

Sri Lanka: Can the LSSP be revived?

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I live in Negombo. In 1956, this citadel of the UNP that was at that time supported by the Church was captured by LSSP, Comrade Hector Fernando, a medical doctor by profession. When Lanka Samasamaja Party that is the oldest political party in Sri Lanka celebrates its 79th anniversary this month, the party seems to be in total disarray with two factions openly fighting with each other. A majority of the LSSP Central Committee has decided to support Mahinda Rajapaksa at the next presidential election while the minority wanted to back opposition candidate. When the decision was taken, it was not clear who the opposition candidate would be. Elsewhere (*Vame Handa*) I called the former LSSP (M) and the latter LSSP (R). It is imperative to note that letters M and R do not stand for Marxist and Revolutionary respectively. I used them for Mahinda and Ranil (at that I thought Ranil Wickramasinghe would be the main opposition candidate). I am extremely sad to see that the party that contributed immensely to Sri Lankan political culture has deteriorated to this extent that not a single member of the central committee of the party stood against both factions of the party on the basis of its past Trotskyite tradition.

I was once a member of the political bureau of the LSSP and I resigned in 1994 when Comrade Bernard Soysa accepted a ministerial post in Chandrka Bandaranaike's government. As a footnote, I should also say that I was expelled from the party in 1973 for struggling against its coalition politics. The LSSP in its history has faced many splits, but until 1964, party was able to withstand those splits primarily because the party was on the side of correct political position. In 1964, when the majority of the party decided to join a coalition government with the SLFP, the LSSP faced a split from which the party was not able to come out although its numerical strength grew 1965-1970 period and the number of parliamentary seats it won in 1970 General Election was increased to 14. When I say that the LSSP has failed to come out of its 1964 split, I mean it became politically weak and ineffective. Comrade N M Perera, my mentor, realized this in 1975 when he decided to quit the coalition to form a left front.

While reflecting on the history of the LSSP, it suddenly came to my mind a person who was very much interested party's theoretical grounding, comrade Reggie Mendis. Once he gave me a small booklet written by Comrade Colvin R de Silva, another stalwart of the LSSP. It was in Sinhala and the title of which is *Unge Deshapalanaya saha Ape Deshapalanaya* (their politics and ours) a thundering attack on the political line of the Ceylon Communist Party headed by Comrades S A Wickramasingha and Peter Keunman. It is interesting to note the title of the book had shown a close affinity to the book by Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, a splendid work. The principal tenet of the *Unge Deshapalanaya saha Ape Deshapalanaya* is that the political party of the working class left should not join to form a political front with bourgeois parties even those bourgeois parties show here and there a semblance of anti-imperialism and/or a support for peoples' democracy. A similar view expressed by Indian Marxist M N Roy against the position taken by V I Lenin in the Third International. Roy argued that forming front with the Indian national bourgeois would not help the working class movement and their struggle. Of course, there may be exceptions. So for LSSP, forming fronts with this or that layer of the bourgeois does not flow from its principled position on which its foundation was laid especially after 1938. For the Communist Party, it is different. The idea of formation of fronts with bourgeois parties directly flows from its theoretical position.

In my view, the LSSP's theoretical position was grounded until 1964 on Colvin's above mentioned

book. In this sense, 1964 decision was a deviation from this theoretically correct position to which the party was adhered to since the late 1930s. However, the party leadership realized by the mid-1970s, the experiment of 1964 was a mistake. With the demise of NM, Colvin and Leslie, and the failure of the party to attract cadres that left the party in 1964 and after, the LSSP failed to reinvigorate the party returning to its previous position. Party did not conduct classes to train its members and discussions within the party were on immediate issues like who should hold the minister post. It is unfortunate that there is not a single member of the party who could write a book like *Unge Deshapalanayasaha Ape Deshapalanaya* or to return back to this writing in central committee discussion.

Two positions taken by two open factions revealed the theoretical poverty of the political party that was well known in the past for advancing Marxist theory in relation to underdeveloped world. Today Tissa Vitharana faction claiming that MR regime has been anti-imperialist had decided to support MR candidacy while Lal Wijenaika-Jayampathy Wickramaratna identifying MR regime as fascist or near-fascist has decided to support the so-called democratic faction of the bourgeois led by Chandrika Bandaranaike, Ranil Wickremesinghe and Maithreepala Sirisena.

Sri Lanka needs a strong social movement to counter three main trends in its recent history, namely, towards authoritarianism, towards economic policy framework that is biased towards the interests of the upper classes and layers of the society, and towards majoritarianism. Although these three trends emerged prior to MR coming to power and directly stem from neoliberalism, they have consolidated and strengthened under Mahinda Rajapaksa regime due to multiple reasons.

What is relevant to my present submission is to look at the question of what social movements were actively engaged against the MR regime and its policies and actions. I recognize two counteracting forces in Sri Lankan society that questioned policies and actions of the MR regime. The first group, primarily urban, posed the issue of democracy, rule of law and good governance in their orthodox meanings. The most important group in this category was the Sri Lanka Lawyers' Association that came forward strongly against the removal of the Chief justice, Dr Shirani Bandaranayaka. It organized many fora to discuss the matters that fell within its purview. Later, Citizen Forum also raised similar issues with strong political orientation. These views had been finally crystalized in the movement for Just Society led by Rev Maduluwawe Sobhitha raising two main demands, (1) abolition of the executive presidential system and (2) reactivation of the 17th Amendment by repealing 18th Amendment to the Constitution. These protests by these groupings received so much attention by the media partly because of their elitist character.

The second opposition against the MR regime came from subaltern movements. There are four groups, (1) student movement; (2) trade unions and workers' movements; (3) protests by peasants and rural masses; and (4) movements by numerically small nations and ethnic groups. Second and third movements were scattered and sporadic. The same can be applied to the fourth movement after militarily defeating the LTTE in 2009. Hence the consistent opposition to the government, especially against its policies on education, has been guided by the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF). IUSF launched many a struggle in the recent past against cuts of student subsidies, educational reforms, commodification of education and so on.

It is interesting and encouraging to note that IUSF was able to defeat government plans to reform education by encouraging private investments to enter into the field of education with the motive of profit. In the last year or so, it won almost all its struggles. The IUSF while struggling for free education also widened the democratic space that the elitist groupings failed to achieve. I remember very well when the march in Colombo by the IUSF was banned by a court order at the request of the Police, Najith Indika, IUSF President decided to defy the order and continue the march. It proved to be a great victory. The following week, a district judge warned the police not to come forward with

such requests. This, in my view, was a most significant victory for the democratic movement in Sri Lanka and all credit should go to IUSF.

The other subaltern movements that were capable of forcing the MR government to retreat include the anti-pension scheme by private sector employees in Free Trade Zone, peoples' movement against water problem at Rathupaswala, protests by slum people against forcible eviction from their houses, peasants' opposition to seed and water bills and micro opposition by villagers on their problems.

Both factions of the LSSP have made a fundamental mistake by not taking into account the subaltern movements and their struggles. While the first is not even concerned with recent political trends, the second has refused go beyond elite demands against MR regime. So my submission is if the LSSP and its politics to be revived, it needs a third faction to counter remaining factions grounding itself on Colvin's *Unge Deshapalanaya saha Ape Deshapalanaya*.

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P.S.

*http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=115617

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