

NOTES TO THE PEOPLE

Sri Lanka: Is the UNP Social Democratic? - On Vickramabahu Karunaratne (Bahu) Joining UNP

Friday 17 July 2020, by [LIYANAGE Sumanasiri](#) (Date first published: 17 July 2020).

The author of this article, Sumanasiri Liyanage, presents the political evolution of Dr. Vickramabahu (Bahu) Karunaratne, the leader of the Nava Samasamaja Party (NSSP), who runs today in the elections for The United National Party (UNP). [ESSF].

Dr. Vickramabahu Karunaratne, the leader of the Nava Samasamaja Party (NSSP) and my erstwhile colleague both at the University of Peradeniya and the Lanka Sasamaja Party and the NSSP, is contesting Kalutara District at the forthcoming General Election as a candidate of the UNP. As I have known Bahu for nearly 50 years.

I first met him at the Faculty Club of the University of Peradeniya soon after he returned from England after obtaining his PhD from Cambridge University. Between 1970-75, we had breakfast almost everyday at the Engineering Faculty canteen. That was the period of Vama Sasamajaya, an embryonic formation within the LSSP as the predecessor of the NSSP.

My understanding is that there was no disagreement between the LSSP leadership and us, Vama Samasamajist, over the characterisation of the UNP since we all were unanimous that the UNP was the principal bourgeois Party in Sri Lanka with close affiliations to imperialism. The question arises on the nature of the SLFP.

The earlier position of the LSSP was that the SLFP was the second eleven of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. Hence, it was a cardinal error to enter into a coalition or programmatic front with it? This position was strongly argued by Dr. Colvin R. de Silva in his writings especially against the position of the Ceylon Communist Party. LSSP's this position had been watered down in the early sixties and a new characterisation of it and a programmatic and strategic alliance with it were proposed by Hector Abhayawardhana in his famous article, *Categories of Left Thinking in Ceylon*.

This theoretical piece was the basis of Dr. N.M. Perera's majority resolution to the LSSP special conference in 1964.

Hector Abhayawardhana wrote in 1962 that Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) "Has made some claim to social engineering on the basis of socialist principles" so that it was unrealistic to see "No difference between a UNP Government and a SLFP Government".

Cardinal error

Hector Abhayawardhana made a cardinal error in characterisation of a political party by solely looking at the programme of the party abstracting it from international trends and the class basis. His main mistake was not portraying the SLFP as a 'left' but making this transitory phenomenon as a permanent feature. Dialectic understanding emphasises the predominance of processes, flows, fluxes and relations over events, practices and incidents. These populist bourgeoisie parties may today go against imperial actions, but tomorrow would support imperialist invasions.

They may today nationalise multinational companies but tomorrow would send Armies with rifles and bullets to murder striking workers. Today they will go against the MCC compact but tomorrow will sign the same document. These contradictory processes were evident when we look at the evolutionary process of the SLFP especially after Mahinda Rajapaksa became its leader. He was able to strengthen the SLFP's and later Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)'s bourgeois character by intruding into the substantial portion of the class basis of the UNP and negotiating with the nouveau riche transforming it into the main party of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie downgrading the UNP to the position of the second eleven.

In my understanding, Bahu's position on the SLFP in the 1970s was closer to the position of Hector Abhayawardhana although he did not use the term social democratic in characterisation of the SLFP. Instead, we agreed to use his term populism in painting the SLFP knowing well Lenin's famous quote: "Scratch a populist, you will find a bourgeois". So, in a way I am not surprised when Bahu came up with the idea that the UNP or its Ranil's section that was downgraded to the second eleven position is a social democratic party. So even 'left' can enter the UNP to strengthen this social democratic faction.

Social Democracy

The whole idea of the characterisation of the UNP as a social democratic is an outcome of total misunderstanding of the concept social democracy. It is necessary to take a simple fact into account, namely that not a single UNPer called herself or himself a social democrat. Sometime back when Dr. Harsha de Silva was a member of the UNP, the UNP used to say that they adopt 'social market' policies. Anybody who knows about German politics knows social market is a right wing liberal democratic alternative to social democracy.

How do we characterise a political party? The main ingredients are: Its class basis, organisation linkages, its programme and policies. According to Richard T. Ely, 'Social democrats' have two distinguishing characteristics, The vast majority of them are labourers, and, as a rule, they expect the violent overthrow of existing institutions by revolution to precede the introduction of the socialistic State. I would not, by any means, say that they are all revolutionists, but the most of them undoubtedly are. The most general demands of the social democrats are the following: The State should exist exclusively for the labourers; land and capital must become collective property, and production is carried on united. Private competition, in the ordinary sense of the term, is to cease". Wikipedia notes that the origins of social democracy as a working-class movement have been traced to the 1860s, with the rise of the first major working-class party in Europe, the General German Workers' Association (ADAV) founded in 1863 by Ferdinand Lassalle. Many social democratic parties are either based or linked with trade union movement of the respective countries. In fact, a significant portion of their funding also come from the trade union movements and from the working people.

Encyclopedia Britannica gives this note on social democracy. "The social democratic movement grew out of the efforts of August Bebel, who with Wilhelm Liebknecht cofounded the Social Democratic Workers' Party in 1869 and then effected the merger of their party with the General German Workers' Union in 1875 to form what came to be called the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

Bebel imbued social democracy with the belief that socialism must be installed through lawful means rather than by force. The success of the Social Democratic Party in Germany encouraged the spread of social democracy to other countries in Europe.”

UNP: A Senile Party of the Bourgeoisie

In spite of the fact that the inner configuration of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has changed especially since 2005 and as a result the UNP’s class basis got weakened, it is still a party of the bourgeoisie. Its organisational links are among others with the US imperialism and Western Capitalist nations, multinational companies, Ceylon Chamber of Commerce. Its politico-economic program and policies as clearly shown in 2015- 2020 period are neoliberal fundamentalist type. Moreover, it is interesting to note, Bahu’s hero Ranil Wickremesinghe is one of the few members of the infamous Mont Pelerin Society (MPS) which is an international neoliberal organisation composed of economists, philosophers, historians, intellectuals and business leaders.

Enfin

It is pertinent to finish this piece with the first sentences of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Marx wrote: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice.”

He forgot to add:

1. Hector Abhayawardhana’s thesis on the SLFP paving for a 1964 great betrayal as tragedy.
2. The second Bahu’s entry to the UNP is a farce!

Sumanasiri Liyanage

P.S.

• Ceylon Today. Published: 2:00 AM Jul 17 2020:

<https://ceylontoday.lk/news/is-the-unp-social-democratic-bahu-joining-unp>

• The writer is a retired teacher of political economy at the University of Peradeniya.

E-mail: sumane_l yahoo.com