault rifle outside his residence in the outskirts of Colombo on February 16, 1988 by Lionel Ranasinghe alias Gamini, who later confessed to the murder on being questioned by the CID). Ranasinghe, in a 141 page statement, confessed that he was merely carrying out orders given to him by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. His death is still mourned by the Left masses in Lanka. In the presidential elections held subsequently in December 1988, Prime Minister Premadasa beat both the SLFP's Sirimavo Bandaranaike and USA's Ossie Abegunasekera in a close race marred by JVP violence. Social democracy faced the worst violence with so many candidates and supporters killed by the JVP. Vijaya was only the first victim. His death created a serious leadership crisis for the social democratic front. These elections also saw the debut of the United Socialist Alliance (USA), as a new political grouping set up in 1987 and composed of the SLFP's former coalition partners on the opportunist left, including the CCP, the LSPP; the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP) of Vijaya. The USA took 3 seats, while the SLFP won 67. However, the USA could not survive the attacks it faced from the Sinhala chauvinists and it collapsed in '91.

Today we are again in a serious dialogue on the subject of a social democratic alternative. The crisis of the UNP precipitated a substantial trend that has joined the present discussion. It is the new reality of the present epoch.

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**P.S.**

\* lakbimanews column 20 Oct. 2010.