

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Sinhala Racism and the Dialectic of Democracy

One of the less anticipated outcomes of the parliamentary election of October 2000 is the continuing fragmentation of Sinhalese political extremist forces. Perhaps, the sheer incongruity of racism and electoral democracy has pushed racist politics into a sudden, internal crisis.

During the past four to five years, a new wave of extreme Sinhalese racism emerged in Sri Lanka in direct response to the PA government's constitutional reform attempt. The initial ideological campaign for this new generation of Sinhalese racist politics was spearheaded by the now defunct Jathika Chinthanaya school and its ideologues. For years, Nalin de Silva and Gunadasa Amarasekera engaged themselves in a relentless ideological resistance to constitutional reform, power-sharing and peace negotiations. When the PA government's draft constitutional reform proposals were made public in 1995, the Sinhalese nationalist resistance to reform and peace became more organized. The National Joint Committee (*Jathika Ekabaddhatha Kamituwa*) was formed in 1995 to spearhead Sinhalese resistance to the PA government's proposed devolution package. In 1996, the Committee sponsored the so-called Sinhala Commission, which was a civil society commission of inquiry into the negative consequences of the devolution package for the Sinhalese Buddhist people.

The National Joint Committee set up the Sinhala Commission with a historical parallel in mind. In 1952-53, the Buddhist Commission of Inquiry became the catalyst for the post-independence political awakening of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism. The Joint Committee thought a similar initiative would galvanize together and unify the Sinhalese Buddhist forces who could then be politically mobilized as an autonomous political force. The Committee's political reckoning was that this force could also emerge as the so-called 'Third Force' in Sri Lankan politics, as an alternative to both the PA and UNP. During the Sinhala Commission hearings, the NJC managed to mobilize new sections of the intelligentsia and professionals, drawn primarily from Colombo, Kandy and other urban centers.

Meanwhile, another parallel process of extreme Sinhalese political mobilization has been taking place for several years, at a much more organized level. In the forefront of this mobilizations were two new organizations, *Sinhala Veera Vidahana* (SVV) and National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT). The SVV mobilized Sinhalese traders virtually all over the country on an open plank of anti-minoritism. The SVV cleverly appealed to the anxieties and fears of Sinhalese traders who have always had to compete with Muslim and Tamil traders. There were reports that in some towns SVV-led Sinhalese traders even prevented Muslim traders from starting new shops or business premises, often using violence, threat and intimi-

ation. The NMAT, closely linked to SVV, has been functioning more as a cadre-based political movement and a proto-militant party. While leading protest demonstrations and rallies on various issues, the NMAT also began to intervene in the public debate, making regular public statements from an ultra-Sinhalese nationalist perspective. On issues like constitutional reform, devolution, peace talks and Norwegian initiative, the NMAT, with generous support from the privately owned — Sinhalese as well as English — press, made frequent public interventions. In fact, some sections of the English-speaking Sinhalese elite appeared to have been totally converted to the anti-minority politics of the new Sinhalese nationalist activist groups. The Sinhalese elitist *Sunday Times* gave two regular columns to the NJC-SVV-NMAT ideologues, one written under the pen name of Kumbhakarna and the other ghost-written for the television talk show guest, Rev. Gangodawila Soma.

From 1998 onwards, the extreme Sinhalese nationalist groups led by the NJC-SVV-NMAT combine appeared to have occupied the centre of Sri Lanka's political debate. Organized autonomously from both the PA and UNP, and feeling quite strong and confident, they tested their strength in a show of strength against a liberal-progressive measure of legislation proposed by the PA government. The government in 1999 drafted a legislative bill for equal opportunity, in order to redress ethnic, gender and social inequalities in the spheres of education, employment and other life opportunities. On the argument that the proposed bill favored the ethnic and religious minorities at the expense of the majority Sinhalese Buddhists, protests were organized in Colombo and Kandy. Threats were issued to the government of serious consequences if the bill was presented to parliament. This is exactly where the new Sinhalese ultra-right found the efficacy of the tactic of threat and intimidation. It was reported that when the equal opportunity bill was discussed at the Cabinet meeting, there was not a single minister to support it. Many Ministers are said to have expressed the fear that if the bill was turned into legislation, the government would be forced to deal with a situation where Buddhist monks would even be setting themselves on fire.

They tried the same strategy in August this year when the constitutional reform bill was presented to parliament. Large numbers of Buddhist monks were mobilized to demonstrate opposition to the constitutional reform initiative. Monks were seen protesting and demonstrating on the way to parliament, attempting to block the road. One successful tactic they adopted was to persuade the *sangha* hierarchy to issue a decree that monks will boycott the funeral rites for all those Sinhalese Buddhist MPs who would vote in favor of the constitutional bill. Due to the PA's own political blunders, the constitutional bill was withdrawn. Yet, it was a tremendous victory for the newly emerged Sinhalese ultra-right.

In a way, the PA government is partly responsible for creating political space for the rise of Sinhalese right-wing nationalist mobilization. The PA came into power in 1994 on a reform agenda, and in 1994 it clearly got a mandate for reform. But the weakness of the PA has been that after years of preparatory work, it abandoned crucial reform measures in the face of vocal opposition coming from a minority layer of conservative forces in Sinhalese society. With the abandoning or withdrawal of reform measures, space has been repeatedly created for Sinhalese extremist forces to occupy and then capture the terms of the public policy discourse.

The formation of *Sihala Urumaya* (SU) as a political party in July 2000 was a key development in contemporary mobilization of the Sinhalese right. Interestingly, the SU brought together a host of Sinhalese racist groups that found the PA and UNP rather soft on the minorities. The only exception was perhaps Nalin de Silva's *Chinthana Parshadaya* which had been active in the NJC, yet had contradictions, mostly personal, with the Champika Ranawake, NMAT's leader of proto-fascist inclinations. Ranawaka, a grass-roots activist whose political origins were with the JVP in the late eighties, emerged as the SU's national organizer. The role of the Buddhist *sangha* hierarchy, particularly of the Siyam and Amrapura chapters, and political monks resident in Colombo in the formation of *Sihala Urumaya* was quite significant.

The formation of SU, just before the parliamentary election, appears to have led to some unanticipated consequences. The irony is that while the SU leadership claimed that its mission was to unify the badly divided Sinhalese polity, some serious differences emerged among Sinhalese nationalist forces no sooner than the SU was launched. The SU's core leadership came from some new elements, who have been active in SVV and NMAT. Ranawake represented this new activist leadership who were relatively young in age and total newcomers to national politics. It appears that in the face of parliamentary elections, some serious contradictions developed between the traditional Sinhalese nationalist politicians and the new activists of the SU. One interpretation of the developments that occurred after the dissolution of parliament is that there were quite a few self-appointed saviors of the Sinhalese nation who obviously wanted to use the election opportunity to launch their own political careers.

The disunity among sections of new Sinhalese extreme nationalist forces, in the face of the parliamentary election, was so great that leading Buddhist monks, particularly the chief monks of Siyam and Amrapura chapters, made an attempt to mediate. Their attempt failed. Harischandra Wijetunga of the *Sinhala Bhumiputra Party* decided to contest the election on his own. He accused the SU of being funded by the Catholic Church and NGOs, a charge that all of them earlier leveled against human rights and civil society groups. Meanwhile, the *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna* (MEP) of Dinesh Gunawardena had decided to join the PA, with the obvious knowledge that that was the only chance for MEP leaders to enter parliament.

The SU contested the parliamentary election with candidates contesting all districts, even Jaffna. Its election campaign was obvi-

ously well funded, with generous donations obtained from expatriate Sinhalese living abroad. The press and some private TV stations offered the SU space and time, often giving the impression that the SU was to pose a significant challenge to the ruling PA. But the media hype could do little to convince the electorate of the political relevance of an extremely racist political formation. At the end of the day, the SU failed to qualify for even a single seat on the basis of district electorates.

However, the provision for national list MPs under the PR system qualified SU for one parliamentary seat. And this is where the dialectic of electoral democracy played its tricks on the SU. Serious differences immediately emerged within SU when S. L. Gunasekera, the Party President, got himself nominated as the SU's national list MP. But, the Champika Ranawake faction of the SU challenged Gunasekera's nomination. It was reported that Ranawake followers used threat and intimidation to force Gunasekera to withdraw his nomination to parliament. At a stormy Central Committee meeting where Gunasekera's nomination was again resisted by the Ranawake faction, Gunasekera, along with six other CC members, quit the party. This paved the way for Tilak Karunaratne to become *Sihala Urumaya*'s national list MP.

What can be gathered from the lengthy press reports of acrimonious power struggle within the SU are quite useful to understand the internal divisions of the Sinhala right. The competition for leadership is one clear dimension of this power struggle. There has also been sort of a class struggle between Colombo-based elitist and professional strata of the SU leadership and semi-urban, lower middle class and vernacular sections. In the letters to the editor as well as editorials appearing in the Sinhalese nationalist English press, it is clear that Colombo's Sinhala racist elite is shattered by the SU split. For the moment, they blame Ranawake for the split. Yet, eventually they might find Ranawake and his cohorts useful as a tool to bash the minorities, both ideologically and physically.

The JVP: A Shift to the Urban Electorate

Another significant development in this year's parliamentary election is the JVP's ability to gain ten parliamentary seats, thereby becoming the third largest political party in Parliament. The voting pattern as well as the district basis on which JVP got their eight MPs—two of the JVP MPs were from the national list—indicate some interesting sociological aspects of the party's support base. Four of the JVP MPs are from the Western province—two from Colombo and one each from Gampaha and Kalutara—while three others are from the Southern province's Galle, Matara and Hambantota districts. In the entire Dry Zone agrarian heartland, the JVP got only one seat—from the Kurunegala district. From Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Puttalam, Kegalle, Kandy, Matale, Ratnapura, Digamadulla, Moneragala and Badulla districts, the JVP failed to get a single seat.

In interpreting this outcome, a number of observations can be made of the present JVP. Firstly, it won seats primarily from traditional Left districts in the Western and Southern littoral. Secondly, in the

areas where the agrarian crisis is concentrated—North Western, North-Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa provinces, the voters have not been particularly attracted to the JVP. Thirdly, and arising from the second, the JVP has enjoyed greater success in urban electorates in the Western and Southern provinces. For example, while the JVP polled 8.1% in urban Moratuwa, its performance was a poor 3.07% in Yatiyantota, an electorate where there is a concentration of the rural poor and marginal castes. In urban Maharagama, the JVP figure is 10.03 and Kaduwela 11.70, while in Ratmalana it is 9.66. This stands in clear contrast to Teldeniya (3.11%), Hanguranketa (3.08), Nivitigala (2.79), Nattandiya (3.84), Ehaliyagoda (3.24), and Kekirawa (3.93).

If we take the outcome of the last parliamentary elections as an indicator, it seems that the JVP's social base is moving away from the countryside to the city. Nor is it a party of the rural poor. The rural, agrarian crisis does not seem to have a direct link with the JVP's electoral gains.

UNP: What Went Wrong?

Yet another electoral defeat for the UNP under Ranil Wickramasinghe's leadership, is one way of describing the outcome of the October 2000 parliamentary election. The UNP, which is the main opposition party, has been sitting in the opposition since 1994. The process of UNP losing the election actually began in 1993 when the newly formed PA grabbed a few provincial councils that were under UNP control. In 1994, the UNP lost both presidency and parliament. At every subsequent election—local, provincial, presidential and now parliamentary—the UNP has lost to the ruling PA.

In political circles, there are many explanations of the continuing electoral defeats which the UNP suffer. One popular theory blames Ranil Wickramasinghe. What this theory says is that Wickramasinghe is too weak a leader to lead the UNP to electoral victory. Karu Jayasuriya, the party chairman, is seen by many as the hope for the UNP and there have been suggestions that Wickramasinghe should let Jayasuriya take over the party leadership. Jayasuriya, an entrepreneur, was brought to the UNP by the late President Premadasa. He has built up a reputation of being a 'gentleman' politician. When elected Colombo's Mayor a few years ago, he also came out as a good manager of public affairs. But it is still not clear whether

Jayasuriya could really provide an effective alternative to Wickramasinghe. Karu Jayasuriya is basically a Colombo-based politician, little known in the rural areas. His class background is not similar to that of Ranil Wickramasinghe and of the UNP's traditional leadership. This perhaps explains why Jayasuriya's chances of replacing Ranil Wickramasinghe are remote.

The other explanations of the UNP's continuing electoral defeats point to the fact that after the 1994 defeat, there has not been any significant effort to change the UNP from within. Wickramasinghe has not really reformed the UNP, although he has successfully forced some of the old guard out of the party. Those who have been pushed out have joined the PA, although their political records have been less than credible. The UNP's main problem with the electorate is one of credibility. Wickramasinghe has not been able to convince the voters that the UNP under him is a new UNP that has broken away from the dreadful legacy of the 1980s. It is this factor which the PA has been constantly exploiting at elections. At every election campaign, the PA strategy has been to remind the voters of the so-called 'regime of terror' (*bheeshanaya*) under the previous UNP rule. Not surprisingly, it has worked.

To illustrate the last point, we may recall a subtle change that occurred just on the eve of both presidential and parliamentary elections. Towards the end of the Presidential election last December, Wickramasinghe, the UNP candidate, gave the impression that victory was easily in his hand. About ten days prior to election day, the UNP media and activists also began to behave as if they had already won the presidential election. A similar thing happened during the October parliamentary election. In the final week of the campaign, the UNP leadership organized regular press conferences, describing them as 'victory' press briefings. The activists and the rank-and-file of the UNP also began to behave as if they were forming the next UNP government even before the election took place. The UNP may have encouraged this behavior as an election strategy. But it also sent a message to wavering PA supporters who would otherwise have voted for smaller parties or not voted at all. If the UNP won any of these elections, as the majority of these vacillating PA supporters knew quite well, there could have been post-election violence, unleashed by enthusiastic UNP activists. This fear, indeed, appears to have motivated large numbers of undecided PA supporters to vote for the PA, primarily to prevent UNP coming back to exercise its political overlordship in neighborhoods. **P**

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