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THE MARXISTS AND THE ULTRA MARXISTS OF SRI LANKA SINCE INDEPENDENCE

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The Marxist Parties in Sri Lanka's Politics

The politics of Ceylon since independence evolved within a British-style parliamentary system, reinforced by a tradition of tolerance rooted in Buddhism and Hinduism. In this climate of security and semi-consensus, several respected Marxist parties functioned led by able leaders, who have at times defended parliamentary democracy against legislative or executive threats. The revolutionary record of these parties has been slight, and only older members of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (L.S.S.P.) ever languished in imperialist jails and then only during World War II for the little known crime of "revolutionary defeatism".

Marxist leadership has come typically from the older elites of wealth, caste, low country Sinhalese stock, private schools and university degrees. Some learned their Marxism in the seminars of British scholars. A certain Fabian restraint carried over in their later practices of politics¹

Marxist politicians after 1947 confronted five chronic problems in the political struggle.

- (1) The choice between parliamentary and revolutionary strategy in the effort to gain national power.
- (2) The issue of Marxist unity between the LSSP and the Communist Party
- (3) Frequent secessions by left-wing splinter groups.
- (4) The alternatives within parliament, of maintaining Marxist independence as a minor element of the Opposition, or of collaborating (as minority partners) with the semi-Marxist Sri Lanka Freedom Party as a means of shaping government policies.

1. Works on Marxist Parties of Ceylon include: Robert N. Kearney, "The Marxist Parties of Ceylon", in P. Brass, and M. Franda, *Radical Politics in South Asia*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1973); Calvin A. Woodward, *Growth of a Party System in Ceylon*, (Providence, R.I. 1969); W. Howard, Wriggins, *Ceylon, Dilemmas of a New Nation*, (Princeton, N.J., 1960); George J. Lerski, *Origins of Trotskyism in Ceylon...* 1935-42, (Stanford, Calif., 1968); Leslie Goonewardene, *Short History of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party*, (Colombo, 1960); Hector Abhayavardhana, "Categories of Left Thinking in Ceylon", in *Community*, Colombo, No. 4, 1963; Charles S. Blackton, "Sri Lanka's Marxists", *Problems of Communism*, Jan.-Feb., 1973.

- (5) Increasing the Marxist voter-base while maintaining rapport with a predominately rural, Buddhist society.

At the first meeting of the Ceylon Parliament after the 1947 election, only eighteen Marxists, sporting red ties, and led by Dr. N. M. Perera (LSSP) took their seats. The best organized parties in Ceylon their prestige enlarged by the 1947 general strike, they included in addition to the LSSP and the Communist party (led by Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe) a small Bolshevik-Leninist group (Dr. Colvin R. de Silva's) which had broken from the LSSP in 1945.²

Turning points in modern Marxist History³

In the twenty years that followed, the evolution of Marxism was shaped by a series of turning points in the national experience. In 1952, the Marxist opposition parties seized their first opportunity to take politics into the streets, when Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake, acting on advice of an International Bank mission attempted to reduce the crippling burden of the rice subsidy. As public protests rose Marxist unions were mobilized to stage a one-day mass work stoppage (*hartal*). Turbulent demonstrations following the *hartal* prompted police to fire on crowds causing fatalities and leading to fateful political repercussions.

The resignation of the moderate Senanayake, to be replaced by his formidably conservative cousin, Sir John Kotelawala, ushered in a period of severe repression of Marxists. But it laid the grounds for a virtual voters' revolution of the Buddhist Sinhala-speaking economically under-rewarded village elites: *bhikkhus*, school-teachers, ayurvedic physicians and local officials. This materialized in 1956 in the electoral victory of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna. Socialism became respectable and non-alignment in international affairs opened the way for relations with the communist world. This was the first government to award cabinet posts to Marxists.⁴

Cooperation between the MEP and the LSSP ended in 1957 and the CP's "critical support" terminated in 1959. Periodic renewals of this alliance with the SLFP (the MEP's successor) reflected the aim of moderate Marxists to seek alliances with a mass-based, progressive party. This combined with fear of a return of the United National Party (UNP) and, following the abortive Army coup in 1962, of threats of right-wing dictatorship.

A major attempt to reforge left unity took place in 1963 when Philip Gunawardena's following (now called MEP) joined the LSSP and CP in establishing the United Left Front (ULF). The demons of divisiveness haunted this compact from the outset.

2. The voters of Sri Lanka have been consistently non-Marxist. The Marxist parties percentage of the popular vote declined from the 20.5% of 1947 to a nadir of 13.0 in the 1970 General Election. See Kearney, "Marxist Parties of Ceylon" in Brass and Franda, *op. cit.*, 405.
3. While sources on the history of events since independence are limited, the works of scholars including Wriggins, Kearney, and Lerski, and Woodward, (see Note 1) are valuable.
4. Philip Gunawardena, and P. H. William de Silva.

Left-wing Communists broke away declaring that the ULF compromised basic principles. Almost simultaneously the ULF was shaken by the ideological war between the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China, leading to fission by the N. Shanmugathan section of the Ceylon Trades Union Federation (CTUF). Then in 1964 Dr. Perera encouraged by the joint efforts of T. B. Ilangaratne (SLFP) and Bala Tampoe (Ceylon Mercantile Union), negotiated an alliance with the SLFP, the most crucial step in Marxist politics since 1947.⁵

The LSSP "purist", Edmund Samarakkody, seceded to form a sprinter group the LSSP moderates were denounced as "golden brains" who had become "left fakers",⁶ and the Fourth (Trotskyist) International withdrew its recognition from the Sama Samajists because they had allied themselves with a bourgeois party. Within the SLFP, the allocation of three cabinet posts to Marxists was anathema to the right-wing which joined the UNP in Opposition, and helped defeat the SLFP-LSSP Coalition in December, 1964, on an opposition motion leading to a General Election.

In the 1965 General Election, a conservative victory, economic discontent and the *sangha's* fear of Marxism influenced the results. The LSSP and CP survived, but only Philip Gunawardena of the smaller Marxist faction won a seat, and he, having boxed the political compass, was allied with the conservative UNP. The ousted left-wing Marxists, however, continued active below the level of parliamentary politics, cultivating dissatisfied young radicals.

The United Front Coalition

Although "centrist" Sama Samajists demanded that the Communists be brought into the alliance, and questioned whether the "Leftward moving progressive elements" in Mrs. Bandaranaike's following had socialist aims, the LSSP was drawn further into the SLFP orbit while reciprocally radicalizing that party's program, so that the SLFP in platform and rhetoric became a progressive-socialist party. In 1967 the CP achieved its aim of joining the Coalition and some LSSP-R elements were recruited. This was the birth of the United Front (UF) Coalition. During the UNP Government's five years (1965-1970), the UF developed lines of attack based on socialism, resurgence of the Buddhists, and primacy for the Sinhalese majority. In the sixties UF Marxist made a serious effort to form ties with Buddhism—the religion of the Sinhalese majority. Some leaders attended festivals and offered *dāna*. This symbolized adjustment with SLFP policies and the ideas of the late S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. In return they gained powerful posts in the shadow cabinet.

While left wing Marxists condemned the parties for "their capitulation to parliamentarianism", N. M. Perera and S. A. Wickremasinghe insisted that mass interests could be advanced through such peaceful political means as long as an open demo-

5. According to an article of Roshan Peiris, *Ceylon Daily News*, March 2, 1973, T. B. Ilangaratne, and Bala Tampoe, of the Ceylon Mercantile Union played an important part in the arrangements.

6. Comments of Wilfred Perera, in *Young Socialist*, III, no. 4, October, 1965. Samarakkody eventually abandoned the LSSP-R to create the miniscule Revolutionary Sama Samajist Party.

matic situation continued to exist. Even the embarrassment of a rift between the CP and the LSSP-SLFP over the 1968 Czechoslovak crisis did not break the Coalition which the CP viewed as "the mainstream of the anti-imperialist and progressive forces in Ceylon".⁷

Emergence of Ultra-Marxism⁸

But a serious, little noticed dissent with this view was rising. Another nucleus of Marxism far from parliament was developing, partly from left-splinter groups. Disenchanted youth, enemployed or disadvantageously employed, had begun to share their grievances.

Ultra-Marxism of the young was a widespread response to the gap in opportunity and life-style between the western-educated elites of wealth and caste and the Sinhala-speaking peasant majority. This group, expanding in one of the most extreme population explosions in Asia, faced rising economic inequities.⁹ Attempts by UNP and SLFP Governments to generate jobs and the revenues and productivity to maintain a welfare state had been cumulatively unsuccessful. But among frustrated youth ranging from disfunctionally trained B.A.'s to redundant farm labourers, despair was tempered by anger. In such an exploitable climate Marxist students at schools and universities came forward with stirring solutions. Marxism had become respectable, and revolutionary ideas politicized many especially the new rural element among university students. Through these youths in the sixties, some of the traditional conservatism of village Ceylon was eroded and an appetite for simplified confiscatory socialism created.

University students in the early sixties joined campus CP and LSSP societies and study groups where they were told that the dated curricula they studied was designed for privileged youth, that after achieving the B.A., there would be few "desk jobs" for them, and that the corridors to job security were closed except to young Ceylonese of wealth and high caste.

Gradually, however, some of the youthful anger caused by this gap between promises of politicians and the dead-end realities began to be directed against the Marxist parties which had imperceptably merged with the establishment. Young critics began to blame them for the slow rate of progress towards socialism; for their

7. Cited in Kearney, *loc. cit.*, p. 430.

8. Recent work of H. A. I. Goonetilleke, *The April 1971 Insurrection in Ceylon A Select Bibliography* (July, 1973) Louvaine, Belgium, contains 346 items dealing with the crisis. It is invaluable. Factual and interpretative reports include: Politicus [W. A. Wiswa Warnapala,] April Revolt in Ceylon, *Asian Survey*, Berkeley, California, 12, No. 3, March, 1972; S. Arasaratnam, "The Ceylon Insurrection of April, 1971", *Pac fic Affairs*, 45, No. 3, Fall, 1972; A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, "Ceylon: The People's Liberation Front and the Revolution that failed", *Reprint Series, Center for Developing Area Studies*, No. 23, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec; Charles S. Blackton, "Sri Lanka's Marxists", *Problems of Communism*, Jan.-Feb., 1973, Washington D.C.

9. It has been suggested that population increase was especially high in the Kegalle and Kurunegala areas where insurgent activity was intense during the 1971 insurgency. See Howard Wriggins, and Frank Coe, *Demographic Change and the Youth Insurrection in Sri Lanka*, May 1971 (Mimeographed) 54.

growing associations with bourgeois political power and parliamentary methods to the exclusion of revolutionary alternatives, and for allowing repeated fragmentation of left-wing purists off into political limbo. Admired in the early sixties, UF Marxist leaders began to appear as mere cocktail communists, more given to social democracy than to revolutionary objectives. Viewed by young people without prospects, far below the prosperous circle of 'Sravasti' and amiable inter-party associations among *goyigama*, *karāva* and *salāgama* M.P.s, the Marxist leaders were almost indistinguishable from the non-Marxist elites.

This criticism was exaggerated, but Marxist leaders in this period committed the error of ignoring trends among the young and underestimating their potential for radical action. The oversight speeded the transition of the youth movement from the discussion-group level to secret, revolutionary conspiracy. In those obscure gatherings, young dissenters seem to have concluded that (a) the UNP, SLFP and UF governments were incapable of fulfilling their campaign promises, (b) this demonstrated the inadequacy of the parliamentary system and therefore (c) Marxists must return to revolutionary means to build a better society. The most influential of the groups affected by these ideas in the mid-sixties was the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or Peoples Liberation Front, "a clandestine ultra-left group organized in a cell-system".

The genesis of the JVP and its climax in unsuccessful insurgency in the spring of 1971 are public knowledge. What will be treated here is an examination of the interaction of the new Ultra Left with the established Marxist parties subsequent to the traumatic experience of the 1971 uprising.

Interactions of The new left with the established Marxists

This was uniquely a revolt of youth, of Sinhalese Buddhist origins and approximately national proportions of caste membership, though, locally, inter-caste conflicts played some part. Some leaders were middleclass or from village elites, the sons of the devotees of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. The followers were largely lowerclass, unemployed or deprived youth from the lower-middleclass. Undergraduates-numbering thousands in campus branches of the JVP proved to be summer soldiers (only some 200 are thought to have served as fighting men). But most JVP were literate products of free state education. Their common grievance was that the promises dating from 1956, from the UNP, and from the United Front had not materialized. Marxist lectures had taught them to believe bourgeois programs never would be achieved.

The revolt was aimed against the Government, the elites, and the Marxism of opportunism and compromise. It failed in more than the military aspects because the narrow base of the movement did not include labor unions or many adults of any category over the age of 35, because of surviving conservatism and populist nationalism, because of massive foreign aid, because of poor planning and fuzzy thinking, because the mass of Ceylonese rejected it, because it was premature.

The eruption of the Ultra-Left was nevertheless the watershed of modern Ceylonese history. The rebels of 71 would partly shape the future. Despite adolescent aspects, vagueness of precept and plans, and disregard for individual rights, the JVP stated clearer than any party manifesto the call for united action to build a self-reliant Sri Lanka on egalitarian lines. The deprived youth may intuitively have acted in the name of the future poor of Sri Lanka.

Marxist Parties and the Constitution of 1972

While parliamentary democracy survived the insurgency of 1971, some of its safeguards did not live through the legislation passed since 1972. Beginning in 1970, the Ceylon Parliament, as a constituent assembly, debated the components for a new constitution. Through twenty-two months, bridging the period of the JVP insurgency and its repression by the resurgent Armed Forces and police of Ceylon, Colvin R. de Silva shepherded the measure to its inevitable acceptance by the massive UF majority dominating the Navarangahala. It was promulgated on May 22, 1972. The constitution establishing the Republic of Sri Lanka was a victory for the Ceylonese parliamentary Marxists, most active in its formulation. For them May 22, 1972 was the beginning of real independence as the electoral revolution of 1956 had been for Buddhist-Nationalists.

But while the way was opened for measures most Communists and Sama Samajists supported (limitations on income and property-holdings, Janatha committees to oversee local and regional affairs, for example), some of the most important subsequent legislation such as the Criminal Justice Commission Act, and the Press Act, seriously disturbed and even disrupted the Left.

So events after 1970 raised questions about the future of meaningful democratic politics in Sri Lanka. Economic crisis hampered the new national programs. The chronic threats of ethno-linguistic, class-caste and ideological disunity remained the unsolved concerns of all factions. Within this complex political setting, the country's Marxist parties faced transformed and interrelated problems, the strands of which run through both the past and present of Ceylonese Marxism.

The Dilemmas of Marxism in Sri Lanka

One problem had its origins in the social and educational background of Marxist party leaders and their past commitment to multi-party parliamentary democracy. Accustomed to employ Fabian socialist rather than revolutionary methods, their policies had usually been more ecumenical than their rhetoric, a condition which brought them advantages and power incommensurate with their small numbers and narrow voter-base. They gained a national podium, vast press coverage, and the opportunity to advance socialist measures and to radicalize the SLFP. Some Marxists doubted that alliance with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party would permanently advance the cause of Communism. Yet the LSSP and the Keuneman group in the CP remained active in the UF, despite the concern of some that post-1972 press and security legislation might be used against them if the SLFP decided to exclude the Marxist parties from the Government.

This uncertainty pointed up a second, related dilemma. By choosing to retain their ties with the still partly bourgeois SLFP, Marxist politicians brought upon themselves the wrath of the left-radicals and "purists" who admitted no alternative to violent social revolution. Social and generational cleavages of the past decade had aggravated this conflict into a most serious danger to the major Marxist parties. Whereas in the early 'sixties most undergraduates belonged to campus LSSP groups, many students in the years since despaired of victory for socialism under UF Marxist political leaders, and turned to Marxism-Leninism or Maoism. So the old Marxists had a tiger by the tail. If they moved leftwards to preserve Marxist unity in Sri Lanka they threatened their vital link with the mass-based SLFP. But if they stood pat they confirmed the charges of purists and young activists. The continuing afflictions of this dilemma were implicit in the endorsement by UF Marxists of legislation which advocated (a) mass political participation and (b) strong measures against subversion. Overt clashes between CP elements, and internal dissent within the LSSP indicated the persistence of this difficulty.

United or fissiparous, parliamentary or insurrectionary, the Marxists faced another major problem. This was their inability to gain large political support in the villages. Peasant Sinhalese had been mobilized to the blue banner of the SLFP in the 1956 electoral campaign. The influence of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike after his assassination in 1959, became an almost religious force among rural Buddhists, and few Marxists dared to challenge his memory or the right of his widow, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, to lead the populist, semi-socialist SLFP. It is noteworthy that peasant Sri Lanka, though some of its youth joined the JVP, generally supported the SLFP while according a substantial minority of its votes to the conservative-Liberal United National Party.

Buddhism, the faith of the majority, which was singled out for special status under the new constitution at the special insistence of the majority SLFP within the United Front, presented the Marxists, as atheists with difficult questions of interpretation, tactics and strategy. Was the Middle Path a congruent philosophy with which Marxism could cooperate to the mutual advantage of both, against capitalism, Christianity and the Western Imperialism? Was it, on the other hand, an obsolescent form of anti materialism, increasingly irrelevant in an era of modernization and technology? Or was it, Buddhism, perhaps the lion in the Marxist's path to political power?

Since the revival of the 19th Century, Buddhist influence had grown stronger among the Sinhalese of all classes. Buddhism had shown more adaptability to change than had many other creeds. Recent renewed interest in the *Kalama Sutta*—stressing individual empirical investigation—and growing Buddhist interest in the need for a new life model suggested that Buddhism would be able to adapt to new social forms. Buddhism has had within it progressive forces. Though many of the most political and pragmatic *bhikkhus* have been trained in Western countries, and favour constitutional modes of progress, there has been some rapport between the *sangha* and leading members of the LSSP and CP. The fact that such leaders occasionally paid public homage at the Dalada Maligawa may have reflected residual cradle reverence

for the religion of their young days. By joining forces with the SLEP, the Marxist parties had advanced their political fortunes, and worked with SLFP Buddhist members of the UF to legislate an eventual socialist state for Sri Lanka.

Yet clearly, Buddhism has been a major force for Marxists to reckon with in national politics. The Siyam *Nikāya*, largest of Sri Lanka's religious orders, had shown marked anti communist views and after 1970 again begun to warn against Marxist influence in UF policy formation, and against legislation which seemed to centralize power in the hands of the UF Coalition.

The events of 1971 suggested a third perspective on the interaction of Buddhism and Marxism in Sri Lanka. The resistance of rural Buddhist society to the predominantly Buddhist JVP was significant. The insurgent JVP flouted the non violent principles of Buddhism, and some novices and a few *bhikkhus* of higher ordination took up arms against the Government. If this reflected a loss of religious dynamism and Buddhist appeal among contemporary youth, the result would be the creation of an enormous vacuum, which Marxism would seek to occupy. An indication of this might be seen in the move by some CP members to leave the UF and form a "third force" in the national society. The majority of political Marxists, on the other hand, clung to their hard won power and leverage, by remaining shoulder to shoulder with the SLFP and the Buddhist majority. On balance, the question of the parties' responses to Buddhism may pose the deepest dilemma for the Marxists of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

If the events of 1971 bonded the Keuneman Communists and the LSSP closer to the U.F., post-insurgency legislation caused the majority (Wickremasinghe) CP to move into periodic bouts of opposition. Marxists remained disunited, and secession to the ideological left resumed even if the revolutionary alternative had died in battle.

Though the most severe criticism of the JVP came from the establishment Marxists, the latter realized, as they watched the armed forces smash the insurgents, that a revolutionary opportunity was being wasted, and that fratricide among the Left had taken place. After the uprising, Marxist alternatives narrowed: (a) continued coalition with the SLFP, (b) independent opposition in the National State Assembly under less favourable conditions, or (c) resort to revolution perhaps with the heirs of the JVP against a state power far greater than existed in 1971. The important, rarely discussed, relationship between Marxism and Buddhism remained uncertain. The *sangha*, hostile towards Marxism in 1965, began to show this tendency again after the Constitution of 1972. With the decline of capitalism, and Christian culture as targets for both Marxists and Buddhists, Marxism and Buddhism seemed likely to come into eventual confrontation with one another for the shaping of Sri Lanka's future.

A long period of cultural civility and British style in politics ended with the insurgency of the Ultra-Marxists. The increasing tendency towards proclamation of Emergencies became confirmed. The spiralling series of undergraduate strikes had climaxed in tragedy. And the enlarged influence of the police and the armed forces, along with increased centralization of power, and chronic economic problems had turned Sri Lanka into an almost typical "developing nation".