

Struggles for Democracy in Sri Lanka

Saturday 15 October 2011, by [FERNANDO Wimal](#), [KADIRGAMAR Ahilan](#), [SKANTHAKUMAR Balasingham](#) (Date first published: 15 January 2011).

In mid-January 2011, WIMAL FERNANDO, the veteran Sri Lankan left and democratic rights activist and former trade unionist, was interviewed by Ahilan Kadirgamar and Balasingham Skanthakumar, to record his recollections of almost five decades of struggle for social change. Fernando begins with vignettes of the radical movement of Sinhalese youth in the late 1960s and early 1970s leading up to the first Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP - Peoples Liberation Front) insurrection in 1971; his experiences thereafter as a leader in the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) until the July 1980 strike; followed by the establishment later that year of the Movement for the Defence of Democratic Rights (MDDR); and concludes with his launching of the Movement for Free and Fair Elections (MFFE) in the early 1990s to campaign for changes to the electoral system and the strengthening of democracy. The interview was transcribed, and interpolations inserted by B. Skanthakumar, and edited by Meena Nallainathan.

Wimal Fernando:

Ahilan Kadirgamar and Balasingham Skanthakumar - How does the current period compare with earlier periods of authoritarianism over the past five decades?

Wimal Fernando - Some people think it's even more frightening than before. I don't think so. There is still some space. This sentiment is just an excuse for not doing what ought to be done.

Let me explain: we have been struggling from the 1980s with this problem of how to develop, among the Sinhalese at least, a discourse on this ethnic conflict, on the demand and the need for devolution, which in my opinion is basically about equal dignity [of Tamils]. Whenever this demand [for power sharing] was made by Tamils, the political representatives of the Sinhalese majority reacted in a stupid way.

The recent cabinet decision that the national anthem should be sung only in Sinhala is a case in point. Even if only a fraction, for example, school children and public officials, were singing the national anthem in Tamil - now Sinhalese politicians have succeeded in ensuring that hereafter no Tamils will sing it at all! That's what I mean by stupidity. There are leftists, Tamils and Muslims in the Cabinet, but not one speaks up.

In the face of these kinds of things how do you react - is it by saying that everyone has the right to their own opinion and so on? There is a contradiction that exists. Democratic politics is where there is space for various opinions and even actions based on what you believe to be right. However, when things are really bad - as now and maybe for quite some time to come - you need people who are convinced that they are right and who think that what is right should be done regardless of what

others think. You might even call them zealots. Otherwise, in these confused times, you can go on debating endlessly without even deciding on minimal activities.

As we approach the 40th anniversary of the first Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection in April 2011, and its suppression, take us back to the origins of the radical, mainly Sinhalese, youth movement in the South during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

That was a special time, and not only in Sri Lanka, of course. Many years after the first JVP uprising, I met a Bangladeshi who told me that around the same time there was a remarkably similar youth movement [in East Bengal] that, like us in the Ginipupura ('The Spark') group [one of several revolutionary left groups that emerged from the pro-Peking Ceylon Communist Party], also took the name of Iskra or "Spark". [Iskra was the Russian socialist newspaper originally managed by Vladimir Lenin.]

Three things contributed to the youth insurrection. Firstly, the perception that armed insurrection to topple a capitalist government was legitimate. Even more than legitimate, it was regarded as necessary and heroic, almost a duty. The revolutionary processes in Cuba and Vietnam were enormously influential in this regard. Secondly, the left movement within the country had for the preceding 30 years been propagating the idea of socialism and, more importantly, ideas of social justice. They fought for welfare, health, education, and so on.

1970 was the zenith of the left movement because the LSSP [Lanka Sama Samaja Party] and CP [pro-Moscow Communist Party] came into government and unlike now, not whimpering, but from a position of strength. They asked for and received the ministries of their choosing: Finance, Constitutional Affairs, Plantation Industries, Transport, Housing, etc. They wanted, through participation in the parliamentary process, to capture the commanding heights of the economy [to acquire, through state ownership, the most strategic and influential institutions, sectors and processes of the economy - through which it was assumed the country could be reoriented in a socialist direction]. They made a mess of it, but that's another story.

Thirdly, dissatisfaction was already surfacing, particularly among the young, the educated and the unemployed. It was a dangerous mix. Unlike now, there was intense ideological discussion among university students, and there was a powerful left movement. For example, in my time, the LSSP would sweep the board at student council elections in universities. The trade unions were dominated by the left, which even had a large presence in local government. In comparison to those of the 'Old Left', the achievements of the JVP have been insubstantial.

The main question [at the time] was whether the left parties in government were revolutionary or revisionist. By 1968 there was already a division in the Communist camp between supporters of the Soviet Union and those of the People's Republic of China. In Sri Lanka, no one saw the absurdity in Communists describing themselves as pro-Moscow or pro-Peking! The two CPs here would parrot the line from their respective centres of world revolution. The joke was that if someone in Moscow sneezed, then the local CP would contract influenza. Such was their blind devotion.

The leader of the pro-Peking Communist Party, 'Shan' [N. Sanmugathasan], took the view that the parliamentary left were revisionist and described parliament as a den of thieves. However, soon, 'Shan' himself came under attack. If you believe in armed revolution as you claim, the critics within his party asked, where are your arms...and why aren't you collecting them?

So, there were breakaways and expulsions from the CCP [Ceylon Communist Party - Peking wing] of young, gifted and determined leaders, beginning with Kalyananda Thirananagama (KT), followed later by Gamini Yapa, and finally, Rohana Wijeweera [founder of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna]. The

Ginipupura group founded by KT and others was highly influenced by the Chinese Cultural Revolution. There were at least three or four within the group who claimed to have received “training” in China, which immediately elevated their standing among the others!

There was a unique conjuncture in 1970, with a strong left presence in government, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party majority in Cabinet in the shadows. The most impressive SLFPers, such as T.B. Ilangaratne, T.B. Subasinghe and Badi-ud-din Mahmud were themselves close to the left parties. There was also dynamism in the cultural arts with E.R. Sarathchandra’s plays, novels by writers such as Karunasena Jayalath, and others. All in all, the time was ripe for the young to challenge the government with arms. But when the revolutionary challenge came, it was amateur in the extreme.

For instance, what was the main weapon used by the JVP in April 1971 to attack police stations? It was a hand-bomb consisting of Milkmaid condensed milk tins packed with iron nails and barbed wire cut into pieces, and half a stick of dynamite; the firing mechanism was a small tube filled with acid, cotton wool and sugar, I think. These homemade bombs were secretly mass-produced in a few “factories” – actually the dwellings of JVP members – in March of 1971.

The JVP’s main method of mobilisation was to hold classes, usually at night, and sometimes in the forest. These were educational meetings for young people, by young people. By now, there were enough disgruntled, angry graduates without jobs.

Their mood was already clear from incidents during the previous UNP [United National Party] government, such as the barracking of the Education Minister, [I.M.R.A.] Iriyagolla, at the convocation ceremonies at Vidyodaya [now Sri Jayawardenapura] and Vidyalankara [now Kelaniya] universities. The graduates of these new universities – formerly *pirivenas* or Buddhist institutions of higher learning – took it as a slight that the chief guest was the Education Minister, and not the Governor-General who graced the convocations at the elite universities of Colombo and Peradeniya. Iriyagolla was stung by his reception and used every public platform thereafter to ridicule the graduates and their lecturers, and to promise that he would never recruit graduates as government teachers. He was true to his word and consequently by the general election of 1970 there was an accumulation of unemployed graduates.

In comparison to the classes conducted by [the] Ginipupura [group, set up by Kalyananda Thiraganama and others], the JVP’s classes were fewer and more straightforward. There were only five classes, usually beginning around 10pm and extending for up to four hours. Being seated on the grass for that long, slapping the mosquitoes, and keeping awake for the duration was seen as a sign of one’s revolutionary fervour! This was a time when Che Guevara was a heroic and mythic figure, and clandestine activities were admired among the young. I don’t know if it is so now. I think not. Young people today are more intelligent, more sophisticated and worldly-wise than we were. It is easy to laugh at ourselves now, but those were different times. Socialism was in the air, and one had to breathe it to understand our choices.

Anyway, through these classes [Rohana] Wijeweera was able to organise large numbers of young people. So much so that after the insurrection had begun on the 5 April, and when Sirima [Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike] went public and spoke to the country over the radio, she described the revolutionists as misguided children (*lamay*) and not even as youth (*tharunya*). She appealed to them to surrender, and they did, in the tens of thousands. Almost all of them were Sinhalese, with perhaps a sprinkling of Tamils and Muslims among them. They were detained in prisons, in the universities and other ad-hoc detention camps in isolated places.

The thinking behind Wijeweera’s strategy in targeting police stations was simple. In every police station there were a limited number of rifles, usually under lock and key, and some shotguns. The

main police weapon in use was the .303 rifle. It is a very heavy gun, which cannot easily be carried and fired; one has to jam it against one's shoulder, because of the recoil, and fire one bullet at a time. It's very difficult to aim accurately. So, Wijeweera's plan was to overwhelm the few police officers in each station through superior numbers, in a coordinated action on the same day and at the same time. The bombs were intended to scare the police officers away. He was proved right in a way because most stations were captured without a fight, as the police deserted them when they came under attack or feared attack. By 7 April, all but a handful of police stations in Kegalle and Matara districts were under JVP control.

Although you were never a member of the JVP, how did you become involved with Ginipupura, one of the revolutionary left groups that emerged from the pro-Peking Ceylon Communist Party?

In 1965, I was 24 years when appointed as an assistant teacher at Maho Central school and my students were only four or five years younger to me. So there was not much of a distance between the students and myself. Thereafter in 1968, I was sent to Maharagama for specialised training as a teacher. The Government Teachers Training College in Maharagama, at that time, had both students and lecturers who were openly supporting the LSSP and CP. They had party branches, even though the UNP was in power. But unfortunately, their left orientation didn't prevent them from ragging newcomers based on whether they were of up-country or low-country [Sinhala] origin. I thought that if we can build a strong group of students who were guided by Marxist principles, they could put a stop to this ragging even though the lefties "didn't or couldn't".

So I asked the JVP leader in Kegalle, who was a close friend of mine, to send us someone to teach us about Marxism. Actually, the reason behind this request was less to do with spreading revolutionary ideas and more as a means of combating the endemic ragging.

The person who was sent was none other than Kalyananda Thiranagama. He would arrive late at night, after 10 or 11 p.m., and the class would end around 1 a.m. and then some of us would walk him to Maharagama town to catch the last bus to Colombo. He would alight at Nugegoda and then walk the rest of the way back home. The leaders, especially revolutionary leaders were supposed to teach by example, through sacrifice and hardship. He of course, did not reveal his links with *Ginipupura*. Only later, when he estimated that we were quite taken up with his grasp of Marxism (not that it was such a difficult task, since we didn't know the ABC of Marxism!), did he introduce us to *Ginipupura*.

Following these classes, some of us were invited to an educational camp organised by *Ginipupura*. Here we were told that Sri Lanka needed a revolutionary party, and that its strategy should be that of armed struggle. We agreed and joined. We didn't know what a revolutionary party was. We only knew what it wasn't! It wasn't the LSSP, the CP and their parliamentary path to power.

There were a number of other groups. GID ['Castro'] Dharmasekera had the Mao Youth Front. He later had a peculiar political evolution and subsequently donned Buddhist robes. Gamini Yapa organised a group called Peradiga Sulang ('East Wind'), with the aim of creating liberated zones [territory under the effective control of insurgents] as Mao had done in China. There was also Sumith Devinuwara (another Lumumba university graduate) who had a group with a base among Ceylon Transport Board workers. Kasu Alwis was another leader of that time.

Among the rank and file or cadres of these groups and their followers, the main inspiration was Che Guevara and the Cuban model. Collectively, we were all labelled "Che Guevarists". However, among the gurus of these groups, there was an understanding that we needed our own line, suited to our own conditions, to make the revolution in Lanka.

Wijeweera was most explicit on this position and he was able to mobilise at least 10 times more in number than all the other revolutionary groups combined. Another reason was that unlike the Ginipupura and Peradiga Sulang groups who were more discriminating in their recruitment, joining the JVP was comparatively easier. One had to attend the five classes, then organise classes themselves, perhaps lecture at those classes, and thereafter one was recognised as a JVP member. Among the new recruits a few would be identified as suitable for military training. There were some ex-military personnel sympathetic to the JVP who would give basic training in handling shotguns in the forest. They also gave instruction in karate, adequate to be thoroughly beaten by someone who actually knew karate! Wijeweera wasn't too bothered about the theoretical quality of his members. He had a target of the numbers necessary to storm the police stations, and he believed once he had those numbers, he could capture state power in a one-day revolution. No one knew what an armed insurrection would be like, not the government, not the police or army, and not the revolutionists themselves.

Ginipupura had a different perspective to that of the JVP. We believed in the strategy of an extended war or people's war based on Mao's experience in China. We realised we could not replicate Mao's strategy in Sri Lanka – there was no possibility for a “long march” on our small island! However, our idea was to instigate or encourage small struggles (*sulu aragalaya*) among the people so that they were trained to fight, and also to identify the enemy.

It all went wrong even before it had begun. Some JVPers in Moneragala got the date mixed up and began attacking police stations a day earlier on 4 April night. However, prior to that, the government had already got wind of the JVP's plans, including when some bombs accidentally detonated in one of the factories in Kegalle.

It so happened that my two brothers (Patrick and Sarath) and my younger sister (Vinitha) were in the JVP. They considered *Ginipupura* to be a hostile organisation and were very secretive about the JVP's plans, especially in the presence of my father (an early member and leader of the LSSP in Kegalle who was still loyal to the Party) and myself.

They used our family home to organise themselves, and helped themselves to anything there that could be of service to the revolution, including a sword presented to my father as a wedding gift. The local police kept our house under surveillance and knew that my father and I were neither in the JVP nor in the confidence of my siblings. This worked to our advantage as both of us were spared the imprisonment and convictions meted to my brothers and sister, although I was kept in police custody for one month. After the 1971 insurrection, my father left Kegalle and returned to his native village in Moratuwa, where he died in 1977. He didn't live to see his youngest son freed from prison.

It is argued by some that the '71 insurrection marks a watershed in the transition to state authoritarianism and thereafter rule by emergency which has been the normal state of affairs for the past 40 years. What is your take on this?

Many of the human rights abuses we have experienced in recent years are not new at all but began in 1971. At the time, state security personnel grabbed people from their homes without an arrest warrant. The government introduced the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) Act that made confessions admissible in court. For 40 years, no police officers have been recruited when the ordinary law alone is in operation – aside from periods between 1977 and 1983, and short periods after that and to date. For these police officers, the emergency law is the ordinary law! The judiciary has also been conditioned by emergency law. So too of course are the people. No one would think it wrong today if the police barged into your home and took you away, or beat up people for pasting posters on walls.

We – who thought we were revolutionaries – have to admit to providing the State with the

opportunity to legitimise these practices through our adventurism in 1971. A number of us including many JVPers of that time came to realise that we didn't know the first thing about armed struggle and we didn't understand the power of the state. The JVP thought that all you had to do was to surprise the enemy - through attacks on police stations and where possible army camps - and then state power would fall into your lap. Other groups, especially Ginipupura, based ourself on Mao's theories of social change through supporting 'small' or daily struggles by the people. But all of us were hopeless amateurs. The established Left parties had a far better understanding of how to mobilise the people...but we disbelieved the sincerity of their claims to being socialist.

In the aftermath of the repression of the '71 insurrection, how did you make the transition from revolutionary politics to trade unionism?

The honest answer is that I was never really into party politics! The revolutionary groups of the time were not really parties; they were clandestine organisations of like-minded people who believed themselves in all sincerity to be authentic revolutionaries and who were willing to sacrifice not only their jobs but even their lives.

As I mentioned before, my father was a pioneer member of the LSSP [Lanka Sama Samaja Party] in Kegalle; and so instinctively I gravitated to the Left while in university and participated in the student politics of the LSSP or Left Group as it was sometimes known. But I didn't join the LSSP after leaving campus, and instead fell into the Ginipupura group in 1968 when I was in the Government Teachers Training College in Maharagama, and later began organising clandestine classes for radical students and teachers (much as the JVP was doing) after I began teaching at Maho central college [near Kurunegala].

After the JVP was crushed in 1971 we began to understand what state repression was in real terms, and as a teacher it made sense for me to become active in the teachers union. It was not something that was thought out: trained teachers especially those who passed out from Maharagama College, as I had, joined the Ceylon Teachers Union [Lanka Guru Sangamaya].

For a long time it was the second largest teachers union on the island, with around 40,000 members including in the North and East. By 1973, through its activist membership the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) was the most high-profile among the teachers unions. We had more Tamil members than the Ceylon Tamil Teachers Union, more Muslim members than the Muslim Teachers Union, and more graduate teachers than the Graduate Teachers association.

There was a central committee of 21 and an executive committee ('Ex-Co') of 7. The main office-bearers including the General-Secretary and Treasurer were elected at the annual delegate conference, and the district leaderships at annual district-level delegate conferences. The delegates were chosen from CTU school committees. The process was rigorous and honest. The union's leadership was also young. In 1970, aged 29, I was considered a senior member of the Ex-Co!

The CTU leadership at national and district level were highly committed individuals. Politically, most were aligned to the 'Old Left' [LSSP and CP-Moscow]. The younger leaders were from defunct revolutionary groups, associated or formerly associated with the pro-Peking Communist Party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, and the Ginipupura and Peradiga Sulang groups.

In the North and East the top-level leaders were a bit older. The Northern Province Teachers Association (NPTA) formed the CTU's branches in the North and it was a prestigious union there. Our district president for Batticaloa and a Vice-President of CTU was Prince Casinader who later became TULF [Tamil United Liberation Front] MP for his district. In Jaffna, also we had senior highly respected teachers like Rasanayagam, Shanmugaratnam, Sunderalingam and others who

probably were TULF supporters though left-leaning.

The leaders were very committed. They would spend all of their leave on union work and their own money too. In addition all of us would take no-pay leave which was risky because it affected our pension entitlement. There was further self-sacrifice because the central committee members were not permitted to take promotions, as these were doled out as perks to teachers by the authorities rather than through a fair and transparent process.

What were memorable struggles of the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU)?

In 1975, the CTU along with other major teachers unions began organising for a strike. The teachers' movement in Sri Lanka from its inception in the 1950s had the issue of discriminatory salaries based on the language medium of teaching. English-trained teachers with 2 years training got almost double the salary of swabasha [Sinhala & Tamil] trained teachers. The demand was for equal pay for equal work.

The major teachers union, the Sri Lanka Jathika Guru Sangamaya [National Teachers Union affiliated to the right-wing United National Party] was mobilised and functioned on the need to remove this anomaly. After the [centre-Left] Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) came into power and sometime in the 1960s, the swabasha teachers were renamed 'general-trained teachers', and the English-language trained teachers were renamed as 'special' or 'secondary-trained' teachers, teaching English, Science, Maths, Home-Science and Handicraft. The salary anomaly remained.

The Ceylon Teachers Union in the beginning only organised secondary-trained teachers from Maharagama and Palaly teachers colleges but in 1970 it opened its membership to all teachers, changed its name (previously it was the Secondary Teachers Union), and adopted the demand for equal pay, that is, that all teachers salaries should be equalised at Rs355 per month. We took this decision even though our members already drew that higher salary.

The Sri Lanka Nidahas Guru Sangamaya (Independent Teachers Union affiliated to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party) led by the sister of Monty Gopallawa MP and supported by Anura Bandaranaike [son of the prime minister], proposed a compromise salary increase of Rs135 per month to all future trained teachers. They sought unsuccessfully to mobilise teachers from the special training colleges at Maharagama, Palaly, Peradeniya, and Wattalagedara. Even in these training colleges the CTU prevailed. This was an unusual and remarkable stand for trade unions.

The strikes began in the training colleges, and then spread to schools in Colombo and Homagama, and thereafter island-wide. There was a lot of unity among the big teachers unions and the token strike was to take place on December 4 1976. By coincidence, the Budget Debate on education happened to be underway at the same time. The CTU organised a rally for teachers at Hyde Park [in Slave Island, Colombo] which was then double its present size. The park was packed...and the liquor shop opposite ran out of arrack! We prevailed and won our demand for equalisation of pay.

Did the CTU relate to the demands for self-determination of Tamils in the early 1970s onwards?

In 1976, the debate on the right of self-determination [of Tamils] broke out in the CTU. In the early 1970s, 'Shan' [Nagalingam Sannmugathan, leader of the pro-Peking Ceylon Communist Party] had already defended the right to self-determination of nations in principle, but also argued that the Tamils were not yet a nation – though perhaps evolving in that direction. Tamil nationalists were of course half-incensed and half-tickled by this line of argument.

B. A. Kader, a vice-president of the CTU in Nuwara Eliya of Muslim background [later the founder secretary-general of the Up-Country Peoples Front led by Periyasamy Chandrasekaran], was the authority on the right of self-determination within the union. He would quote chapter and verse from Stalin [on 'Marxism and the National Question'] during the debates within the leadership.

In 1976 the CTU had its delegate conference in Jaffna at the Veerasingam Hall. There was one delegate for every 10 members, elected at school branch level. The annual general meeting was attended by branch delegates, office-bearers from district-level branches and the members of the central committee and the executive committee. So this was a representative and democratic decision-making process. At this conference, in which almost 1000 delegates participated, the CTU adopted a resolution supporting the right of self-determination for Tamils, up to and including the right to secede.

This was in the same month [May] that the 'Vaddukoddai Resolution' [of the Tamil United Liberation Front demanding a sovereign secular socialist state of Tamil Eelam] was proclaimed but strangely our debates - from within Marxism - were independent of, and almost oblivious to, those unfolding in Tamil politics.

Although our resolution was carried, I proposed that the delegates should take the debate and resolution back to their schools, and discuss it further among members for the year ahead, with the aim of reaffirming it at the next annual conference which was to be in Galle in 1977. In fact, that is exactly what happened.

However, around the same time, the Left within the government, as well as outside of it [in extra-parliamentary groups] was breaking up and in fact a key issue was the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) Act and its continued support by Left parliamentarians. The Leftists in Cabinet (especially from the LSSP and CP-Moscow) were bullied by Sirima's [Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike] right-hand man, Felix Dias Bandaranaike (FDB): "If you deny me the CJC, then I will have to release the insurgents", he had argued.

The Left parliamentarians could and should have rebutted this but they were desperate to cling onto governmental power. They had visions of achieving socialism through parliament. They detested the JVP insurgents because the '71 insurrection had thrown a spanner in their plans for socialism through reforms and because it had, in their view, strengthened the right-wing within the SLFP.

The left and the right wings of the coalition were locked in a deadly struggle. Sirima had been playing a balancing act among the SLFP factions but the insurrection put the fear of death into her and she aligned herself with the Right within her party thereafter. The United Front government broke up as first the LSSP and later the CP abandoned the SLFP, or maybe the other way about! Then the remnants of the SLFP coalition were swept away in the United National Party (UNP) electoral landslide of July 1977.

What were the ramifications of these developments within the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU)?

The breakup of the coalition did not affect the CTU leadership directly. The leadership affiliated to the LSSP had already left the CTU and joined an LSSP-led teachers union. The SLFPers among the leadership including the former president of the CTU, A. B. C. de Silva, had already left to form a new teachers union under the same name. The pro-Moscow CPers in the leadership were mostly from its 'hard-line' faction [that is, critical of the SLFP] and continued to support the CTU.

The undisputed leader and the public face of the CTU was H. N. Fernando [JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera's brother-in-law]. He led the struggle against the United Front-leaning CTU leadership in

the 1970s. He was also arrested as a JVP suspect in 1971 and held in custody for nearly 3 years.

The CTU leadership and later the rank-and-file went into a crisis around 1977. The issue was that a faction, led by H. N. Fernando got the CTU to support the JVP, first surreptitiously and later around 1978 openly.

Many of us those days thought that a really effective radical trade union had to be led or at least guided by a Marxist party. The newly emergent JVP, especially after Wijeweera was released in 1977 by the UNP looked the most plausible among the left parties. At least, 'HN' and company thought so. We, in the central committee who were in the majority, strongly opposed this move.

By 1977 the CTU was split, although it only became visible in the following year, as many committed activists including myself were opposed to this course because of our deep political differences with the JVP. In 1977 the JVP had a strong Sinhala nationalist colouring but was able to convince itself that it was not an anti-Tamil, racist organisation. There was an extremist fringe within the JVP who touted the 'Burma Solution', that is, the expulsion from Sri Lanka of Tamils of recent Indian-origin - many of whom were rubber and tea estate workers.

This was also linked to one of their economic proposals for reforestation of the highlands which had been cleared for tea cultivation. Now, what happens to the workers on those estates? You pack them off to India! How do you square this with your socialist ideology? That is where the JVP class on 'Indian expansionism' came in, because it rationalised the deportation of estate workers as 'fifth-columnists' for India in Sri Lanka. In these circumstances, there was no way that we could be associated with the JVP.

The anti-JVP group, including myself, were expelled at a bogus delegate conference of the CTU in 1979. This was held on the eve of the May Day at the New Town Hall [in Colombo] and was attended by many JVPers who had come for their Party's procession the following day! This shows that even the best of trade unions with strong democratic traditions and clean regular election of office bearers can be subverted by a leadership. The CTU leadership was not corrupt but misled by the JVP which they thought had the best potential to become the Marxist party of the Sri Lankan revolution. The real paradox was that the CTU which had adopted the proposal to recognise the right of self determination of the Tamil people was brought under the leadership of the JVP covertly.

Then in 1980, when the movement for a general strike began, the Ceylon Teachers Union had a huge problem. The JVP took a decision not to support the strike. According to them, the strike movement was a conspiracy by sections of the Left, especially the Nava Sama Samaja Party led by ex-LSSPers such as Vasudeva Nanayakkara and Vickramabahu Karunaratne, to expose the JVP unions to state repression. [JVP leader] Wijeweera never had much patience or interest in long-term or daily struggles; he was always fixated by the idea of one big push to capture state power.

Soon after the July '80 strikes began, it was already clear to us that we were heading for defeat, especially when tens of thousands of workers heeded the UNP government's ultimatum to return to work or be sacked for striking illegally. We knew the strike would be a failure because key sectors were absent: estates, harbour workers, electricity board, health, banks with the exception of the Central Bank staff union etc. Bala Tampoe's CMU [Ceylon Mercantile Industrial and General Workers Union] didn't participate; it was clear that a 'general' strike was not in the offing and that those who did strike would be isolated and finally crushed.

The Ceylon Teachers Union took the decision to strike. This broke the links between H. N. Fernando's group and the JVP for some time. The internal bickering, our expulsion from CTU, the exposure of the move to affiliate CTU to JVP and the overwhelming repression of the strike seriously crippled the capacity of CTU to participate in the strike. At least 40,000 including me lost our jobs.

The CTU never recovered, and neither did the rest of the trade union movement.

The CTU held another AGM later and passed a resolution apologising for the illegal expulsion of our group and proposed that we be taken back. We went back, but the CTU was a mere shadow of its former self. The damage was done. We told the members that we were in a new era where the last bastion of resistance to the government, the trade unions, had been blown apart and we needed new forward-looking strategies to revive. Only months had passed since our exclusion but by then we had moved on in our thinking about the relevance of traditional forms of organising and political action, having been affected deeply by the defeat of the July '80 strike and shaken by the repressiveness of the state in its response to that movement.

The trade unions were counting on a change of government to reverse their misfortunes. Then [UNP President] JR Jayewardene had a referendum [in 1982] and extended his government's term in office by a further six years without having to seek re-election for his government or himself. The unions had to wait until 1994 for a change of government. In between they continued to operate in their traditional way, without being creative or innovative. They are still stuck and unable to move forward.

So we looked around and saw the wreckage, actually not only because of the strike but also the far-reaching changes as a result of the United National Party victory in 1977. JR's [President Jayawardena] armoury ranged from common thuggery to the 1978 Constitution. We hadn't grasped the enormity of the transformation that took place after 1977, and I am not sure that we have since. JR [Jayawardena] had a clear plan to stay in power for as long as it took to establish the 'Open Market' economy; and preserve his hegemony, which for him was most important and where he miscalculated. He had a talented second-line leadership but he feared being challenged. Why is it with leaders like him that the more power they accumulate, the more scared they become?

Is this why you made the transition from trade unionism to democratic rights activism?

After the July '80 strike, the solidarity shown by personalities like the Anglican Bishop of Kurunegala Lakshman Wickremesinghe, and the famous lawyer and former Senator S[omasundaram] Nadesan QC, both leaders of the Civil Rights Movement [a prominent non-governmental organisation established after the 1971 insurrection] to the cause of the strikers convinced us that we needed a broader coalition - initially for the purpose of securing justice for the strikers and our reinstatement. However, our individual issues became secondary to the larger issue of resisting dictatorship and so towards the end of 1980 we formed the Movement for the Defence of Democratic Rights (MDDR).

We had two basic principles: to see the social struggles around us also as struggles for democracy and to see all the struggles as our struggle regardless of who was involved and where they were. We began with a small group of around 30 individuals but because of our backgrounds we had good links with trade unions as well as with former members of Sinhala revolutionary groups whom we had befriended through the Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners.

MDDR had one full-time worker, S. Sivagurunathan at the beginning, and office-space in Kumar Rupesinghe's flat in Castle Street [in Borella, Colombo]. So, we were a mixed group with some like Regi Siriwardena and Charlie Abeysekera who focused on drafting public statements, others like Kumar [Rupesinghe] who were interested in documentation of human rights violations, and then people like me who were into direct action such as fasting, pickets and processions. It was guaranteed that public protests would be met by government-sponsored thuggery, so we would try and sustain an action for long enough to be seen and heard but hopefully short enough to avoid being physically attacked.

We also had to support ourselves and our families, so we would do different things. I sold coconuts

at the Maharagama pola [outdoor market] for a while; others sold karavala [dried fish]. I remember the actor Hugh Fernando's home in Negombo being somewhere the sacked workers would gather to pack the karavala and place a solidarity message inside each packet which we went selling from door to door.

For two years, in 1981 and 1982, we didn't have much money. A Sri Lanka solidarity group in Holland would collect money through sales of its newsletter and send us a few thousand rupees every four months or so. This covered the cost of campaign literature and postage and also the full-timer's wage. We needed money but we didn't expect to be funded especially from abroad. The money from Holland was given in solidarity and that was the spirit in which it was accepted.

Then the July '83 riots broke out and the situation changed. I happened to travel abroad for the first time before the communal violence took place, and was in Stuttgart [Germany] that horrible week. Thereafter, I travelled to Holland to meet our friends there, and was introduced to a couple of Dutch funding agencies who were shocked like us by the carnage. One of them offered to support us in 1984. It wasn't a lot of money – enough to cover the production and postage cost of our periodical, Prajatantra ('Democracy'), travel around the island, and the full-timer's stipend – but that is how we became an NGO!

Looking back, one of our key experiences included the movement of Moneragala peasants against sugar multinationals in the mid-1980s. The UNP wanted to promote agricultural export promotion zones and identified Moneragala and Vavuniya for sugar cultivation. Our clash was also on an ideological level with some intellectuals who told us that we were bucking history by resisting the march of capitalism; as these peasants were destined to lose their lands and become proletarianised as agricultural labourers. The Moneragala peasants disagreed and we sided with them in defending their right to hang onto their lands whether or not these land-holdings were productive or not.

How did the JVP insurrection in the late '80s impact on MDDR?

In my estimation the majority of the youth involved in the '71 insurrection came from Left backgrounds. These were young people taking up arms against the government (including Left parties) supported by their parents. This was not the case with those involved in the '89 insurrection, most of whom did not have the same social background and political references as the previous generation. In fact, many came from families that supported the UNP that was then in government.

MDDR took up cases of people who were 'disappeared' during the terror and counter-terror campaigns of the JVP and the state. We ourselves were at risk from the JVP as we tried to support initiatives that were independent or critical of them such as the Sinhala-language magazine Vivarana that was the precursor to the alternative media that sprung up in the early 1990s such as Yukthiya and Ravaya.

The JVP had marked some of the local organisers of the peasant movement as a threat to its authority in those areas. Once it became armed, it went hunting, and gunned them down. We would show our defiance of the JVP by attending funerals of their victims; carrying a shotgun or revolver for our own protection. Devasarana [an inter-religious centre established by 'Sevaka' Yohan Devananda at Ibbagamuwa near Kurunegala] gave sanctuary to many, harbouring almost 200 persons and courageously sheltering them. We were able to resist the government for some time, but we couldn't withstand the terror campaign of the JVP during its second insurrection.

In conclusion, tell us about the Movement for Free and Fair Elections (MFFE).

Wimal Fernando: The Movement for Free and Fair Elections (MFFE) was spearheaded by MDDR in the early 1990s and began by monitoring provincial council polls in 1993. The objective was to minimise violations of election law rather than to report on the conduct of the elections. When the Southern Provincial Council was suddenly dissolved, MFFE faced its first real test because of the widespread violence. In 1994, MFFE monitored elections in most districts including in the north and east. We continued to observe elections until 2004 (including in Jaffna) and after a lull of several years (when we worked with another election monitor – Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections or PAFFREL), we will resume monitoring in 2011 beginning with the scheduled local government elections.

Our achievement has been to secure acceptance of election monitoring as part of the democratic process and despite the fact that Sri Lanka's election laws make no provision for observers. But election monitoring alone is no longer sufficient. What we need today is a strong movement standing for radical reform to our electoral system.

Multi-party representative democracy will face its litmus test in parliamentary and presidential elections due in 2016 and 2017 respectively. In spite of still enjoying massive support in the south, this government does not have credibility in the north. It's slowly and steadily painting itself into a corner. Five years from now, will this government countenance the prospect of defeat and give up the power it has accumulated? Or will the people of Sri Lanka need to take the path shown by the people of the Philippines in 1986, or the Middle East and North Africa more recently?

COLOMBO - 12 AUGUST 2011
