

Sri Lanka: Generating alternatives

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Lightning, thunder and heavy afternoon shower are very common in these days in Negombo. As my bus moved through Katunayake-Colombo highway that borders the Negombo lagoon, I see a reflection across the lagoon what is happening over the lagoon in the sky. It is scary, but beautiful. I browsed through my ipad for latest news in pre-election time.

What is happening in the Sri Lankan political landscape is scary and ugly. In the course of one month two main bourgeois parties, the UNP and the SLFP have lost their secretaries general. News of Opposition member crossing over to the government is followed by reports of crossovers from the government. This tit for tat politics shows either two parties are basically no different as far as respective policies are concerned or politicians have no real concerns over policies and ideologies they preach in public so that crossing over is not ideologically constrained.

Maybe both are true at the same time. What do these two camps really stand for? Let me stick to the objectives stated by them. If my reading is correct, while MR stands for development and state security, MS stands for democracy and good governance. Politicians of the two camps are allowed to move freely between these two name boards within the next three to four weeks or so. One cartoonist depicted that this exchange of people will end up by two people who holding name boards also changing their respective places. Politics, unlike other businesses, is no longer a serious affair. It has become a game and people were made mere observers. This development signifies an issue of great import, namely, the crisis of bourgeois politics in Sri Lanka.

Once in a while, bourgeois rule encounters new crisis that needs changing the rules of game. In 1964, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie faced a serious crisis because of the growing strength and militancy of working masses and possible unity of their organizations. Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike knew that, against this backdrop, the maintenance of bourgeois rule needed some kind of restraining working class organizations and their demands. A coalition between the SLFP, LSSP and CP was formed. In 1971, a militant youth movement was crushed. Working class parties got weakened. So, the situation was created for bourgeoisie to execute neoliberal economic policies in 1977. Honeymoon phase of neoliberalism was over by the mid-1980s. The threat posed by Tamil militants had to be contained or stopped in order to adopt the next round of reforms to rejuvenate neoliberal economic project. Four peace efforts were tried by J R Jayewardene (1987), Ranasinghe Premadasa (1991), Chandrika Bandaranaike (1994-5) and Ranil Wickremasinghe (2002- 2005). The failure of all these efforts since the mid-1980s compelled the upper classes to form an alliance on the basis of Sinhala Buddhism with the lower classes of society. The ideal person for this political project was Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose regime was able to defeat comprehensively the LTTE in May 2009.

TINA Syndrome

Military victory came with a heavy cost. Thirty five years of war had created multiple imbalances. The security establishment that was weak and isolated was strengthened and its presence was regularized. Military bureaucracy was brought into the decision-making process. War is a business so with it a new rich class emerged. Military victory and post war 'development' projects reinforced structures and processes that emerged in war time. Although the market was unified allowing more space for capital accumulation including capital accumulation by dispossession, the influence of traditional upper classes got weakened giving more operational space to emerging new rich class. Traditional bourgeois norms have been ruptured leading to some kind of civilizational crisis. The USA and EU are worried about Sri Lanka government's leaning towards China, the country that has been increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean Region. It is in this context, that a substantial section of the upper classes have once again posed the idea of regime change.

The recent proposals for regime change come not only with a very limited agenda—that is understandable—but also presupposing that they should not touch the framework neoliberalism. In other words, there has been a convergence globally towards neoliberalism so that all changes in Sri Lanka have to be within the same framework. As a result, changes proposed are confined to minimising waste and corruption, establishment of good governance etc. Any deviation from basic model of neoliberalism is thought to be as denouncing as impractical and unrealistic in the given global context. This TINA (There Is No Alternative) syndrome has now hegemonized the Sri Lankan discourse. Even my left friends have succumbed to it. This is the phenomenon what Tariq Ali called the domination of 'extreme center'.

A capitulation to 'extreme center' is witnessed in the following statement by a former supporter of the NMSJ (National Movement for Social Justice): "I sort of played a significant role in the intervention that National Movement for Social Justice made until the MOU was signed. Afterwards, the gravity of the process moved more towards the Ranil-CBK-Rathana/Champika axis. I think the central role that NMSJ played is sort of over. That is understandable. ..I think it is inevitable that this kind of campaign reaches this stage of elite competition sooner or later. It is sort of inevitable, within the present political balance. The political elite would try their best not to allow a visionary organization like NMSJ and a visionary like Sobhitha there to dominate the scene. That has to be expected."

What is to be done?

The opposition candidate, Maithripala Sirisena, has depicted the effort that he is engaged in as a 'game' at a public meeting in Mathugama. The game is played according to set rules some deviations notwithstanding. So this is game between UPFA and the Opposition. Game rules have already been written. Within that rules he has planned to upset the opponent internally (psychologically) and externally (mobilizing oppositional forces). This is game by the elites and the people have no significant role to play. They are mere observers. Sirisena's statement implies those who are not either with UPFA or his opposition are disrupters of the game. What I submit here is those 'disrupters' are in fact trying to generate different game rules in which interests of the subalterns will dominate the course. Until 1964, the LSSP did that. JVP began to play that role in the 1990s but abandoned in 2004. What is imperative today is to generate new alternatives to replace moribund neoliberal agenda.

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P.S.

*http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=116012

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