

# The Left alternative in Sri Lanka

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**In this fifth extract from his book Sri Lanka: Arrogance of Power - Myth, Decadence and Murder, Rajan Hoole looks at the central role played by the Left, and especially the LSSP, in the period stretching from the country's independence through to the 1970s.**

As the country drifted towards chauvinism in the post-independence years, the Left until the early 1960s offered hope as an alternative to a politics entrenched in feudalism and the past. In the first Parliament, the Left was almost in a position to form the government. The Citizenship Bills which turned Tamil plantation labour into virtual serfs was largely intended to take a huge slice off the Left's support base. The battle to resist the Bills was staunchly fought by the Left and lost. The Sinhala Only Bill of 1956 too was ably opposed by the Left and from the debates came those memorable words of Dr. Colvin R. de Silva of the LSSP, that are etched in this country's history: "One language, two nations; two languages, one nation."

Even before his assassination in 1959, the government of Prime Minister Solomon Bandaranaike was in crisis. Weighed down by Sinhala Only, two bouts of communal violence, the broken pact with the Tamils, a restive section of the Buddhist clergy charging him with betrayal and an air of conspiracy in the cabinet, the Prime Minister, whose moderation never completely deserted him, was an isolated man. The two main Left parties, the LSSP and the CP, which had long taken an ambivalent view of parliamentary democracy - as against revolutionary change - had by 1960 firmly opted for parliamentary democracy. In contesting the 1960 elections, the Left was optimistic about forming the government. They failed. The debate about parliamentary democracy once more emerged in the Left. The early 1960s was a period when a Left front and coalition with the SLFP were discussed in a parliamentary context. The Left divided and subdivided with some sections rejecting parliamentary democracy and working towards newer expressions of democracy at the grass roots or even revolution.

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We trace some of the developments in the form of questions posed to Mr. Hector Abhayavardhana, a senior LSSP theoretician, whose 80<sup>th</sup> birthday was commemorated recently in December 1999, and his answers.

**Q: Leading Tamil intellectuals from the Left, including V. Karalasingham from your own party, saw very clearly in the early 60s where the nationalism of the Tamil-speaking people, founded on alienation and self-imposed isolation, as expressed by the Federal Party, would eventually drag them and the country. Karalasingham described their politics as 'burning themselves out in impotent rage'. Knowing the dangers very well, why did the Left distance themselves from the Tamils by abandoning their earlier stand of parity for Sinhalese and Tamil as official languages and adopt 'Sinhala Only'?**

H.A: In 1960, the LSSP (Lanka Socialist Party) had overestimated its electoral strength. When we went for the first electoral contest in that year, we were hoping for the formation of a government

with our leader Dr. N.M. Perera as prime minister. The result was a hung parliament with the UNP of Dudley Senanayake having the largest number of seats. It was a great come down for the Left, and at the second elections in 1960, the LSSP publicly committed itself to helping the SLFP to form a government. The SLFP won. The Party thought desperately of means to break out of its isolation. One idea was the formation of a United Left Front (ULF) under the leadership of Philip Gunawardene of the MEP, Dr. S.A. Wickremasinghe of the CP (Communist Party) and Dr. N.M. Perera of the LSSP. Now, by the early 60s, Philip Gunawardene had consolidated a Sinhalese chauvinist line. He had taken the lead to line up with Bandaranaike's SLFP in the mid- 50s to form the MEP, which swept the 1956 elections on a Sinhala Only platform.

**Q: Philip Gunawardene was of course a leading light of the LSSP. Why did he do that?**

H.A: It was opportunism of course - to break out of his isolation. As a condition for forming the ULF, PG insisted that we adopt Sinhala Only. We discussed it in the Party. There were those who opposed it, but we eventually decided to accept it.

**Q: But Edmund Samarakkody led a group that split off from the LSSP and stood by the policy of parity on languages.**

H.A: That is true. But Edmund was part of the move to form the ULF, and there is nothing in the record of the discussion which says that he opposed the adoption of Sinhala Only. But ironically the ULF was formed in 1963, and before it could consolidate itself Philip broke it up and went his way. We were left with Sinhala Only and we could not go back to our old position since it was now awkward to explain to the public why we changed to Sinhala Only and changed back to parity.

The early 60s were a period of drift. The SLFP government narrowly survived an attempted coup in January 1962 by a right wing section of the armed forces. After the coup attempt the SLFP was feeling more and more isolated and was beginning to show signs of collapse. The split between the right wing of the SLFP and the left wing was open. The Prime Minister Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike publicly appealed for support from the LSSP and CP and there was a drift to commence talks. The right wing of the SLFP was violently opposed to the LSSP and CP. Felix Dias Bandaranaike who belonged to the right wing sought to counter Mrs. Bandaranaike's strategy by appealing to Philip Gunawardene to join the SLFP and form a common government. The left wing of the SLFP led by T.B. Illangaratne pressed Mrs. Bandaranaike to open talks with Dr. N.M. Perera without delay. She did so and this led to the short- lived United Front government of 1964.

The Government was defeated on the Press Bill in December 1964 where several members of the SLFP Right led by C.P. de Silva voted against the Government. The UNP came to power in the elections which followed. Thereafter the SLFP, LSSP and CP formed a United Left Front and campaigned to form the government at the next elections. So you see that these years, 1960-65, were characterised by a feeling of isolation and uncertainty on the part of the SLFP, particularly after the coup attempt in January 1962. Both the CP and LSSP were faced with having to consolidate a united front or going back to a relatively isolated political existence in the face of the UNP and SLFP. This period saw shifting relations between the parties and an anxiety to cement some coalition with the Left or the Right to stabilise the SLFP government. Without being unconcerned about the Tamil question, these were the main issues which impelled decisions at that time. Once we had dropped parity in 1963, there was no way of going back to it.

**Q: But the Left has been accused of encouraging communalism when in the opposition from 1965- 70....,the so-called 'Masalavade line' of the Left? (Masalavade is a popular Tamil delicacy.)**

H.A: That was a misunderstanding. The Left had to adopt a common position on language with the SLFP. On May Day in 1966, the Left and the SLFP marched in a common procession from Victoria Park. Someone started shouting “Dudlige bade masalavade” (“Prime Minister Dudley’s stomach is filled with masalavade”). The slogan went right down the line. Thereafter people thought that it was a Left slogan.

**Q: In the coalition government of 1970, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva was entrusted with the task of drawing up a new constitution. The new constitution adopted in May 1972 was a psychological blow to the Tamils. It made no accommodation with Tamil demands. Sinhala Only remained the policy on language and Buddhism was given the foremost place. Unlike the Soulbury Constitution of 1947 where the Law was supreme, the one of 1972 made Parliament supreme in the name of the people. To the minorities outside the mainstream in a polarised polity, this arrangement appeared even more a tyranny of the majority - the Sinhalese Buddhists. Section 29 of the old constitution which, symbolically at least, guaranteed protection to the minorities against discriminatory enactment was also dropped. The Tamil youth especially were left feeling bitter and in a rebellious mood. It has been widely said that the Federal Party leaders found Dr. Colvin R. de Silva from your party less accommodative than the SLFP?**

H.A: What you say may be true of the left of the SLFP. But the right of the SLFP would have gone no further than the 1972 Constitution. Where the LSSP was at fault was in mishandling the matter of the new constitution - we were already caught in the compromise made with Philip Gunawardene on the language question. Where we were at fault was on the issue of talks between S.J.V.

Chelvanayakam and Mrs. Bandaranaike on the new constitution. Mr. Chelvanayakam asked for talks and Mrs. Bandaranaike refused. We could have insisted that Mrs. B should talk to Chelva, but we did not.

It was then that Chelvanayakam resigned his seat and announced his intention of turning the bye-election into a referendum calling for a mandate to form a separate state for the Tamil- speaking people. The LSSP could have insisted on going the full length of talks with Chelvanayakam and the Tamil leaders, but did not.

**Q: On looking back, the Left was deeply divided on ideological issues while their positions on key issues affecting this country were similar. Today many see the traditional differences in the Left as unreal in comparison with the challenge of formulating a programme for political action to defend the interests of the powerless against the enormous power of corporate institutions. Why did this not happen in the 50s and 60s?**

H.A: After the Russian revolution of 1917 and the setting up of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), the Marxist movement was appropriated by the new Soviet government and the Communist International. With the death of Lenin, the factional crisis in the Soviet Communist Party came to a head, and the entire leadership of Lenin’s Bolshevik Party, with a few exceptions, was wiped out by Stalin. From its centre in Moscow, the Stalinist movement appropriated the goodwill that belonged to the former Marxist movement. At the same time, it converted that movement into one that devoted all its energies to the military defence of the Soviet State and the carrying out of the foreign policy of the Soviet Government

Irrespective of our wish as Trotskyites, we were converted into a permanent opposition to the official communist movement and one that had behind it the entire resources of the Soviet State. The Stalinist - Trotskyite split became a worldwide split and everyone had to contend with the policy of the Stalinist-movement. It was then impossible to get away from it.

So far as the world was concerned, Marxism consisted of the Soviet State and its worldwide projection. Until the death of Stalin in 1953, no one outside the Trotskyite movement could reasonably expect that this state of affairs could be changed. Only subsequently with the coming to power of Gorbachev could the possibility of radical transformation of Stalinist politics be visualised. Today, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, the concrete fact is established. Today Stalinism and Trotskyism look unreal. Then they were a reality we could not get away from.

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We may however mention here that contemporary political observers close to the Tamil Left do not fully agree with Hector Abhayavardhana's reading of events. They find it wholly unconvincing that the Left joined the SLFP in a coalition to counterbalance the Right in the SLFP and to maintain a viable Left option. They rather see it as a piece of parliamentary opportunism with very predictable results – the suicide of the Left in an entity where the forces of the Right had the upper hand. A telling instance of this opportunism, they point out, was the experience of the Jaffna District Communist Party while the new constitution promulgated in 1972 was being drawn up. We give the experience as related by V. Ponnambalam, the leader of the JDCP, a very responsible man, to a Left intellectual:

The Jaffna District Committee of the Communist Party decided at a meeting that they would press for the abrogated Bandaranaike- Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957 to be incorporated in the new constitution as a settlement to the Tamil question. They asked CP leader Pieter Kenuman to arrange for a deputation to meet Prime Minister Mrs. Bandaranaike and Minister for Constitutional Affairs Dr. Colvin R. de Silva. The delegation led by V. Ponnambalam presented their case cogently and pointed out that if the aborted B-C Pact was implemented, the Tamil militancy (which was just beginning to emerge) could be nipped in the bud.

Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranaike listened very intently and agreed with the delegation that implementing the B-C Pact would be the best way out.

Then up jumped Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, and in a two-hour harangue interspersed with his usual histrionics, painted a grim picture of Buddhist bhikkus and Sinhalese mobs taking to the streets and literally bundling the United Left Front out of power. This so unnerved Mrs. Bandaranaike that she told the delegation that the matter would be shelved for the moment. Those close to V. Ponnambalam blame Colvin R. de Silva for the present impasse in addition to S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, J.R. Jayewardene and other individuals like Badiuddin Mohammed. Being in that coalition, Colvin R. de Silva, they contend, appears to have been impelled to prove himself more SLFP than the SLFP Right. The 1972 Constitution, which entrenched Sinhala Only, and placed Buddhism in the foremost place, was an ironic testament to the man who once said, "Two languages one nation, one language two nations".

It is moreover hard to understand how this constitution was found acceptable by the LSSP leader, Dr. N.M. Perera. At the beginning of the chapter, we quoted from a speech made by him in Parliament on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1955, when signs of the deluge of the coming year were all-too- evident. He moved a motion to make Sinhalese and Tamil state languages enjoying parity of status. He said that such a timely gesture was necessary in view of the chauvinist sentiment being whipped up by the Tri Sinhala Peramuna. Articulating essentially 'Ceylon for the Sinhalese', the Tri Sinhala Peramuna was a precursor of present day extremist groups with the same social base – the commercial and professional elite of Sinhalese society.

One reading N.M. Perera's speech from 1955 would be impressed by the fact that it came from the

heart with a sense of urgency. To an interruption by Mr. D.B.R. Gunawardena that J.R. Jayewardene headed the Tri Sinhala Peramuna, Dr. Perera said, "I have no doubt that there are important members of the Government apparently associated with the organisation." Its sponsors, he said, were good capitalists and supporters of the UNP. Parliament has been greatly impoverished with the passing of such giants of the past who combined intellectual brilliance with lucidity of exposition and a passion for justice – a combination no longer in vogue. There were already rumblings of Sinhalese being made the sole official language. The UNP government of Sir John Kotelawela was being ominously silent on the issue. After Kotelawela said in Jaffna, when asked pointedly by Handy Perinpanayagam that the Government stood for parity of Sinhalese and Tamil, he denied in Colombo that he had said such a thing.

Arguing his case with great clarity, Dr. Perera pointed out that democracy is not majoritarianism and the absurdity of forcing 23 lakhs of Tamil speakers to transact all their official business in Sinhalese because 58 lakhs (official figures) were Sinhalese speaking. This kind of reasoning, he pointed out, would make it legitimate to pass laws forcing everyone to adopt the religion of the majority or entitling only Sinhalese speakers to get government jobs. "The sovereignty of the majority", he said, "is automatically checked by those inalienable rights the minorities have, which cannot be overridden by the mere whim and fancy of a majority."

Dr. Perera then went on to demolish the case of those who protested that things would not be so bad: that while Sinhalese remained the state language throughout the country, Tamil would be a regional language in the Northern and Eastern Provinces that are predominantly Tamil speaking. Dr. Perera said that the logical outcome of this arrangement would be to drive and confine this non-Sinhalese speaking element – the Tamil-speaking element – to the Northern and Eastern Provinces. This, he pointed out would concede Mr. Chelvanayakam's case for a federal state comprising the North and East that would have a separate government.

He then put the pertinent question: "Is there any earthly reason why they should agree to be a portion of Ceylon if they are confined to those areas?" This region, he said, not being economically viable would be forced to look to India or to 'other imperialistic countries' (i.e. the US and Britain). Having Sinhalese as a state language and Tamil as a regional language in the North and East, he concluded, 'would lead to so much rioting, bloodshed and civil war'. (See CDN 13 & 14 Nov.1997.)

His foresight, events have shown, was unimpeachable. Few would contest these conclusions today except for the intellectual progeny of the Tri Sinhala Peramuna. The Sinhalese extremists to this day, while vociferously insisting on a unitary state under Sinhalese hegemony, were all the time in their actions conceding Dr. Perera's arguments. (See 4.8 for an extract from an extremist leaflet issued about the time of the 1958 pogrom.) It was ironically Jayewardene who made Tamil a state language towards the end of his presidency when his logic had run its course. Perhaps Dr. N.M. Perera himself came to underestimate the gravity of the situation as a result of the deceptive calm of the 60s.

The Left had indeed faced very difficult challenges in a small country where the economic problems were superimposed on a feudally dominated, abnormally polarised polity, with a good section of the working class disenfranchised. Decisions were forced on the actors under pressures of the hour. But the question needs to be asked if the compromises in principle made to get into the mainstream of parliamentary politics helped the Left's objectives. Their flirtation with chauvinism did not impress the chauvinists who believed their chauvinism to be fake. By the time of the 1977 elections, the prospects for the Left were at their nadir. The giants of the Left – Dr. N.M. Perera, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, Pieter Kenuman and Dr. S.A. Wickremasighe – were all defeated in their secure electorates by largely unknown UNP candidates.

It took another 4 years for the Left to make a re-entry into parliament in the form of Sarath Muttetuwegama of the Communist Party, at a bye-election in 1981. After years in the wilderness, the parliamentary Left went back to its old positions, dropping its veneer of chauvinism. The key younger figures from the Left who held the stage during the 1980s were Sarath Muttetuwegama, Vasudeva Nanayakkara and Dr. Vikramabahu Karunaratne (the latter two from the NSSP - which broke away from the LSSP in the 70s) and Vijaya Kumaratunga. All of them distinguished themselves as anti-chauvinist and champions of minority rights. Had elections been free and fair, more of them would have become MPs in the early 80s. They demonstrated that it was possible to fight elections successfully in a Sinhalese constituency while strenuously opposing chauvinism.

Vijaya Kumaratunga broke new ground in another way. After leaving the SLFP, he and his wife Chandrika Kumaratunga (nee Bandaranaike) founded the SLMP in the mid-80s. It espoused socialism, while the time also permitted it to remain oblivious to the old questions of Stalinism and Trotskyism that had bedevilled the Left. Even if these developments were not so visible electorally in the 80s, they made the break in public opinion of 1994 possible, when the Peoples Alliance led by Chandrika Kumaratunga came to power. The PA which comprised the SLFP, SLMP, LSSP and CP, while depending on older SLFP figures for its electoral support, was closer to the old Left on the Tamil question.

But paradoxically, the first step in creating a break was taken by Jayewardene - who has been described by some of his contemporaries as the most unprincipled politician in Sri Lankan history. These important changes did not come because of agitation by the Left. They came because of Jayewardene's rash and intemperate handling of the Tamil question. Conditions started improving for the Plantation Tamils who had not already left for India, because Jayewardene needed peace on the estates and the income they generated to sustain a costly war in the North-East. Moreover, by getting the Indian Government involved in the internal affairs of his country, he was forced to go a long way in accommodating Tamil demands in the form of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. He got it through parliament not by campaigning for mass support, but by using the undated resignation letters of his MPs in his possession. The Left to their credit helped their traditional adversary to soften the impact by publicly supporting the political solution under the Accord.

There was the other important segment of the Left, which rejected the parliamentary line and went into mass work at the grass roots. Some of the dissidents (e.g. Bala Tampoe and N. Shanmugathasan) remained active in trade union work. Many among the younger generation rejected middle class aspirations and lifestyles and sought a closer identification with the people. They became active in protest movements on issues. An important one was against the expropriation of peasant lands in Moneragala for multi-national investment in sugar in the early 80s.

Most of the second-generation groups survive as issue-based NGOs. One political movement of significance from the second generation is the JVP, which will be referred to in the coming chapters.

## **Rajan Hoole**

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\*<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-left-alternative-in-sri-lanka/>

The first four extracts can be found at:

<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/?s=Sri+Lanka%3A+Arrogance+of+Power+-+Myth%2C+Decadence+and+Murder&x=13&y=3>