

FRACTIONAL POLITICS

DISMANTLING INSTITUTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

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In his last address to Parliament, the late President Premadasa characterised the current state of politics in Sri Lanka as a 'personalised class struggle'. This comment evoked much interest from several analysts and journals such as the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. There is no doubt that the politics practiced by the bourgeoisie of Sri Lanka is highly personalised with all the petty bickering, intrigue, scurrilous literature, etc., that go with it; the atmosphere of violence, overt and sometimes latent, also provides an apt frame for such personalised politics. However, whether the struggle can be considered a 'class struggle' will be questioned by many; it may be more a case of 'class suicide'.

This is because the personalised politics of the bourgeoisie as expressed through the major political parties have led to the dismantling of the very institutions which can give stability to the system. This situation demands an explanation of the social bases of the fractions of the bourgeoisie that are in contention in order to establish some sort of analytical framework within which the struggles for political power can be understood.

Sri Lanka has been quite used to factionalism and personality struggles within the Sri Lankan Freedom Party. In 1964, and later in the eighties, significant sections of the SLFP left the party and formed other political parties; the SLFP also has still to resolve its succession problem.

In contrast, the UNP had remained more or less intact since S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike left the party in 1951. His departure was a significant as well as a positive development for Sri Lanka's politics as it created a vibrant two party system, permanently changing the political balance. From then until the late President Premadasa took over the leadership of the party, the UNP had displayed the characteristics of a relatively cohesive party. Premadasa was the first leader of the UNP not linked to those who had been active in the Ceylon National Congress from which the UNP had emerged; his election to the leadership was a reflection of the rapid social changes during this period in that he was representative of the new groups that had progressed into the ranks of the bourgeoisie. However, the major question of whether he would be able to keep the party together as in the past remained, and very soon he proved his inability to do so. The emergence of the DUNF and the concomitant effects that have become clearer in the Provincial Council elections are a reflection of these changes. In addition to this division in the UNP which was hitherto the more cohesive party, the demise of President Premadasa has created within it questions of succession as well. We may see in the UNP

in the near future factional politics very similar to those in the SLFP. This will certainly make it more difficult for the bourgeoisie to find a stable political leadership.

The political crisis is compounded by the undermining of the peaceful system of regime change which Sri Lanka had enjoyed till the early seventies. After universal adult franchise in 1931, Sri Lanka had developed a multiparty system which helped in the process of peaceful regime change. Even with some limitations, this was a major factor for political stability as well as an important mechanism that absorbed and kept political dissent within constitutional limits.

Another factor was the importance of political ideology in demarcating political parties with the emergence of three major political currents: a right of centre UNP with a positive response to minority issues; a Sinhala populist SLFP with a lesser degree of sensitivity to minority issues and a Marxist left which had a principled position on the minority question until they abandoned it in order to play coalition politics with the Sinhala populist SLFP. These distinctions enabled the Sri Lankan electorate to choose at various times either the right of centre UNP or a coalition of the other two forces.

To supplement this political culture, the bureaucracy had managed to develop an electoral system which by and large gave a fair chance to the electorate to choose the party to be put into power. Many mechanisms were introduced into the electoral system in order to make it 'free and fair'. But most importantly, the very possibility of regime change through elections made the bureaucracy a more neutral machine. This ensured the continued existence of a group to run the executive. Finally the enthusiasm of the electorate and its consciousness of the value of the vote helped the system to function.

I would argue that the early seventies saw the emergence of two important processes that tended to undermine this system. The first was the emergence of political groups both among the Sinhalese and Tamils who refused to work within the system such as the JVP among the Sinhalese and the LTTE among the Tamils. Although parliamentary based electoral politics have absorbed some groups earlier involved in violent counter state politics, a hard core still refuses to be absorbed. The key issue here seems to be not the capacity of these groups to exist, but the inability of the system to provide answers to the underlying political and social problems; it is difficult to foresee these political currents disappearing or becoming less effective politically until these issues are addressed.



The second and probably more important factor is the politics of the ruling groups themselves. Factional struggles among the ruling groups have done everything possible to destroy the system which maintained a certain degree of political stability. The beginning of this political hara-kiri was the trend in the electoral system which gave huge majorities to the ruling party. Armed with this majority, ruling parties of all persuasions began to use their majority power against minorities both ethnic and political. The enactment of constitutional changes in 1972 without any consideration for the rights of minorities is a major example of how this majoritarian power in parliament was used against an ethnic minority. Examples of the use of majority powers against a political minority abound; one example was the violence directed against the UNP at the Dedigama by-election; another was the postponement of elections in 1975 when the government at that time used emergency powers brought in to quell the 1971 insurgency to its political advantage and in order to victimise political opponents. Thus, by the second half of the seventies, the main elements of this trend such as the use of a parliamentary majority against political opponents, violence in politics, attempts to bypass the electorate and continue in power, the use of emergency powers as the norm rather than the exception were in place. And this has continued to characterize the politics of the "South".

These trends were confirmed by the re-emergence of the phenomenon of post election violence in 1977 which later transformed itself into violence against the Tamil population. The violence against the SLFP in this instance had an element of revenge against SLFP supporters who had used political power against their opponents. This threat of violence, increasing in vehemence in subsequent years, has been a primary factor in undermining the electoral process.

From July 1977 onwards it was UNP's turn to undermine the system. The first victim was the principle opposition candidate who could contest against President Jayawardena; taking away the civic rights of Mrs. Bandaranaike ensured that. The next step was the postponement of the general election due in 1983 through a fraudulent referendum. Up to that time, both parties had maintained a semblance of democratic practice and had sought to give a legal facade to their undemocratic steps. With the referendum even the facade was dropped. Electoral fraud supported by open violence was used to win the referendum.

The next landmarks were the riots in 1981 and 1983. The first came in the wake of the District Development Council elections. Although this was a totally inadequate package to meet Tamil demands, the extremists in the UNP government not only opposed it but more important in the context of our discussion, undermined the election in

Jaffna. When the JVP contested these elections, there was some hope the system would be able to absorb them into the electoral process; this possibility came to an end with the banning of the JVP in the aftermath of the anti Tamil pogrom of 1983. The rest is more recent history. The late Mr. Premadasa was elected to the office of President with the votes of a quarter of the total electorate in an election marred by violence. The legitimacy of this election will be debated for a long time to come. It was the threat of the JVP and terror which prevailed and therefore the need for stability and some semblance of normalcy which made society accept the results. The general election of 1989 was a replay in the same context with UNP enjoying more power because of President Premadasa's victory.

Thus the political crisis of the Sinhala bourgeoisie is characterised by following phenomena: the system that had successfully maintained a degree of stability in society through peaceful regime changes had been undermined by the rulers themselves; secondly, politics within the ruling groups had been transformed into highly personalised fractional struggles involving a large degree of violence; finally, there emerged two significant political currents in the Sinhalese and Tamil political formations outside the political establishment and threatening it, with no systemic responses that would make these currents politically ineffective.

Unfortunately, the impact of this type of politics is not confined to the ruling group alone. It has had the capacity to infiltrate and undermine other institutions in society. This is specially true of the bureaucracy; what is popularly called the politicisation of the bureaucracy reflects this tendency. The business community has not developed into a cohesive group enjoying a degree of relative independence from the politicians; it is also embroiled in factional politics. The other major institution — the military — has so far not shown any significant degree of independence from politicians either. The latest actors to become involved in personalised politics are some NGOs. They too have absorbed the factionalised political culture of the ruling groups.

In other words all the major institutions of society are affected by the factionalism of the ruling political groups. As a result they are all incapable of giving any direction to the country at times of crisis. Finally there is no doubt that the political culture of ruling groups also reflects certain characteristics of our society. Sometimes the infighting within political parties bears similarities with battles within kingship networks, families, villages, etc. which are all equally petty and sometimes violent.

Given this background, Sri Lanka's politics is bound to face serious problems in finding a stable political order for some time to come.

