

Comrades in majoritarianism: Why Sri Lanka's Left parties are steeped in ethnonationalist politics

Saturday 23 November 2024, by [TANTRAY Bilal Ahmad](#) (Date first published: 13 November 2024).

With parliamentary polls on November 14, a reminder that the legacy of compromising on the rights of Tamils casts a shadow on centre-Left president Dissanayake.

In September, progressives around the world were cheered by the results of the Sri Lanka election as Anura Kumara Dissanayake was voted in as the country's president. Dissanayake is the leader of a centre-Left coalition called the National People's Power alliance and chairperson of the country's most popular communist party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

This was the first election that followed the unprecedented Aragalaya peoples' movement of 2022 or The Struggle, which dislodged the Rajapaksa brothers after almost two decades of uninterrupted rule. However, for those familiar with Sri Lankan history, the victory did not come without its fair share of apprehensions.

In most countries, the primary objective of the Left parties is to organise citizens based on class identity, transcending ethnic and religious differences. However, in Sri Lanka, leftist political parties have not only espoused and exploited Sinhala nationalism but have actively taken the lead in opposing negotiations with the Tamil minority. In Sri Lanka, communism has long been infused with ethnonationalism.

The first Sri Lankan Communist party to be formed was the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, in 1935. The party's manifesto, along with promising to abolish social and economic inequality, also supported the official use of Sinhala and Tamil languages in the government and administrative offices. In the 1947 general elections, the Left-wing parties performed exceedingly well and won close to one-fourth of all elected seats.

When the Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949 were passed by the United National Party-led government, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and other communist parties opposed the disenfranchisement of the Indian Tamils who had been brought to the island during the colonial period. Historian KM DeSilva argues that this disenfranchisement was directed at reducing the support the communist parties had found on the island. The Indian Tamils, who mostly worked in the plantations, were considered a group that was influenced by Marxist politics.

In 1951, Solomon Bandaranaike broke away from the United National Party and founded the Sri Lankan Freedom Party, which challenged United National Party leader DS Senanayake's vision of Sri Lankan nationalism with Sinhalese nationalism. As language and ethnicity became the central theme of Sri Lanka's post-colonial nation-building programme, the United National Party's constitutional secular nationalism turned out to be quite limited in its reach.

While in opposition, political expediency caused the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and communist parties

to join forces against the government. When the Freedom Party came to power in 1956, riding high on the popularity of the Sinhala-only movement, they were supported by the Viplavakari Lanka Sama Samaja Party, a breakaway faction of the communist Lanka Sama Samaja Party.

Thus, when the promise of two official languages was betrayed and Sinhala was made the sole official language of Sri Lanka, a communist party, the Viplavakari Lanka Sama Samaja Party, was a part of the Sri Lankan government.

The other communist groups, such as the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, also came to the realisation that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was the strongest political force in the country. Opposing this brand of nationalism, they realised, was only causing them to cede more ground to the Freedom Party. By 1960, all prominent communist parties had dropped the demand for Sinhala-Tamil parity from their manifestos.

In 1965, the United Nationalist Party came back to power, defeating the Freedom Party. Government formation was completed due to the support of the Federal Party, which was the most popular Tamil political party at the time. Dudley Senanayake, who became the prime minister, started an effort for ethnic and religious reconciliation based on the promises the previous government had made to the Tamils.

However, this was fiercely opposed by the Freedom Party and also by the communist parties in the opposition. Thus, from being the last political parties who vowed to bring parity between Tamil and Sinhalese languages, the communist parties went to opposing government initiatives for ethnic reconciliation. The communist parties of Sri Lanka gave up on their ideals for the sake of political expediency.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna was formed the year the United Nationalist Party returned to power, as a Soviet-returned student, Rohana Wijeweera, became disillusioned with the "old Left" and called for a socialist revolution.

In 1971, the JVP staged an armed insurrection, attacking hundreds of police stations around the country. The rebellion was swiftly quelled and the majority of the JVP cadre were arrested.

The next year, secularism in Sri Lanka was struck a major blow by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike of the Freedom Party, who oversaw the drafting of a new constitution that made the protection and propagation of Buddhism a duty of the state. This marginalised the country's religious minorities, including Tamils, who were mostly Hindu. This Freedom Party government included two communist parties – the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka.

In 1977, the JR Jayawardene government released the jailed JVP cadre, including their leader Wijeweera, who fought the 1982 presidential election, garnering an impressive 4% of the votes. In a highly polarised political climate of the eighties, the JVP catered to Sinhala-Buddhist sentiments.

With the signing of the India-Sri Lanka peace treaty in 1987, which permitted Indian troops to set up bases in northern Sri Lanka, the JVP's Marxist politics took a pronounced anti-India, anti-Tamil turn. The 1987 India-Sri Lanka accord was seen by Sinhala nationalists as a compromise on national sovereignty as it envisaged a constitutional amendment that would devolve reasonable political powers to Tamil-majority provinces in the North and East of the country.

The ultra-nationalist position of opposing the India-Sri Lanka accord was most vociferously adopted by the JVP, who saw the presence of Indian troops on Sri Lankan soil as new colonialism and the constitutional amendment as unacceptably detrimental to national integrity.

The JVP ran protest movements against Indian presence and also started a violent campaign against "Sinhala traitors". This second insurgency of the JVP was put down with immense severity, with death squads and Special Task Forces running riot and killing most of the JVP cadre, along with many sympathisers.

After the second insurgency, JVP regained members and made a move towards mainstream electoral politics once again. They joined forces with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in the 2004 elections, winning a personal best tally of 16 seats. The coalition was based on opposition to the Norway-brokered ceasefire signed between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the United National Party government in 2002. Thus, the New Left continued to cater to the Sinhala-Buddhist sentiments just like the Old Left had done and opposed any kind of ethnic reconciliation with the Tamil groups.

The anti-Tamil stance of the JVP was so strong that it soon broke ranks with the Rajapaksa government as well as it did not want the government to cooperate with the Tamil Tigers even in disaster relief operations in the aftermath of the devastating tsunami that hit the Indian Ocean in December 2004.

In the 2024 elections, Dissanayake and the JVP's mandate was primarily built on the economic distress that the country faced during the Rajapaksa regimes and also during the recovery period under Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Wickremesinghe, even though he navigated the country through a remarkable economic recovery, had become unpopular because of the austerity measures that his government imposed on the population.

Stabilising the economy while responding to the popular demands of the people will be the foremost task for the new president. In such an environment, it is easy for reconciliation measures in the north and east to be sidelined. Given that both the Old and the New Left, barring the time around independence, have militantly used the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist platform to gain political clout and have repeatedly thrown the Tamil minority under the bus to achieve that goal, the doubts about the JVP seem fair.

The new Sri Lankan President has so far shown maturity when it comes to blunting the party's historically anti-Indian stance. Whether the same maturity will be exhibited in changing the party's historically anti-minority and majoritarian nationalist stand remains to be seen.

Bilal Ahmad Tantray

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

Scroll.In

<https://scroll.in/article/1075522/comrades-in-majoritarianism-why-sri-lankas-left-parties-are-steeped-in-ethnonationalist-politics>