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They'll Come for the Votes

Chandralekha Kingsley

They'll come for the votes –grinning they'll come for the votes.
Pompously dressed in jackets
having made many an excuse to secure their posts
they'll come for the votes –grinning they'll come for the votes.

The siblings of those that shamelessly became ministers
and a few more have gone home –never
sighted near the village. But with a song and dance
they'll come for the votes –grinning they'll come for the votes.

Neither Kandam knows nor Kadamban understands
any story or any sorrow of the people.
Plans for the locals they have none.
Like the chameleon they are, the pair that we have.

She who came to speak the truth
they drive her away from the village.
They who callously uttered lies and distortions,
hoaxes of all kind, and unintended pledges;
they who set up unions and raked in the subscriptions
where have they gone? –These men of might
who dared not oppose the state
have yet to show their face in the village –but
they'll come for the votes –grinning they'll come for the votes.

“Should one wait six years for a cabinet post? ...”
that's from the younger one.
Had he self-respect, would his elder brother
have fallen for Mahinda Chinthanaya?
Merrily they clown, merrily the pair of them
Do they not know that they are dancing in the buff?

The starvation of the folk of Kingsbury lines
the helplessness of Vazhamala and Vadapazhani
the soldier chasing Ammaci of Aricithottam
the starvation to death of Meenatchi of Middleton
the brothers never understand.
Washed and polished, the two kings of mischief
when will you come? When will you come
to hold forth and fetch votes?

(translated from Tamil, Puthiya Poomi, January 2007)

From the Editor's Desk

There is no doubt that the country is rushing headlong towards disaster. What was an unsuccessful peace negotiation but a badly needed ceasefire has been effectively destroyed with only the paper on which the Ceasefire Agreement was written remaining in tact.

In several ways the ongoing undeclared war is worse than war itself when one considers the number of people killed in direct combat, by sniper fire, bombing, shelling, landmines and Claymore mines among others; the number seriously injured and crippled and the number of people who have been displaced by the conflict the figures are no less than for conventional war, except during certain military operations that have seen hundreds dead in a matter of days.

To add to the woes of the Tamils, extortion, kidnapping, murder and disappearing which were common events in the North and the East have become familiar events in Colombo. It is incredible how daringly killings and kidnappings take place in broad daylight and how incapable the police seem to be able to solve even one crime. The plight of those who could not be released by paying a privately arranged ransom has continued to be anybody's guess.

Since around May, kidnappers targeted a few Sinhalese and Muslim businessmen, and that caused considerable shock and fear that the country is drifting towards. Even before the controversy heated up in the media, the police evicted hundreds of occupants from their temporary residences in lodges in Colombo and expelled two hundred from Colombo.

Threats against the media went up one notch with a senior figure in government threatening the editor of a leading newspaper with a reputation for some degree of balance in its news and being free of chauvinistic sloganeering. Threats against the Tamil media continued while the owner of the Maubima and Independent newspapers that

were forced to close down some months ago was arrested on charges of funding the LTTE.

Some of the actions of the government have misfired and brought discredit to it. But the war machine shows no sign of slowing down, despite the cost of the war to the country, the intensifying economic crisis and the burden on the people who suffer the rise in cost of living resulting from the war as well as hardships added to their everyday activities by the increasing number of security measures.

Interestingly the 'International Community' seldom comments, and never acts, on matters that affect the broad masses of people and misery suffered by the vast numbers of people displaced by the conflict. The plight of the oppressed Minority nationalities is the least of their concern. Interestingly the killing of NGO activists working directly or indirectly for INGOs attracts strong criticism, although the slaughter of hundreds by the war machine rarely makes one blink.

Plans for ethnic cleansing in the Trincomalee District through setting up a High Security Zone (HSZ) in Muthur-East-Sampur is not their concern. Indian expansionism sees in the HSZ its opportunity to get a firm foothold in that part of the island with a strategically important harbour.

Recent moves by Germany, then the US and the UK to stop or curtail aid to Sri Lanka are signals of disapproval, but Japan has distanced itself from this approach. What the 'International Community' does not like is embarrassing conduct by a client state. It will be foolish for the oppressed nationalities to be misled by such signals of disapproval.

A change of government or a change of style of work in carrying out the oppression so that the programme of imperialist globalisation is implemented smoothly is all what they desire.

The Parliamentary System and the Politics of Class Domination

SK Senthivel

General secretary, New Democratic Party

Sri Lanka seems to be perched on the top of a volcano. The country is in a state of simmer signalling a shift towards total war. Already in the North-East and beyond, blood and tears flow like rivers. Deaths and displacements are at a peak level. Violations of human rights and denial of democracy occur at a pace that they have attracted worldwide responses. Economic deterioration and crises are worsening by the day. The rise in prices of goods and service charges has made the rise in cost of living an unbearable burden. The consequent situation is so severe that ninety percent of the population comprising the workers, peasants, and other working people in the government and private sectors are facing a variety of crises.

The main question facing the country concerns the solutions for the above problems that concern the political and economic affairs of the country. In this situation, every socially and politically conscious person needs continues to be deeply concerned about the living conditions of the entire people, the problems faced by the nationalities, and the future of the country.

There is a need for alternative political thinking appropriate to the particular conditions of Sri Lanka, policies that derive from it and practice that could carry forward those policies. Such new thinking is required in each of the spheres of politics, economy, social affairs, and culture.

In this context, it is important to possess a historical perspective and analysis of the developments in the political sphere of Sri Lanka. Such an outlook should be able to recognise the links and relationships that the economic, social and cultural spheres have with the political, since we need to identify the reasons for each of the problems that is experienced as adverse results, serious crises and bloody tragedies. A

historical outlook based on scientific social analysis is an essential precondition for that. There can be no doubt that it will be based on a Marxist world outlook.

To a few intellectuals, it is fashionable to claim that class outlook and politics of class struggle based on a Marxist view of the world are outdated. In particular, we see some who at one time posed as Marxists to secure prominence in the spheres of social science and culture now claiming to be postmodernists and carrying out blatantly anti-Marxist propaganda.

However, approaching historical development and the various aspects of politics, economics, social affairs, and culture from a class perspective is necessarily based on scientific social analysis. While it is an undeniable reality that the national contradiction and national oppression have developed to occupy a place of prominence, no one can deny that class contradiction and class oppression remain the basis and the driving force in social dynamics.

Thus, whether one were to review the development of the political history of Sri Lanka or to examine the current political situation, it is not possible to exclude the consideration of class. Class considerations have continued to exist among the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Hill Country Tamil nationalities. Hierarchical differences of propertied and un-propertied classes, exploiting and exploited classes, and ruling and ruled classes have continued to exist. Such class identity cannot be easily got rid of. When talking about this matter, Comrade Mao Zedong said "In class society everyone lives as a member of a class, and every kind of thinking, without exception, is stamped with the brand of a class".

The politics of family domination

A recently published article about the families that have been in power outlined the family politics that has continued within the UNP and the SLFP and the political culture adhered to by them. However, the article failed to touch on the class political stand that provided the basis for the leadership of these two parties to carry forward Sri Lankan politics as the politics of their respective families. Also, there was no mention of the upper caste elitist status of the families that comprised the political leadership. Also there was no mention of the dominance of Buddhism. Nevertheless, class, ethnicity, caste and religion have been

dominating the politics of the colonial era as well as that of the parliamentary political leadership that succeeded colonial rule.

Pompous utterances are made about democracy, people's era, free elections and the possibility of anyone to be elected to parliament. But it is an unwritten rule in Sri Lankan politics that, for one to reach the top in the bourgeois parliamentary democratic government, one has to hold a 'high' position in class, nationality, race and religion. In Sri Lankan political history, it was only once, and for just three years, that a person outside the Govigama upper caste, R Premadasa, said to be a low caste, held the post of Executive President. History also showed that the upper class, upper caste Sinhala elite found it hard to stomach the period of rule by Premadasa, who had mass appeal, political ability and a considerable record of service to the people. If this one instance were excluded, one would see that in Sri Lankan politics the leadership of the ruling classes was always connected with feudal values in relation to class, nationality, race and religion.

Sri Lanka had four-and-a-half centuries of colonial rule. British rule lasted one and-a-half centuries. Various forms of slavery were nurtured in an environment of tightening colonial grip. The ideology of landlord-serf relationship got established as an extension from the feudal era, since the colonialists could not bring about major changes in feudal society and feudal relations here. While they confiscated land in the in the central highlands to set up plantations for the production of tea and rubber, they did not go beyond that to bring about major changes in feudal property relations, since they needed the feudal classes as their allies and for their administrative services.

Thus the feudal classes secured administrative posts to become local officials who dominated over the people. This needs to be seen as an extension of feudalism. These classes were able to preserve the ownership of property and its continuance as well as to further advance themselves. They belonged to the Govigama upper caste among the Sinhalese, and a section of this class became Christians to consolidate their dominant class status. The fact that the names of the ancestors of the leading political families like the Senanayakes, Bandaranaiques, Jayawardanes, Wickramasinghes and Rajapakshas are of European origin is an indication of their class cum religious backgrounds.

Thus it can be seen that the politically leading families forming the ruling class forces are descendents of feudal families that served the

colonial rulers. Amid their capitalist attitude subservient to imperialism, they are fully immersed in their feudal ideology. Irrespective of whether they were Kandyan Sinhalese or Low Country Sinhalese, they have not freed themselves of the '*walauwwa*' (manorial) mentality of the upper-class, upper-caste elite. From among non-Govigama castes too, especially the Durawa, Karawa and Salagama, settled along the coast, arose families with links to the colonial masters since pre-British times that ventured into trade to develop into an influential capitalist class. Despite their wealth, the elite of the majority Govigama considered them to be of lower birth and took advantage of caste rivalries to keep them out of political leadership. It is from the above elite families that capitalist development emerged among the Sinhalese to develop into comprador capitalism, national capitalism and big bourgeois capitalism. This development by and large accommodated feudal ideology, thinking and practice.

Such a situation was a hindrance to the democratisation of society. The parliamentary democracy and the electoral systems were mere façades of bourgeois democracy by means of which broad democratic practices could not be carried forward. Instead the descendents of the afore-mentioned upper caste, upper class ruling elite consolidated their respective dominant positions within parliamentary democracy.

The bourgeois parliamentary system was introduced through the Soulbury Constitution of 1947. The colonialists transferred the power to rule to the families of the upper caste, upper class Sinhala elite who dominated politics, through the general election of 1947 for the first parliament. Members of these elite metamorphosed into guardians of Buddhism to make the independence of 1948 their monopoly.

The class nature of leadership

Even before parliamentary government was introduced with this Sinhala Buddhist elite ruling class in power, they had solidarity with the Tamil upper caste, upper class elite of feudal descent. The colonialists appointed educated and propertied Tamils to the administrative system introduced by them in the 19th century, and granted them a variety of titles including knighthoods. In the capital city of Colombo, they were referred to as the representatives of the Tamils and in the Tamil regions the leaders of the Tamils. The Tamil elite played along with the colonialist conspiracy of divide-and-rule by serving the colonialists as

their trusted loyal servants as well as reinforced their upper caste, upper class positions. The history of the Tamils is written with this elite group occupying a central place.

When the bourgeois parliamentary system was set up in 1947, the relationship between the Tamil elite and the Sinhala Buddhist ruling classes was an alliance of feudal upper caste forces. Members of the Saiva Vellala elite became ministers and senior administrators. The solidarity between the Sinhala and Tamil upper classes held even when subsequently a Saivaite-Christian Tamil leadership took over. It should be noted that the elite class solidarity has been able to withstand even under the prevailing conditions of chauvinistic war of oppression.

The bourgeois parliamentary rule has been in existence for sixty years since its introduction under the Soulbury Constitution of 1947 and under the constitutions of 1972 and 1978 as drafted and implemented by the Sri Lankan ruling classes. But in their essence and fundamentals they have not transcended the constitutional boundaries set out by British imperialism. This is because the Sinhala Buddhist ruling classes designed the constitutions to serve their own class interests and to satisfy the wishes of the imperialists, and not in the interests of the vast majority comprising the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, and Hill Country Tamils as well as other national minorities or with the aim of ensuring equality and a sense of confidence among the nationalities and national minorities. Sixty years of bourgeois parliamentary rule have shown that there has been no constitution based on genuine democratic principles that addresses the fundamental needs and aspirations of the people.

Sri Lanka is territorially a small country. It nevertheless has resources including water and land that can offer its people a good life and development. In this country with agriculture as its main occupation, it should be possible to achieve self sufficiency in food. However, the families of the upper caste, upper class comprising the descendents of feudal classes have made fertile lands and water utilities their property. Ordinary peasants lived on their lands as landless peasants or as lease holders. The land ceiling introduced by legislation in the 1970s did not bring much benefit to the landless. The ceiling on land was placed at 50 acres. But the feudal families were able to contrive methods by which the most fertile and productive lands continued to remain in their hands. When JR Jayawardane came to power in 1977, the land ceiling was raised to 100 acres to protect the

landowners as well as to enable them to reclaim the lands that they had lost. This illustrates the nature of the domination that the propertied Sinhala elite exercised over land.

Meanwhile, state-owned lands in far away forest areas with poor soil and water resources were allocated to landless Sinhalese. Poor people were settled as cultivators in these lands with little infrastructural development. Thus in the pretext of distributing land to the landless, planned colonisation schemes were set up in traditional homelands of the Tamils and Muslims in the North and the East, with chauvinistic motives, thereby killing two birds with one stone. What should be noted in here is the matter of class distinction between the upper class Sinhala Buddhist elite of feudal descent and the overwhelming majority of Sinhala working masses. Such fundamental class distinctions exist among the Tamil, Muslim and Hill Country Tamil minority nationalities.

Thus, among the basic components of family dominance in politics are class, incorporating private property and exploitation of labour, and upper caste family status derived from feudalism characteristic of South Asia. Such features can be recognised in the echelons of state power in SAARC countries, India in particular.

Family dominance or class dominance?

The ascent to power of Sirima Bandaranayake as the world's first woman prime minister was not as a consequence of her political work or experience. Equally, the election of her daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga as executive president in 1994 was not only because of the pro-people policies and pledges. One cannot easily forget that what was basic to both mother and daughter was their upper class, upper caste dominant class background. In the same way, the succession of DS Senanayake as prime minister by his son Dudley Senanayake to be followed by Sir John Kotelawala had similar reasons as the basis. The ascent of JR Jayawardane to power and for Ranil Wickramasinghe to become leader of the UNP and to gain political power, with a short spell of power for R Premadasa separating the two periods, was again on a similar basis. It should also be understood that the survival of Ranil Wickramasinghe amid today's internal crisis of the UNP and Rukman Senanayake, another political family successor, standing together with him have little to do with pristine deeds based on democratic values.

The role of the Buddhist Sangha establishments has been important in taking to the villages the dominance and power of these class-caste elitist families. Thus it is inevitable that the dominant ruling families do not only accept the blessings of the leaders of the Sangha but also their likes and dislikes.

Much is spoken about the arrival of technology and the development of aspects of capitalism in the country. In particular, imperialist globalisation is being welcomed by the leadership of all the ruling classes and by all governments. But feudal ideology, thinking and practices continue to survive and dominate this country with a large rural population. As much as these are arrogance and a tendency to dominate among the ruling classes, there are slavish thinking and practices among the people. It is undeniable that these characteristics prevail to varying degrees among the Tamil, Muslim and Hill Country Tamil nationalities as well. It has been well exploited by the ruling parties in all elections from those for the parliament and presidency down to local authority.

Resisting ruling elite dominance

Those who resisted this state of affairs to a considerable extent were those who were leftists at the time. But they could not persevere in their left ideological policies beyond a certain period. The main reason for that was their class origin. The leftist leaders who came from well to do families got themselves into the mire of parliamentary political opportunism in the 1960s to alienate themselves from the working class and other toiling masses, go behind the ruling class forces and finally degrade themselves to the state of forfeiting even their identity. We can see that they reduced themselves to mere yes-men for the Chandrika Kumaratunga government then and the Mahinda Chinthanaya government now.

What lessons do all these teach us? It is important to develop healthy political debates on these matters. It is only through that the class politics of the working people can be advanced as an alternative to the politics of the ruling classes. It is only such politics that could progress along the path to resolve the whole range of problems faced by the country, the people and the nationalities.

Will Leaving the Plantations Lead to Salvation?

E Thambiah

National Organiser, New Democratic Party

The plight of the plantation worker today

Many dislike to be told, even with substantial evidence, that the Hill Country Tamil community remains backward. They claim that the community has advanced since there are teachers, traders, senior government officials, lawyers, doctors, lecturers and engineers in the community and that the community is therefore now advanced. What they mean is that, except in the plantation sector, in other sectors the community is advanced.

There are others who question whether the plantation workers should continue to be plantation workers and their descendents too should remain in the plantations. They think that the community cannot advance because a majority of the community is in the plantations; the reason being that the wages are very low for the plantations and their standard of living is at rock bottom. Their question arises out the frustration that being plantation workers brings no benefit. They conclude that, since it is not possible for them to elevate their standard of living or secure higher wages, the best thing to do is to leave that field.

Will it be possible for all the workers involved in physical labour to leave it and join the service sector or other white collar jobs? Will it be possible for the entire plantation worker population and the Hill Country Tamils to be dependent on the few in other forms of employment?

Production is the basis of economics. It is production that directly or indirectly sustains the service sector and other forms of work including white collar employment. Production of goods cannot be separated from human life; and it is fantasy to suggest that a vast majority of people could be involved in non-production sectors.

Workers in the plantation sector and their descendents are not sufficiently advanced in intellectual pursuits for even a small number of them to be find employment in sectors that do not require physical labour. Such a growth cannot be expected to occur suddenly. How could the hill country plantation worker community that has been denied basic living requirements and a minimum basic wage for two hundred years escape from employment based on wage labour?

Although the daily wage is slightly higher in other employment sectors, the workers there will be casual labour subject to severe exploitation without any employment protection. They are likely to find work as gardeners, domestic helps and shop assistants. This is not a state of advancement.

Leaving the plantations for employment will, in the long run, mean forfeiting one's permanent residence in the estate. It could mean a nomadic life on the streets away from the region where one lived thus far. The plantation workers do not have the means or wages to procure land or dwelling for life outside the plantation. Nor do they have the right to the 'line rooms' and their surroundings in which they resided so far. It should be realised that their right to residence is by virtue their employment in the estate.

From British rule to rule by the Sri Lankan ruling class

The work skills of the plantation workers who were brought to the plantations set up two hundred years ago in the mid 1800s by the British colonialists have not been developed substantially. Although political administration of the country has been handed over to the Sri Lankan capitalist class, direct and indirect domination by colonialist capital still persists in the plantations.

The plantations were taken over by the state in the 1970s. Since the plantations could not stand up to the grip of imperialism over international trade and since state ownership under capitalism cannot be transformed into common ownership, the government was unable to properly administer the plantations.

Since the Sri Lankan ruling class, besides failing to unite the plantation workers with the national mainstream, subjected them to chauvinistic oppression, the plantation economy faced serious crises.

In the 1980s, the World Bank and the IMF, in the name of reforms, applied pressure on the government to hand back the plantations to the private sector. Accordingly in 1991, twenty-two plantations were given on lease to private companies. These companies, in turn, placed the management of the plantations in the hands of management companies.

Unlike when the plantations were in the hands of British companies, the years commencing the 1970s were marked by a chauvinistic programme designed to subject the plantation workers to planned ethnic oppression. Plantation workers fled the estates as a result of chauvinistic colonisation activities as well as chauvinistic harassment and oppression. A large number of plantation workers were sent to India between 1970 and 1983, under the Sirima-Shastri Agreement of 1964.

As a result of continuing chauvinist attacks in the plantations, plantation workers continue to leave the estates, especially in Kegalle, Ratnapura, Kalutura and Galle Districts.

Globalisation and privatisation

Ever since the handing over of plantations to private companies in 1991, the companies have shown sustained reluctance to increase the wages of plantation workers. As a result, the plantation workers continue to struggle to survive for want of a decent living wage; and there are no new registrations as plantation workers. With the denial of a fair wage and new employment opportunities, the workers face the question as to whether they should continue in the plantation sector.

Since the 1990s, imperialist globalisation dominates the world market. That is, the situation in which one country directly dominated another in the period of colonial domination gave way to a situation in which the capital of one country exercised dominance in another; and that has now changed to one in which capital from various countries exercise dominance over several countries through multinational companies. The World Bank, the IMF and the World Trade Organisation become principal instruments of imperialist domination and international economy and commerce have been linked to the imperialist agenda through modern information technology. Global dominance and supervision by the World Bank, the IMF and the World

Trade Organisation to carry forward the global dominance of capital has come into practice in the name of globalisation. That is, the operation of the global economy according to the neo-liberal policies of the three organisations was facilitated through information networking.

This globalisation dominated by international capital has come to control plantation capital and business. International capitalisation of the plantations has risen and the share of multinational capital in plantation companies has also increased alongside market rivalry in international trade.

Rather than continue the plantations as a macro-economy, globalisation seeks to fragment large plantations and plantation workers and transform it into micro-economies. Expulsion of plantation workers from the estates is a prerequisite for it.

National and class oppression of plantation workers

Chauvinism has as its aim the destruction of the population density of the plantation workers in the central highlands with a Hill Country Tamil national identity. The departure of plantation workers from the estates will only help the chauvinist agenda.

The plantation industry remains the economy of the plantation workers and the plantations remain their residential areas. It is not healthy for them to leave them. Under such conditions, the question as to whether the plantation workers could or should leave the plantations for reasons of low wage and poor employment opportunities becomes important.

Plantation workers cannot improve their earnings or standard of living by leaving the plantations. The global environment and globalisation of labour have not advanced sufficiently for that purpose. Also leaving the plantations in that manner will not ensure right of abode or social security.

It is not the destiny of plantation workers to continue in the plantation sector. But that does not mean that they should leave the plantation sector to suit the needs of capital and the desires of chauvinism. Besides, conditions do not exist that allow the choice of an employment sector where they could be advanced workers.

Hence it is necessary for the plantations to struggle politically to secure a fair wage, employment opportunities, and social security in the plantation sector itself. It is through that they can establish the light to livelihood of the vast number of plantation workers who are not in a position to leave the plantation sector as well as achieve the basic requirements to fulfil the national aspirations of the Hill Country Tamils.

Political and trade union leadership

Politics and trade union policies, political and trade union organisations, leadership, practice, programmes and style of work should be accordance with the above stated purpose.

For this, the contribution of popular activists, especially that of the educated among Hill Country Tamils is essential. The educated, if they so desire, could act independently. Working independently means acting in opposition to oppression and pressures. Their living environment should be such that they could establish their independence in that manner. The educated from the Hill Country should work with dedication in the plantation sector to which they belong to create a climate in which the plantation workers there also could live in freedom. The current climate is one in which not only plantation workers but also their dependents and the educated are being compelled to leave the plantation areas. This is not secure for the educated.

The role and dedication of educated Hill Country Tamils

The toil, dedication and struggles of the plantation workers are the source of the evolution and development, however small, of the educated Hill Country Tamils. In the struggles demanding employment, teacher appointments in particular, for the educated it has been the plantation workers who had been the main fighting force. The survival of the educated relies on the survival of the plantation workers. Hence, the educated should play an important role in defending the survival of the plantation workers. The educated are the descendents of the plantation workers.

There is a general criticism that, during the struggles by the plantation workers during November-December 2006 demanding a

wage rise, the contribution of the educated in the Nuwara Eliya District, where there a large number of educated Hill Country Tamils, was neither remarkable nor organised. The reason is said to be that the educated are alienated from the plantation workers, and tended to see the struggle for a higher wage as a problem of the plantation workers alone rather than as a social problem.

The educated should change this situation and use their knowledge to make an exemplary contribution towards the society and its survival. They need to develop plans and work with the people. Otherwise the existence of the educated itself will be wrecked; and there will be no prospect for the emergence of educated people emerging from among the plantation workers.

The educated cannot consider as service the work that earns them their wage. They should go beyond the idea of serving the people through their profession to contribute to the advancement and survival of the community. Each should act according to his or her ability in a way that enhances one's personality.

In a situation in which parliamentary politicians and trade union leaders are very much obedient to the ruling chauvinistic capitalism, it is vital that work is done outside the capitalist framework with a long term view. It is important that the educated think deeply about and contribute to the political, social, economic and cultural means needed for the liberation of the plantation workers and the Hill Country Tamil nationality as well as for the resolution of their day-to-day problems.

[Translation of article in Tamil from Puthiya Poomi, February 2007.]

State and Secularism

(An essay on religion in the politics of Sri Lanka)

Imayavaramban

1. Introduction

Some argue that historically the state has rarely been secular. It is true that religious establishments have at times wielded considerable control over the affairs of the state especially under feudal monarchies. Religion has even been the driving force behind the throne. The affinity of a monarch for a given religion did not necessarily mean that religion was allowed to interfere with the affairs of the state. Except during periods of religious zealotry and state sponsored proselytisation, discrimination against people for religious reasons was not common. And religion even when it has divided communities was not always a cause for social conflict, since, as a society, people have coexisted in peace despite differences in cultural, religion, language and caste.

Theocracies have existed in feudal and slave societies in many parts of the world, and the nominal link between the state and religion has at times survived at least in form under capitalism, as for example in the UK. Feudal rulers have shown affinity for religion, in view of its value in exercising control over communities and in preserving social order. There have on the other hand been instances where ethical codes, like Confucianism in East Asia, have had a strong hold on society, and the feudal state has taken advantage of the concepts of duty, loyalty and honour to preserve social order. One needs to be conscious of the fact that historically religion has been a divisive force in multi-religious societies, and particularly so where the link between the state and the religious establishment was strong. There have been many instances where the state has sided with one religious establishment against others, and religious establishments have used state patronage to strengthen themselves in most feudal societies.

Capitalism, out of necessity, undermined the influence of religion, especially organised religion with a central authority, in the affairs of the state, but compromised with religion and religious authority, as they

played a useful role in social control, especially in protecting the ruling classes against revolutionary ideology. For colonial rulers spreading the word of God provided moral justification for colonial expansion in the Americas, Africa and Asia. While contradictions continue between capitalism and the religious establishment, because of ideological differences as well as rivalry for power over society, class interests have ensured that instances of collusion far exceeded those of conflict.

Many religious thinkers have emphasised the humane aspects of religion and sought in religion a means of achieving social justice and in the long term the liberation of mankind. But, often, they are seen as heretics who are at best ignored and under less favourable conditions treated harshly, like the Liberation Theologians of Latin America who were initially ignored by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the 1960s but denounced since the 1980s when their mass appeal became a problem to the establishment. American Christian fundamentalists with fanatical anti-socialist tendencies and hostility towards other religions, on the other hand, enjoyed the patronage of big business as well as the state.

There have been many instances where religion has served as the main organised resistance to the reactionary state; in recent times, Islam has played this role most effectively. However, once the struggle was won, with imperialist support in Afghanistan and in the face of imperialist opposition in Iran, the Islamic revolution failed its people by replacing one form of state oppression with another.

In South Asia, the generally loosely knit religious structures without a central authority like the Hindu religions and forms of Buddhism, as well as the socially more coherent branches of Islam, and the relatively better organised Christianity have produced religious leaders who have emphasised tolerance towards other religions and a progressive, secular approach to society. But in the past five decades we have also seen various forms of reactionary religious ideology and fundamentalism accompanying and aiding the rise of reaction in post-colonial South Asia.

While rationalists and progressive religious thinkers have had some success in helping communities to adapt to modern society, they have not been equipped to deal with the emergence of religion as a reactionary modern political force siding with imperialism. While there is little ambiguity about the theoretical Marxist position on religion, opportunist politics has tempted several Marxist political parties to

compromise with religion, leading to their betrayal of Marxism as well as the oppressed classes. That secularism is undermined consciously and with the connivance of the reactionary state in many instances is not unexpected, but the tendency for the opportunist left to pander to forces of religious hegemony, although not universal, is more worrying and needs to be dealt with.

This essay examines briefly the extent to which secularism has been undermined in society by the upsurge in religious parochialism in Sri Lanka, and the implications of this trend for the liberation struggles of the nationalities against chauvinist and imperialist oppression and for social justice. It also explores ways in which the trend could be reversed through collective social effort.

The essay deals with the emergence of religion and religious extremism as a political force, and state patronage and partiality towards the dominant religion; religion as a political force and its role in the resolution of other social contradictions; the case for secularism; and the prospects for the struggle for secular politics.

2. The rise of religion as a political force

Colonial rulers had a willing partner in the religious establishment in the metropolis and religious conversion was the means for one and the end for the other. The various Christian missionaries who enjoyed colonial state patronage took advantage of social backwardness of the people, aggravated by colonial rule, as well as the social inequality and injustice based on caste and class. As the intentions of the missionaries were not entirely altruistic, while having created a Christian elite group, they soon found accommodation with the traditional elite.

Attractions of modern education, state employment and elevation of social status, however, continued to serve as a bait to attract converts from among the traditional elite. It was with emergence of an educated Sinhala Buddhist middle class in the South and its Tamil Hindu (Saivaite) counterpart in the North that religious identity became a socio-political issue leading to Buddhist and Hindu revivalism. What was significant was that while the attitude of the revivalists was confrontational towards the Christian Churches but less so towards the colonial state and did not demand independence for the country.

It is worth noting that in India too the religious revivalists and reformists while being assertive in their position regarding 'Hinduism' stopped short of a call for independence until after the independence movement gathered momentum. What is significant is that in Sri Lanka and in India the 'nationalist' movement had in it a significant component of religious revivalists who influenced the movements in ways that divided the people on communal lines based on religion. Regional, linguistic and ethnic forms of nationalism remained dormant until the approach independence from colonial rule; and the political struggle against oppression by caste emerged alongside the nationalist movement.

Although the religious revivalists attempted to locate the religion of the majority at a central position in the struggle against colonial rule, the interests that they represented were not that of the broad masses in that religious group. Its driving force comprised the newly emergent elite classes backed by a section of the educated middle classes; and it took advantage of the numerical majority, to whip up sentiments to frighten the majority of the community about threats to its existence not so much from colonial rule but local religious groups.

Targeting Muslims was not surprising in India or Sri Lanka, since, despite the differences in circumstances between India and Sri Lanka, Muslim traders were important rivals to their Hindu and Buddhist counterparts in the two countries. In Sri Lanka, Sinhala Buddhism had as its initial target Christian missionaries, and interestingly there was no communal clash between Buddhists and Protestant Christians but there was an attack against Roman Catholics in the Western Province near the end of the 20th Century.

Conversion to Protestant Christianity among the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka happened among the upper classes and the upper castes and caste groups that had sufficiently advanced themselves to be socially assertive. Also caste identity overrode the difference between Buddhism/Hinduism and Protestant Christianity, and converts from the elite classes were quite at ease to swap their English-educated Sinhala or Tamil Christian identity for an English-educated Sinhala Buddhist or Tamil Hindu identity. This was more common among Sinhala Christians than Tamil Christians to the extent that several of the later day champions of Sinhala Buddhism were one-time Christians or had a Christian ancestry. The Roman Catholics with a

long history of persecution under the Dutch, and to a less extent the British, and a larger oppressed class component than the Protestants, were more loyal to their religious identity than the latter. The leadership of predominantly Tamil Speaking Muslims too tended to emphasise their religious rather than linguistic identity for a variety of social and political reasons.

The targeting of Muslims by Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists during the riots of 1915 was a significant turning point in the history of the relationship between the nationalities, and the signs that Sri Lankan (then Ceylonese) identity was going to be interpreted as Sinhala, in essence Sinhala Buddhist, identity became clear in the decades that followed. Even before independence it was only the left parties, the LSSP and the CP, which were truly Sri Lankan and secular in outlook. Sinhala-Christian accommodation, however, prevented the Sinhala nationalists from openly adopting the Sinhala Buddhist ideology at least until the Buddhist priests became a major political force in 1956.

Although in general religious identity was hostile to left politics and in particular Marxism, the left parties had supporters among Buddhist and even Hindu clergy in the early years. The Catholic Church was openly hostile to the left and was openly supportive of the pro-imperialist UNP up to the mid 1960's. Elite class interests dominated Muslim politics so that hostility to the left was strong among the Muslim clergy and other religious figures. However, the left, especially the Communist Party, had a strong Muslim presence at various levels from among the working class and the educated secular Muslim intellectuals.

Although the partiality of the colonial state towards an English-educated elite and its continuation under the UNP was the pretext for a call to redress the injustice to the deprived masses which contributed very much to the electoral success of the SLFP-led coalition in 1956, the benefit to the oppressed masses was marginal. Despite an anti-imperialist national bourgeois agenda, some reformist measures and expansion of social welfare, the class interests were elitist and its Sinhala Buddhist identity became increasingly explicit. The UNP was not slow to take advantage of the surge in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism to which the leadership of the UNP had contributed.

State sponsored colonisation schemes had already led to the Sinhala encroachment of Tamil and Muslim areas in the East and to this was added the approach of occupying pockets of territory under various

pretexts by laying claims to the existence of Buddhism in the region. Setting up a Buddhist shrine by placing a statuette of the Buddha under a Bo tree and then enlarging it into a temple and taking over more territory with the tacit support of the state has been a standard technique since the mid-1950s. Distorted versions of history has also been the basis to claim that much of the North East belonged to the Buddhists or was under Sinhala rulers at some time and therefore rightfully belongs to the Sinhala Buddhists.

Chauvinistic interpretations of improvised versions of history, presented as the glorious past of the Sinhalese (and of course Buddhism), had tremendous appeal among the Sinhala rural masses, and the portrayal of other nationalities as aliens, invaders and destroyers of the Sinhala civilisation and Buddhist values contributed to parochial thinking and helped to consolidate the position of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism. The state through the school curricula and the media played an important part in the process. This tendency was on the rise since around the 1960s, and saw a steep rise since 1977 when spokespersons of the government made no secret of their intention to 'Sinhalise' the North East.

The increased scale of pampering of the Buddhist clergy by the state since 1956 and purchasing political support from members of the clergy by political parties in return for material favours has contributed to the corruption of the clergy and divisions among the clergy on party political lines and to the emergence front organisations of political parties comprising members of the clergy. The net result is that the Buddhist clergy has become politicised as a group which, with a remarkable few exceptions, upholds Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism. Although a loosely knit organisation called the Eksath Bhikkhu Peramuna played a role in the election of the SLFP led government in 1956, obstructing the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact addressing the Tamil national problem, and finally in the assassination of SWRD Bandaranaike in 1958, the clergy did not have a political existence separate from the main chauvinistic political parties, until the launching of the Jathika Hela Urumaya, which gave prominence to Buddhist Clergy.

The state and the Sinhala Buddhist capitalist classes have during the past three decades gone a long way towards imposing a Sinhala Buddhist identity on the landscape, work places, the media and the social domain. The Mahanayake priests of the Siamnikaya (with its twin

power centres at Asgiriya and Malwatte), Amarapura, Ranayanikaya chapters of Buddhism have been made politically important to the point that not merely consultation with them but their endorsement has been made a minimum requirement for the solution of the national crisis. Besides the formal Buddhist establishments have emerged a number of political fronts comprising Buddhist priests affiliated to various chauvinistic political parties as well as explicitly Sinhala Buddhist political organisations. Even important lay organisations like the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress whose activities were intended to concern religious affairs too had become politicised to form an important section of the chauvinist lobby obstructing a just solution to the national question.

That the Buddhist clergy like most other clergy was corrupt has been a long-standing complaint. Many priests have been notorious for their breach of the Buddhist rules of discipline and desire for worldly pleasures; and this has since the 1980s been a subject of public debate and discussion with some Buddhist clergymen publicly denouncing the Buddhist Mahasanghas for the state of affairs. But none of this has even dented the importance of the Buddhist clergy to chauvinist politics.

The Catholic Church was once the most political religious establishment but has avoided direct involvement in politics since the mid-1960s. With the Catholic population almost equally distributed between the Sinhala and Tamil nationalities, the Church has been badly divided on ethnic lines since the 1970s and the clergy is now identified with nationalism of one kind or the other. Although the Church is now less virulent in its opposition to the left, the establishment has not been approving of the spread of left ideology within the community since the 1960s and surviving as a small but resilient force. In the absence of a strong left movement, the role of the Catholic Church in politics is likely to be confined to alignment with Tamil nationalism in the North East and conservative Sinhala nationalism in the South.

Protestant Christians have a large middle class component and the Protestant establishment has accommodated a diversity of political identities, including a tiny but active minority with a historical affinity for the LSSP. While Protestant Christians have individually had a strong

presence across the political spectrum, the religious leadership has tended to cater to elitist and middle class interests.

Since the 1970s the traditional Protestant Churches have been besieged by well-funded evangelical Christian organisations, many with roots in the US. They are actively involved in proselytisation and often accused of using unethical methods involving public performances of miracles as well as using money and other material inducements, much to the resentment of religious Buddhists and Hindus. They are also bitterly hostile to the left as well as to armed struggle, but keep off political work that would earn the wrath of the state.

The Muslims do not have a central religious authority, and the rise of Muslim nationalism and the emphasis on Islamic identity have made religious considerations important to political work. The pursuit of opportunist politics by Muslim political leaders to the neglect of the genuine social and political concerns of the masses as well as the rise of Islamist politics internationally, largely in response to the anti-Muslim, anti-Arab imperialist agenda and collusion of many Arab and Muslim leaders with imperialism, and the effect of employment in the Middle East on social life among other factors has led to the emergence of strong Islamist groups. Although they are not a strong political force, they have had a serious impact on the social life of Muslims, especially women. Contradictions exist between the emergent Islamists and the more traditional mosques and their implications for the political direction of Muslim nationalism remains to be seen.

A major victim of the rise of Muslim nationalism and the emphasis of Islamic identity has been the left movement, in which until well into the 1970s there was a strong Muslim presence which made valuable contributions at every level in carrying forward the leftist cause. The emphasis of religion runs the risk of going beyond the threshold of identity to demand conformity of individual members of the community; and that could make not only Marxists but also progressive and left thinkers vulnerable to attack by conservative and reactionary elements as well as opportunist politicians.

Hindus in Sri Lanka have no formal religious authority or a clergy to preach religion or to make rulings on matters relating to religious theory

or practice. Its survival has been through social practice that has been susceptible to change. However, the Hindu revivalist movement in the North since the late 19th century helped to consolidate religious values, as upheld by the Hindu Vellala elite. Unlike Buddhist revivalists who despite its elitist class interests addressed the Sinhala Buddhists as a whole, the Hindu revivalists were narrower in their outlook and were concerned the defence of Hindu Vellala interests against the threat of Christian proselytisation. Rather than fight to eliminate caste oppression, Hindu revivalism defended the caste hierarchical structure as well as the practice of untouchability.

Various individuals ranging from Hindu social workers to self-proclaimed sages and god-men as well as Hindu organisations have cropped up, claiming to speak on behalf of the religion and the religious community. Since the middle of the last century, under Indian influence, organisations of devotees of cult figures like Satya Sai Baba and Guru Maharaj among many others have mushroomed, as well as temples for various deities, like Hanuman for instance, hitherto unknown in the country. Their appeal is mostly to the middle classes while some cater to the affluent.

Hindu fascist organisations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) of India too have made inroads into Hindu affairs in the country with some elitist Hindu organisations promoting the anti-Muslim and anti-Christian agenda of the VHP in connivance with rabidly Sinhala Buddhist individuals and groups.

3. Political impact of religion

The hold of religion on the Sri Lankan individual varies. Although the proportion of those who strictly abide by their religious code is small, a majority of the population has some form of religious faith, and at mass level there is tolerance towards other faiths. Religious practices have to different extents influenced each other, especially in the case of Buddhism and Hinduism because of the long period of coexistence. In addition, fairly healthy interaction has existed between the nationalities even after the rise of chauvinism and narrow nationalism, so that there has long been a long tradition of religious tolerance, despite mischievous acts of provocation by religious extremists.

The Sinhala Buddhist elite and the more advantaged sections of the clergy have a vested interest in making Buddhism the state religion and have succeeded in securing for it a special place in the constitution, which also guarantees the rights of other religions. Besides the benefits enjoyed by the Buddhist clergy through the elevated status that they have in the Sinhala Buddhist community, successive governments have granted various special privileges for the clergy, in actual practice the Buddhist priests. This has further contributed to the abuse of privilege and breach of the rules of discipline by a large section of the clergy.

The rise in religious awareness and the accompanying increase in mass participation in religious activities meant an increase in income as well as the wealth in the control of the religious establishments, trustees and owners of places of worship and head priests. It also meant an increase in influence for religious leaders in the affairs of the community including politics.

The prominence given to Buddhism in the affairs of the state and the rise in religious awareness also led to the introduction of religious rituals in public and state functions which had for long been secular and a tendency for individuals and organisations to make a public display of religious identity, especially that of Buddhism. Besides religious festivals, what would normally have been solemn occasions for religious observations are also exploited for such display, and commercial interests too promote such trends for their own gains.

Whether the multitude of stupas and statues of the Buddha that keep cropping up along with modern buildings to alter the landscape of the country mean a genuine rise in Buddhist awareness and return to the moral values upheld by Buddhism is thrown into doubt by the rise in crime rate, prostitution, drug abuse and social degradation in the past few decades.

The attitude of the religiously minded elite among the Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities is not fundamentally different, with the scale limited by the resources. Nevertheless, the appearance of posh-looking new and renovated Mosques especially in relatively poor areas with a large Sinhalese population has added to resentment against Muslims, and mosques have been destroyed not long ago in local anti-Muslim riots instigated by chauvinists and criminal elements.

Churches too have come under attack in recent times, and Sinhala Buddhist fanatics have less than three years ago set fire to churches and even tried to prevent Christmas celebrations following the death of Soma Thera, a populist Buddhist fundamentalist, whose death abroad following a heart attack was attributed to 'Christian conspiracy'.

Although Hindu temples as well as Catholic churches have been targets of bombing and shelling by the armed forces, it is the Tamil identity rather than Hindu identity that has been the target of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism.

The Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists are rather selective in its response to events affecting Buddhists and Buddhism internationally. While the response to the demolition of the Bamien Buddha statue in Afghanistan by the Taliban was a condemnation of Muslims as a whole and a call for building a replica of the statue in Sri Lanka, no notice has been taken of the oppression of the Chagma nationality of Bangladesh, a predominantly Buddhist community whose survival is under threat from capitalist predators as well as the state. Nor has there been much interest in the oppression of Buddhists by the Hindu Monarchy of Nepal; significantly it was the Maoist rebels who in the course of their armed struggle defended the rights of all religious minorities in Nepal. On the question of the US-sponsored Tibetan separatist project of the Dalai Lama, although loyalties are divided between the Lama and the Chinese government, for pragmatic reasons, the chauvinists do not wish to antagonise China.

In the period preceding the overthrow of the dictatorial monarchy of Nepal, the Sri Lankan Tamil media generally sided with the monarchy, even when international news reports made the defence of the Hindu monarch untenable. But for the occasional intervention by left and progressive writers, the Tamil media still refers to the Maoists who led the struggle to bring down the dictator as terrorists, while avoiding the use of that term to refer to the LTTE or any other armed Tamil group. This attitude is also evident in the tendency among Tamil nationalists to side unconditionally with India against Pakistan or China as well as to be supportive of the Indian state against oppressed nationalities or to be indifferent. This appears to be related to an affinity for India, based on imagined 'Hindu' and cultural identities.

Politically, illusions about India had been shattered by the conduct of the Indian armed forces in the North East between 1987 and 1989. But links between the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu elite and their Indian counterparts and patrons persist and play an important role in conditioning Tamil attitude towards India.

Ties with the Arab world were not strong among the Muslims, despite religious sentiments and the importance of Arabic to Islam. Orabi Pasha, exiled by the British from Egypt to this country in the late 19th century, played an important role in Muslim revivalism and to greater interest and pride in Arab world as well as to anti-colonial thinking. The assertion of a Muslim identity distinct from that of the Tamils was more political than religious, although religion served to emphasise the distinction. Insensitivity of Tamil nationalism to Muslim sentiments regarding their separate identity and delicate position as a nationality scattered across the island has, besides opportunist politics, hurt the affinity between the Tamil and Muslim nationalities.

Although sections of the Muslim leadership frequently express sentiments of international Islamic brotherhood, ties with Muslims in other countries are conditioned by considerations besides religious identity. Solidarity with Pakistan in conflicts with India exists despite disagreement on the way Pakistan is ruled. Although feelings are strong among Muslims about Palestine, and Afghanistan and Iraq since their invasion by the armed forces of a US-led alliance, the Muslim leadership has failed to give expression to these anti-imperialist sentiments and resentment about the conduct of the corrupt Arab regimes propped up by US imperialism. The ties that Muslim politicians and personalities have with various Arab governments lack in political will and vision.

Support of successive Sri Lankan governments since 1977 for US imperialism as well as their close ties with Israel in the pretext of the war have not prevented Muslim leaders from being partners in government. It is only when public anger among Muslims is strong on a specific event that Muslim leaders issue statements denouncing the oppressor or participate in mass demonstrations. Little pressure has been exerted on the government by Muslim leaders to correct the pro-imperialist stand taken by successive governments against the Palestinians and other Arab people.

Islamic fundamentalism, although inspired by international events and in some instances benefits from support from wealthy Arab states, owes its acceptance among a small but sizeable section of the population to the failure of the Muslim leadership. Although not a significant political force, it has helped to cultivate a climate in which the once active involvement of Muslims in Marxist political discussion and political activity could be readily denounced as Anti-Islamic and hence hostile to the community.

Although the Roman Catholic and Protest Christian establishments have a long history of anti-left politics, active resistance to left politics has diminished since the 1960s; while holding left views are permissible for individuals, questioning certain items of faith is sneered upon. While the religious establishment nominally distances itself from party politics, church leaders intervene when the interests of the establishment or important sections of the religious community are affected. Commendably, church leaders have been outspoken on violation of human and fundamental rights; but have, however, refrained from denouncing the political thought or political organisations, responsible for the act.

The escalation of the national question into war and the human tragedy resulting from it have affected religious establishments as well as sections of the clergy and there is a general desire for the resolution of the conflict. There are nevertheless serious differences in the perception of the national question and the war; as a result, dialogue among religious leaders has failed to achieve much more than joint prayers for peace and appeals to the warring factions to cease hostilities.

If one recognises the class interests behind religious fanaticism, one would realise that while dialogue between religious leaders could help in maintaining a voice of sanity, despite the Hindus only having temple priests but no religious leaders, religion or religious leaders alone cannot deal with mischief in the name of religion.

While all religious leaders and personalities are unanimous in their concern about the deterioration of moral and social values in society, they also seem almost unanimous in their silence about the main cause for such deterioration. They protest about effects without considering the cause, and prefer to blame the failure of society on the decline in the practice of religion.

Sections of the clergy, especially the Buddhist clergy, who are vociferous in denouncing many of the social evils and wrong social values that have become a serious threat to social harmony and stability in their respective religious communities, cannot be unaware that the open economic policy introduced in 1978 is responsible for many of the problems. They cannot be unaware of the role of imperialist domination and rivalry for regional domination in ruining the economy and propelling the country further into war. But the class interests of the religious establishments and religious leaders prevent them from taking a stand against foreign domination.

4. The case for secularism

Secularism is not an end in itself; and the case for secularism is based on social justice. Arguments based on feudal societies with rulers guided by moral and social values based on a religion will not suit a modern society based on rule of law and equality of all citizens before the law. Although laws based on religion have existed, they have been discriminatory, and adapting religious laws to modern societies with a single religion has itself been problematic, and in multi-religious societies they could run counter to certain religious beliefs.

Religion is a matter of personal faith and could be a guide to one's conduct in one's private life and in interactions with other individuals. However, in matters that concern the rights and responsibilities of the individual as a member of a society, to be fair by all members of a society where people do not share a common faith, rights and wrongs cannot be based on religious principles.

Religious leaders and members of the clergy cannot be above the law and, when they participate in non-religious social activities, they cannot be allowed special privileges under the law that will place them at an advantage over other participants.

Thus there is a need to separate the laws of the land with religious belief, and where there is incompatibility between religious laws and social laws and where religious belief is in conflict with natural justice, religion has to give way to the law. In multi-cultural societies, the legal system takes into consideration traditional practices within communities and personal laws specific to a particular community are applicable to matters that concern only that community. But such laws are not eternal and are subject to change with changes in the living conditions of the community.

Modern society, whether capitalist or socialist, has recognised the need to separate religion from the affairs of the state. A secular state does not deny religion its place in society, but in fact recognises the right of the individual to believe and practice a religion as well as to have no religious faith. The right to religious faith should also include the right of a member who belongs to that faith to question the faith free of fear of persecution and ostracism. Thus the collective right of a religious community to religious beliefs and practices exists in a secular society, subject to respecting the right to choice of the individual.

Religious interference in the affairs of the state and preferential treatment of one religion over another have over the centuries been detrimental to social harmony and needs to be averted and, if present eliminated. And there are a number of domains of social life from which religion should be excluded, even in societies comprising a single religious community.

Discrimination against individuals or communities on religious grounds either by the state or by public institutions and organisations leads to communal tension. Positive discrimination to rectify historical injustices suffered by underprivileged communities is, however, a healthy practice and may be applicable to religious groups, for example the faith and the system of worship of the Attho community, as a way of defending the identity of a community to protect against assimilation to a dominant religion by religious conversion and discriminatory practices.

Secularism also implies action to protect society from the abuse of religion. Protecting society from questionable practices based on superstition and myth, which are often justified in the name of religion.

Hence social taboos such as untouchability and exclusion of women from social functions on various sexist grounds need to be challenged and eliminated. Also, the practitioners of astrology, witchcraft and other such practices should be made answerable to the public, in the same way a practitioner of medicine, law or any other profession is.

5. The struggle to secularise politics

Legislation helps to counter discriminatory practices in society, but is by no means adequate. Many socially harmful beliefs and practices survive legislation in the name of culture and tradition. Thus the struggle for secularism needs to be on several fronts.

Confrontation of religion in a way that appears to deny the right of an individual or community to believe and practice its faith has been counterproductive. However, socially harmful practices need to be challenged in the open. Some success has been achieved by rationalists in India, the former state of Madras under the British, as well as in Sri Lanka in combating superstition, astrology and witchcraft. The struggle is being carried forward in India by campaigners for scientific thinking with some success against local charlatans but institutionalised malpractices by well-entrenched, self-proclaimed god-men still thrives, despite exposés, because of political influence and backing from the ruling elite and the media. In Sri Lanka, rationalism has weakened as a result of religion tightening its grip on society.

A state of hopelessness is a common cause for people to find solace and false hope in religion, astrology, and witchcraft in its various forms. The uncertainty faced by individuals as a consequence of the brutal events of the past three decades, and the decline of left and progressive politics have damaged community spirit and faith in one's self as an individual as well as a member of society in dealing with problems. Desperation is driving many to seek support from the supernatural.

The opportunistic surrender of the old left in the 1970s to religion had a negative impact on secular politics and a further blow was delivered by the JVP which, only ten years after its bomb attack on the Dalada Maligawa (the Temple of the Tooth), unashamedly embraced Sinhala

Buddhist chauvinism and capped it by seeking the blessings of the Mahanayakes for its political programme.

Invariably, leaders of all political parties, other than the genuine left, consult astrologers to plan their political moves, let alone their private lives. Many regularly visit prominent god-men of India. Such practices although mildly ridiculed on occasion by a section of the media, are not denounced as serious flaws amounting to political irresponsibility.

The campaign for secular politics is handicapped by the opportunism of political leaders in compromising with the most reactionary aspects of religion and encouraging religious rituals to infiltrate aspects of public life with a long secular tradition.

To secularise politics and public life is just the opposite of ridding religion from the lives of people, or to deny people the right to a religious faith or to practice it. Secularism needs not only to respect such rights but also protect them. Secularism seeks to protect religion from abuse by the exploiting classes and other social parasites to further their interests.

Secularism requires individuals and organisations to be responsible to society as a whole and to be answerable for their actions, and denies them the opportunity to use religion as a shield against any serious charge that may be directed against them. It requires that public affairs be conducted in a way that all sections of the society feel included and not discriminated against.

It is hard to undo the damage done by ethno-religious chauvinism; but there is no other way forward for society but to confront chauvinism in all its forms. An important first step could be a campaign demanding that the state defend the rights of people to believe or not believe in a religion of their voluntary choice and to place all religious faiths on an equal footing.

Questioning archaic beliefs, malpractices and social injustice in the name of tradition and religion within communities is necessary but needs to be done without offending sensibilities. It is not a good practice for a non-member of a community to denounce beliefs and practices within that community; but it is not wrong to make healthy and

positive criticism of ideas and actions in the public domain that concern public interests.

Secular tolerance of beliefs and practices within religious communities is by no means an endorsement of such beliefs and practices. Campaigns against superstitious as well as other socially harmful beliefs and practices should be initiated from within the communities concerned. Equally, the campaign for secularism is most effective when it comes from the communities in whose name discriminatory practices are justified.

Rationalists and social reformers have done commendable work for the secular cause in the early and middle parts of the last century. But they could not achieve their goals; and some of their achievements have now been reversed. We need to learn from their successes and failures.

They have important lessons for those who seek to achieve social reform free of politics. One reason why many rationalists and reformers kept a distance from political work was that they were disappointed with parliamentary politics and the opportunism of parliamentary politicians. Revolutionary politics succeeded in transforming society where both parliamentary politics and social reform have failed, but it too had its reversals.

The task before the Marxist Leninists is to combine the positive aspects of past struggles for secularism with the demands for social justice and make it part of a broad-based political programme for democracy and social justice.

The Liberation Struggle and Political Killings

Mohan

All forms of social oppression are based on violence. However, violence is not used on all occasions. People are trained in various ways so that fear of violence is deeply imprinted at all times in the minds of the oppressed. Violence and fear of violence function are organised to function at various levels.

In slave and feudal societies the ruling classes were capable of directly denying the rights of people, restrict their freedom, and punish people when they defy authority. Equality of all before the law became an accepted social rule only after the arrival of capitalist society. Whether it is the actual practice is another matter. Yet, in advanced capitalist countries, there is the rule of law, at least in form. When the law is openly breached objections could be voiced from within the society. When law breached in secrecy is exposed, it could be a cause for crisis for those in power. Nevertheless, the administration of law and justice defend and protect private property, private control over means of production, and unequal partnership in production, which are the fundamental causes for social inequality. The violence underlying social oppression is implemented behind façades such as maintaining law and order, prevention of subversion of the state, safeguarding national interests, and national defence.

The state is the highest form of institutionalised oppression. The dominant ruling class resorts to oppression in order that it could secure its position, safeguards its class interests and continue to exploit the working classes. Its oppression extends beyond the working class and other toiling masses in its territory to other nations and nationalities. We have witnessed repeatedly in recent times the suppression of resistance and rebellion against such oppression of nationalities, minority groups, and marginalised sections of the population, by the use of violence legitimised by law as well as by means that transcend law. That is how violence becomes inevitable in the struggle against oppression.

Marxism has from the outset emphasised this point. Lenin and Mao Zedong have repeatedly emphasised the inevitability of violence in the fundamental transformation of a society. But the need for the violence is created by the state which is an instrument of class oppression and other means of oppression of the ruling classes.

Marxists do not prescribe that everything could be resolved through violence nor do they claim that violence is the only means of resolving contradictions. If anyone makes such claims in the name of Marxism, that would be childish and diametrically opposed to Marxism. Lenin's unwavering position was that individual violence against the class enemy too is futile and harmful to the struggle for social justice.

Mao's study of contradictions puts forward the concept of contradictions among the people and expands on it. It makes clear that it is only the contradiction with the enemy that needs to be resolved by violent means. In referring to the enemy, it is nowhere said that everyone taking the side of the enemy is forever an eternal enemy and needs to be eliminated through violent means. On the contrary, the study emphasises uniting with all those with whom unity is possible in order to isolate the enemy and goes to the extent of winning over those on the side of the enemy to the side of the people. Annihilation of the enemy forces is not a matter of killing off everyone on the enemy's side. The Marxist Leninist position requires that every opportunity should be used to win over those who joined the enemy by force of circumstances.

If on this basis we look at the armed struggle in Nepal, of the between 12 000–13 000 people killed during the past decade, only around 2000 had been killed by the Maoists. The vast majority was killed by the armed forces of the Nepali state.

In Sri Lanka, with a fierce war raging in the North-East, the number of killed since the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) alone has exceeded several thousands. It will be useful to compare the number of lives lost in Nepal, several times more populous than Sri Lanka, where the Maoists had brought under their control 90% of the country with the situation in Sri Lanka.

The war in the North-East has claimed the lives of over 100 000. Many times more have been made desolate and have been forced to leave the country. During 1988–89, close to 100 000 have been

destroyed by the armed forces of the state and by the JVP. But the people did not benefit from it in any way.

Although it is now five years since the CFA came into effect and is nominally in place, people are being killed in various ways. The government is killing people by aerial bombing with the help of satellite images provided by the US and by attacks from land and sea. Deserving to be equally denounced are, incidents in the South such as the bomb attacks on three buses in which innocent Sinhalese civilians have been travelling. The government uses such events as the pretext to intensify its various activities carried out in the South in the name of national security and combating terrorism such as the harassment of people by the armed forces, and the troubling and torturing of Tamils. In the North-East it is justifying and intensifying its brutal attacks.

Besides, the Tamils are also subject to trouble by various armed groups and criminal gangs involved in kidnapping, demanding protection money and ransom, threats, and murder. These are not carried out by Sinhala chauvinists or Sinhala criminal gangs or the armed forces of the state or the police. Although it is often claimed that these cruel acts are carried out with the connivance and consent of the state, the cruelty is perpetrated by armed Tamil gangs. Continuing clashes between the LTTE and pro-government Tamil militias as well as rivals comprising former liberation movements do not only manifest as killing and kidnapping of members of the organisations but also affect anyone who could be suspected of sympathy or support for such an organisation as well as members of their families.

If those concerned would only give a thought about how these events are ruining Tamil society, they would act differently. All killings occurring outside direct armed confrontation should be considered as acts of crime. It is not permissible for ordinary citizens, irrespective of the community to which they belong, to be hurt or killed.

Individual killings do not help liberation or the struggle against oppression in any way. On the contrary, they lead to a climate of greater confusion and to further state oppression. Therefore, everyone who cares for the society and has an interest in the liberation of the Tamils should come forward to bring to an end the acts of cruelty taking place within the Tamil community.

A considerable section of the Tamil community is tired of war and is disappointed and frustrated in its expectations of the liberation struggle. Outside the North-East many have become alienated from their community to the extent that they care for nothing other than their own safety and security. Especially among the middle classes the desire to leave the country is strong. While oppression and discrimination by the chauvinist state are important reasons, what is it that stops the Tamil people from uniting in struggle for their rights?

At this point, it is useful to take a look at the history of the liberation movements. The Tamil liberation movements rejected the concepts of mass line, mass politics and mass struggle to adopt an approach where a super-heroic armed force will would win liberation. Many young fighters expected an early victory. They placed great hopes on foreign support. Anticipation of foreign intervention did much damage to the self confidence and militancy of the Tamil community. Placing their faith mainly on arms led to an underestimation of political work and the role of the people by the movements. As a result, rather than act from the point of view of the Tamil people they acted from the point of view of dominance of each group. The pathetic situation that we witness in which Tamil militant groups join hands with the armed forces of the state is its direct consequence.

The task before us has been made very difficult. But it is not too late. Making the liberation struggle of the Tamil people a people's struggle and enabling democratic mass participation in the struggle in it would lead to robust unity among the oppressed Tamil people and thereby make way to strengthen the liberation struggle and to prevent unnecessary loss of life.

[Translation of article in Tamil from Puthiya Poomi, February 2007.]

May Day Statement of the NDP

30th April 2007

Comrade SK Senthivel issued the following May Day Statement on behalf of the Central Committee of the New Democratic Party.

Chauvinistic war efforts that have been made in a way that they make the national question more complex and capitalist measures that are being implemented on the basis of the acceptance of imperialist globalisation are leading the country to doom. The consequent burdens of suffering caused by war and economic crisis are being borne to the limit of endurance by the workers, peasants and other toiling masses. Meantime, the working people are distracted by means of differences of race, religion and language so that they do not recognise the chains of wage-labour bondage and deception under capitalism, If the working class and other toiling masses do not politically understand this situation and mobilise to struggle against the forces of the capitalist ruling class, it will not be possible to recover or find salvation from today's tragic situation. This year's May Day message of the New Democratic Party emphasises this point.

Nearly three hundred thousand people have been displaced by the war efforts in the North-East and are experiencing untold suffering and have been made destitute with blood and tears marking their daily life. Amid this, people are stunned by fear due to the spate of killings, kidnappings and disappearing. Human rights are being thrown to the winds. The people of the North-East live a life of misery where on one side they live in fear of military action and on the other they stretch out their hands for their daily meals. It is the workers, peasants and other toiling masses who are most affected by this situation and are pushed down to the bottom of the pile.

At the same time plans carried out under the guidance and direction of organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF has led to worse economic crises. Multinational companies and foreign capital are

robbing the countries resources. The daily increase in prices and the rise in cost of living are a net result of these. The rise in fuel prices is a monthly occurrence. Transport and service charges continue to be raised. Trade unions that seek to question these matters are threatened and distracted in the name of war.

Hence the party emphasises that the workers, peasants and other toiling masses should resolve on this May Day to unite among themselves to struggle against the gigantic problems facing them.

SK Senthivel
General Secretary, New Democratic Party.

NDP Statement to the Media

SLFP Proposals Encourage War Efforts.

02-05-2007

Comrade SK Senthivel issued the following statement regarding the proposals put forward by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party for solving the national question on behalf of the Politburo the New Democratic Party.

The proposals put forward by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party for solving to the national question appear to be an appendix to reinforce the scheme to carry forward the war. These proposals please only the forces of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism and do not in any way address the issues of the fundamental rights of the Tamil people or their fair aspirations for autonomy. Thus it is a waste of time to examine these proposals.

The proposals put forward by the SLFP are weaker than proposals that had been put forward unsuccessfully in the past, and fail to draw on the positive aspects of earlier proposals. These proposals that only give expression to extreme Sinhala chauvinist tendencies are mere words in print that do not deserve examination. They seem to be aimed to ridicule and reject the forces that oppose war and emphasise unity and the rights of the Tamil, Muslim and Hill Country Tamils.

The proposals appear to endorse tendency to push the country further into destruction by war, by failing to understand the political reality

facing us. The NDP wishes to point out that there no benefit is likely to come out of these proposals.

SK Senthivel
General Secretary, New Democratic Party.

NDP Statement to the Media

NDP Denounces Expulsion of Tamils from Colombo

08-06-2007

Comrade SK Senthivel issued the following statement regarding the proposals put forward by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party for solving the national question on behalf of the Politburo the New Democratic Party.

The act of forcibly expelling Tamils occupants from lodges in Colombo and herding them like cattle into buses and dropping them in locations like Vavuniya and Batticaloa exposes the cruelty of nation oppression. No one who respects humanity and human rights will approve of this uncivilized act. The tragedy that befell the Tamil occupants of lodges today could befall Tamil occupants of houses tomorrow. This act of violence carried out with chauvinistic arrogance by the security forces on the basis of ethnic and linguistic distinction is an aspect of acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing. It is part of the program to prolong the war, and the NDP denounces this act of chauvinistic perversion. It emphatically demands that the President and the government act to prevent the next past of this act.

It is claimed in speech and in writing that this country protects democratic and human rights such as the right to survive, the right to travel, the right of abode in a place of one's choice, the right of speech and writing and the right of congregation. But the forceful expulsion and deportation that took place day-before-yesterday show that Tamils do not enjoy those rights. There is no further evidence needed for the denial of democracy and violation of human rights.

SK Senthivel
General Secretary, New Democratic Party

Lawyers Meet Detained Party Members

On 28th May, lawyers Mahinda Jayawardane, E Thambiah, S Thevarajah and Tilak Wijesinghe met NDP Comrades V Mahendran, R Jeyaseelan, S Sugeshanan, S Mohanraj and N Krishnapriyan as well as seven other detainees including Comrade Sarathkumara Fernando of the Railway Workers Union at the Boosa Detention Camp, where they have been held for the past four months following arrest by police from the Terrorist Investigation Department (TID). The lawyers said that they were permitted to meet the detainees only in the presence of TID personnel, and that meeting was not a free meeting.

The detainees informed the lawyers that the TID police were trying to secure confessions from 28 detainees including them, and wanted to know the legal position regarding confession of crime. The lawyers advised them that if a confession of crime is made it could be used against them as evidence against them in a court of law.

Those arrested under the prevailing Emergency Regulations (Anti-Terrorist) are refused permission to meet or discuss freely with their relatives or lawyers. Members of the family could meet the detainees only on submission of documents authenticated by the Graama Niladhaari (Village Officer) and that too for only a few minutes. They are encircled by TID personnel so that free conversation is not possible.

Although the above named lawyers had applied to the Secretary, Ministry of Defence and to the TID several months ago, permission to meet was granted in writing only towards the end of April, and the date for the meeting was in late May.

The detainees whom the lawyers met had been detained for a few days at the TID, Colombo and then transferred to the Boosa Detention Camp close to Galle. It should be noted that they have not been presented at any court of law to date. Detainees at the Boosa Detention Camp are also taken to Colombo or other places for inquiry.

Under the prevailing Emergency Regulations, it is possible to detain anyone at a detention camp or a police station for up to a year without presenting at a court of law. Under the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act one could be detained for as long as 18 months.

Emergency Regulations specify that if a statement of confession was obtained in the presence of a police officer of rank not below Assistant

Superintendent of Police, that statement could be accepted as a confession.

Complaints have been made on behalf of some of the detainees to the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission (SLHRC). It has been stated in the complaints that their fundamental rights have been violated because their arrest and detention are illegal.

Although the TID has, after considerable delay, responded to the SLHRC, the responses lack detail.

Also, three dates had been fixed for inquiring into the complaints and no one from the TID was present for the inquiry. The summons sent out by the SLHRC had stated that failure to reply to the SLHRC and failure to be present at its inquiries amount to contempt of court.

It is significant that the TID has failed to respond in detail to the questions asked by the SLHRC and also failed to be present before the SLHRC on the three dates of inquiry.

[A footnote: The NDP Secretariat has been advised that four of the NDP detainees have now been transferred to remand prison in Welikada, Colombo. This means that they are likely to be produced before a magistrate soon.]

Sri Lankan Events

Muthur East – Sampur: Converging Interests

The Government by extraordinary gazette notification dated 30th May 2007 declared that a vast area covering Foul Point, Illankanthai, Uppural, Thoppur, Kattaiparichchan and Muthur in the Trincomalee District a High Security Zone implying that tens of thousands of Tamils who fled the region in 2006 would not be allowed to return home. But according to the gazette notification "No person shall enter the area comprising Muthur East/Sampur High Security Zone in any boat or vessel or in any other manner, or having entered, remain within or ply any boat or vessel within the Muthur East/Sampur High Security Zone except under the written authority of the Competent Authority." The Tamils who now live as refugees in Batticaloa insist that they be allowed to return to their ancestral lands and held a peaceful protest rally on Wednesday June 20, 2007, the International Refugees Day.

In addition there are plans to set up a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the region Sampur to attract local and foreign investments, and its implications for planned colonization by Sinhalese need no elaboration. The net result will be that the land from which the Tamils have been effectively expelled will be settled with Sinhalese.

The most important project in the region at present is the proposed 300 MW coal-fired power plant to be set up with Indian assistance in Sampur. This project is of importance to India for purposes of regional hegemony.

The gazette notification has to be seen in this context and read in the context of the theatre of India's warning to Sri Lanka in May against obtaining arms for defence from China and Pakistan. Many Sinhala chauvinists and Tamil nationalists were easily misled by the warning, which is now clearly seen to be yet another Indian trick to distract attention from the deals going on behind the scenes with the chauvinistic government to ensure Indian hegemony in Sri Lanka.

Expulsions and Explanations

The eviction of Tamils from lodges in Colombo, where they were in short-term occupation, and the subsequent expulsion of several hundred of them from Colombo in early June was denounced by nearly all but the most rabid Sinhala chauvinist elements.

Interestingly the US promptly criticised the move by the government while India, strangely, failed to comment. Equally strange was the lack of organised mass protests in the streets of Tamilnadu.

Minister Keheliya Rambukwella claimed that all those who were expelled were terrorist suspects, and the police spokesperson claimed that no one was sent out of Colombo against his wishes and that transport was provided to those who volunteered to leave Colombo. Statements by those who were dropped in Vavuniya and Batticaloa gave a different account. The Prime Minister, in a rare conciliatory gesture towards the Tamils, apologised for the expulsions and by implication criticised the police and the defence establishment. But the apology was tarnished by utterances by his cabinet colleague Jeyaraj Fernandopulle who declared that there was nothing wrong in the expulsion. The President declared that there will be an inquiry into the incident.

What was a most positive and significant outcome was the public response to the expulsion. Public protests included a large number of Sinhalese and Muslims who unreservedly denounced the expulsions. Remarkably, the Centre for Policy Alternatives was able to obtain a Supreme Court injunction against expulsion of Tamils from Colombo.

Kidnapping Crosses Ethnic Boundaries

The spree of killings, kidnappings and disappearances continues in the country with one significant difference. The perpetrators of the crimes are now targeting hitherto untapped resources.

Sinhalese businessmen were kidnapped in May and several Muslims in May and June. The police have as on earlier occasions unable to help. While the government pleaded ignorance and Muslims were irritated by frivolous remarks by some spokespersons. Interestingly, some pro-government Muslim political leaders thought it fit to claim that there

were no kidnappings, but the claim was strongly rebutted by other Muslim leaders.

The Party is Over

Attempts by veteran SLFP trade unionist and minister Alawi Maulana to patch-up the relationship between the dismissed minister Mangala Samaraweera and the President ended in failure. Following the granting of bail to former minister Sripathi Sooriyarachchi, held in detention on what once seemed an unbailable offence of the abuse of a state vehicle, and his release from detention the pair of former ministers have declared war against the government. They formed a new political party SLFP(P), P for people, which they announced at the tomb of the founder of the SLFP in Horagolla. They claimed the support of several SLFP MPs who they said will quit the government to join them at the right time, and invited former president Chandrika Kumaratunga to join them in the struggle to salvage the SLFP from the Rajapaksha brothers.

The SLFP parliamentary leadership declared that it will not deprive the two defectors of their parliamentary seats but warned that parliament would be dissolved in the event of an attempt to topple the government. The UNP solicited the cooperation of the two defectors, whose ideological inclinations would normally have been expected to be closer to the JVP than the UNP. Whether a new alliance of SLFP deserters and a UNP rid of its deserters is in the making remains to be seen.

Media under Threat

It has been the Tamil newspapers that had been the target of state repression of freedom of expression. Colombo-based Sudaroli and its sister paper Uthayan from Jaffna as well as the Thinakkural and its Jaffna edition have been regular targets and even recently the editor of Sudaroli has been subject to harassment.

With the exception of newspapers like the Sunday Leader which have been strongly critical of the government as well as of the JVP, as a matter of policy, harassment of Sinhala and English media and media personnel has been less common than for their Tamil counterparts.

Tamil media personnel have been attacked by JVP goons too on earlier occasions.

Since early this year attacks on newspapers critical of the government and government policy has been on the rise. The arrest of a Tamil journalist attached to the Maubima newspaper and freezing of its bank account (held in the name of an individual) were signs of things to come. Following the media publicity for the alleged threat to the Editor of Daily Mirror in mid-April regarding its publication of news relating to the human rights situation in the North-East, the newspaper has been cautious about publishing reports critical of the government.

The arrest of the proprietor of Maubima in hospital in June on charges of giving money to the LTTE, against a background of an earlier allegation by former minister Sripathi Sooriyarachchi that the LTTE was bribed by persons close to the President to persuade the Tamils to boycott the presidential polls, seems to have opened a can of worms. It is now claimed that the proprietor of Maubima was the person who arranged the deal, and having secured release on bail, he is now threatening to come out with the details. The Daily Mirror too has since mid-May been bolder in its criticism of the government with hostile cartoons and even damning stories.

What surprised many was the blocking since the first week of June of the fairly popular pro-LTTE website by Internet service providers in Sri Lanka, who claim that they acted on government instruction. The government, when confronted with the question, denied any such instruction. If that be the case, one wonders why the Tamilnet has not been unblocked yet. Interestingly scores of staunchly propagandist pro-LTTE websites are still accessible.

International Events

Bangladesh

In response opposition parties' protests last year against abuse of power by the government and its plans to manipulate parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Khalida Zia made a seemingly conciliatory gesture by proposing 'Blue Print Election' (BPE) scheduled for 22nd January. The opposition rejected the BPE as yet another move to manipulate from behind, and the government stepped down and a Caretaker Government (CTG) led by Fakhruddin Ahmed was sworn in on 12th January.

The caretaker government in the pretext of cracking down on corruption made several political arrests, initially of leading figures in the Bangladesh National Party, the former ruling party. The motive behind this was not recognised by the opposition until the military-backed CTG started to crack down on the Awami League, the main opposition party and a former ruling party. The matter came to a head when former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was blocked from boarding a flight home from London in April and was threatened with arrest. Hasina's defiance paid dividends and she was allowed to return.

People of Bangladesh are tired of corruption in high places and abuse of power by the government, and moves by the CTG received support as long as they addressed those matters. The CTG's style is highly authoritarian and its intentions suspect, while it enjoys the support of the imperialist powers since it will continue with the open economic policy and structural reform as dictated by the World Bank and IMF like the two rival bourgeois parties pursued while in power. Imperialists should be pleased with a 'stable' dictatorial government as long as it abides by their wishes.

The CTG while concentrating on its political agenda does not address issues like the cost of living and essential needs of the people. In the

pretext of uprooting illegal occupiers, the CTG continues to evict slum- and street-dwellers and even occupants of small rural shops, ignoring the High Court ruling requiring rehabilitation prior to eviction, thus throwing millions of poor out of homes and jobs. To whom the land freed of illegal occupation will finally go is cause for concern since recovered forest, plain land, hills and marshland went to big land grabbers in the past.

While the case for election reform and political reform is strong, the military-backed government is more concerned with its political battles. Fears for democracy are strong since the military ran the country for 15 years since it overthrew by a coup in 1975 the government of Mujibur Rahman, who had by then lost popularity, and assassinated him.

The task for democratic and progressive forces is to unite the people to overthrow the undemocratic CTG. In the long term, Bangladesh needs to be rid of the farcical theatre of what is effectively a two-party parliament and one-class rule, and move towards a people's democracy, for the country and its people to prosper.

Pakistan

The pro-US dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf is desperate in its struggle to hold on to power. Its policy of supporting US aggression against Afghanistan had resulted in deepening unpopularity and increased defiance by not only political opponents but also by the judiciary and the legal profession.

Musharraf in his desire to secure another five-year term with a controversial political manoeuvre sought to cow the judiciary and thereby have his way. The defiance of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in the face of attempts by Musharraf to remove him from office has emboldened the opposition further and has strengthened the campaign for a genuinely independent judiciary. Protests by lawyers and activists against the Musharraf's suspension of Chaudhry enjoy mass support. The parliamentary political parties too have begun to see their opportunity in these developments and former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Shariff have indicated an interest in returning home.

Even Musharraf's allies who helped him to form a government in 1999 after his dismissal of the government of Nawaz Shariff now demand that Musharraf should reconsider his plans and talk to all political parties and takes steps towards holding free and fair elections rather than get himself re-elected as President by the outgoing national and provincial assemblies.

While the stage is being set for various shady political deals for sharing the spoils of state power, the Musharraf government is cracking down on the Pro-Democracy Movement. Thousands of political activists had been arrested in a pre-emptive sweep by the police. Farooq Tariq, General Secretary of the Pakistan Labour Party who was arrested in May and released on bail was re-arrested in less than a month on 5th June and is now detained for 3 months. His arrest appears to be as direct result of his proactive role in the lawyer's movement in support of Chief Justice Chaudhry and his role in the campaign for media freedom.

Whoever fails Musharraf, who escaped several assassination attempts, he has loyal supporters: the Bush administration with no choice but supporting the general, and of course the Indian establishment to which Musharraf has made various concessions.

As for the people of Pakistan the cycle of corrupt parliamentary governments – military coups – repressive and unpopular military regime – popular protests – corrupt parliamentary governments cannot be allowed to go on for ever. The way out is not with Islamic fundamentalists who have proved to be divisive force in Pakistani society, but the re-emergence of a genuine left that seeks a democratic society outside the confines of bourgeois parliamentarism.

Nepal: Lessons in Bourgeois Democracy

Transition from an autocratic monarchy to a bourgeois democratic republic was not going to be easy for Nepal, and meddlers in high places in India and the US would do their utmost to ensure that the Maoists had to struggle all the way to become partners in power; and struggle even harder to implement their pro-people reforms.

The initial faith that the Maoists had in the sincerity of the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) has now given way to a more cautious approach. Interim

Prime Minister Koirala, a veteran in parliamentary opportunist politics and very much under Indian influence, did not miss a chance to cheat on his more progressive partners. The appointment of new diplomats without prior consultation earlier in the year rang an alarm bell and the Maoists did not hesitate to protest and warn that such moves could wreck the entire deal.

Arrangements for the elections to the Constituent Assembly (CA), originally scheduled for June 2007 were deliberately delayed so that the reactionary parties in the SPA could buy time to undermine the popular support for the Maoists. Reactionary elements also stirred up trouble among the Mahadesi minority nationality, which could have led to prolonged civil strife but averted by timely and positive response by the more progressive elements and the Maoists.

The Maoists warned the interim government and the sections of the SPA against dragging their feet about elections to the CA, which have now been fixed for November 2007. The Maoists also demanded that the state take over the properties of the monarch, whose powers as head of state had been removed. Undue delay by the state to act prompted the Maoists to encourage the people to take control of the land belonging to the King. It was popular pressure in various forms that persuaded the Nepali parliament to agree on the prospect of ridding Nepal of the monarchy.

It is against this background of reactionary conspiracy to reverse the gains of a decade long mass struggle that the Maoist leader Prachanda said that his party would take to the streets if reactionary forces conspired against the people's desire of establishing a republican order and called on party cadres to be ready for any eventuality. Another major leader Baburam Bhattarai asked party cadres to be on the alert about safeguarding national interests and national sovereignty which were under threat of interference by imperialistic forces

In an interview in May, Prachanda endorsed Mao Zedong's position that "without a people's army, people have nothing: "The liberation will stop without a people's army. Today the People's Army has caused women's liberation, a partial dissolution of the caste system and a breakdown for the class society in the liberated areas. This liberation is a result of the People's Army and without the people's own army this would not have been possible. Mao's basis for saying this was a total and scientific analysis of the fight ordinary people have to take with the

bourgeoisie. We have showed in practice that his theory was correct “.

India: CPI(M) Reveals its Class Loyalties

Recent actions of West Bengal's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government have again demonstrated clearly where the class loyalties of and the Left Front led by the CPI(M) lie.

The state government in its eagerness to set up Special Economic Zones (SEZ) went so far as to enable Salim Group of Indonesia (a crony capitalist beneficiary of the fascist Suharto regime) to set up a chemical hub in Nandigram by taking land away from the people. When the people resisted, not only the state police, but also hordes of CPI(M) goons turned on the protesters. On 14th March, several people of Nandigram were killed (the official figure is 14 but critics of the government claim that it is much higher), hundreds injured, several women raped by the attackers, and houses burnt down. The bad publicity rather than people's protest forced Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya to beat a temporary retreat on Nandigram.

Inspired by the spirited defiance of the people in Nandigram, the ongoing mass protest in Singur against the acquisition of nearly 1000 acres of land for the proposed Tata-Fiat project gathered further momentum. The claim of the state government and CPI(M) spokespersons that the owners of 90% of the land had already consented to part with their land was soon proven to be bogus. The battered but yet unbeaten Chief Minister Bhattacharya is still defiant on Singur, since a second retreat would be absolute humiliation to him and mark the end of the road for his plans for SEZs and other corporate deals in W Bengal. Dissent is, however, brewing within the Left Front in the state and within the CPI(M) across the country.

The right wing opposition in West Bengal led by Mamata Banerjee's All India Trinamool Congress which seeks to make a campaign issue of even the slightest public resentment against the state government did not miss out on Singur, and Mamata even went on a prolonged hunger strike to attract media attention. While the masses are not rallying behind her, she has become the best available shield for the CPI(M) whose defenders claim that attacks on the CPI(M)-led government will only bring the right wing to power. This line of attack is in conflict with

the line plugged by W Bengal's CPI(M) leaders that the trouble in Nandigram was the making of Naxalites and other terrorists.

The return of the reactionary right to power in the state does not rely merely on preserving a pseudo-left majority in the state assembly to implement the wishes of India's capitalists and imperialism. On the other hand, it requires the mobilization of the working masses of W Bengal to identify their enemy and fight for their rights.

The sore episode of Nandigram has thoroughly exposed the leaders of the CPI(M) and their allies in the media as well as embarrassed left intellectuals who have been sympathetic towards the CPI(M) despite its pathetic record in recent past. The silence of many of them, usually regular writers on a whole range of issues, on Nandigram and the half-hearted excuses that some of them have come out with on behalf of the state government serve as a measure of their embarrassment. But it takes more than to be embarrassment to save one's integrity. It is time that honest left intellectuals took a firm and principled stand on the underlying issues and question the conduct of the CPI(M) and other parliamentary left parties on their stand vis-à-vis imperialist globalization.

France: Swing to the Right

Nicolas Sarkozy's convincing victory in France's presidential election in May 2007 seemingly marked a sharp swing to the right. But elections to parliament in June painted a different picture to suggest that the people are not as strongly as earlier imagined in favour of a rightist agenda. Despite various excuses and explanations for the electoral failure of the French 'left' the fact is that the French left, be it the 'socialists' or the French Communist Party, is part of the establishment that makes little difference to the French imperialist agenda, although it has implications for social welfare and other local issues. This 'left' has yielded to racist pressure on issues concerning immigrants and the underprivileged, merely to ensure electoral victory.

Sarkozy's pledges to cut taxes, control trade unions, dismantle social welfare, and be tough on the unemployed, young offenders, and illegal immigrants; his pro-US and pro-Israel views; and his authoritarian style sound Thatcherite. Notably, not long ago, in 2005, Sarkozy referred to

youth of the rundown housing estates fringing the large cities as "scum" and vowed to mop up the areas.

The French left now has the option of fighting French Thatcherism by taking a genuinely pro-people stand or beat the Thatcherites by being more Thatcherite than them, as the now shamed Blair did in the UK.

Venezuela: Gathering Momentum

The Venezuelan government continued in its spirit of defiance of imperialism with its buyout of the country's top telecommunications company and of its biggest privately owned power company, controlled by U.S. firms and took control of its oil refineries in May.

President Chavez also announced in May that Venezuela has no need for the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund and that Venezuela will pull out of the IMF. There have been no IMF operations in the country for some time and hence the pull out in due course will be a mere formality.

While nationalisation of major industrial ventures under foreign control will not lead to socialism, it is an essential step in ridding the country of imperialist domination. Since the take over was done as a buy-out there is no question of the legality of the steps taken by the government. But that does not mean that the imperialists will take kindly towards these moves.

Imperialism saw its opportunity when in May the pro-US private television channel RCTV lost its legal battle to reverse an earlier government decision not to renew its licence. The RCTV was notorious for its campaign for the unlawful overthrow of the government by a coup and its role in distorting news to serve its aim. The government, unlike for example in Sri Lanka where nationalised media are reduced to mouthpieces of the government in power, is to use the channel for a new public TV station, Venezuelan Social Television (TVs), which will purchase programs made by independent producers and the government will have no say over the contents of the broadcast. Meantime RCTV will be allowed to operate via satellite. This is a far cry from the kind of control the US government exercises over the mainstream US electronic media on sensitive issues.

The Venezuelan government overcame the show of support for RCTV with counter-demonstrations in support of the move. Rather than stifle discussion on the subject, it encouraged public debate of the subject. This approach paid dividends and with growing international support, has silenced some of the South American critics who sided with the US to denounce the action of the Venezuelan government.

US: Heading towards Economic Crash?

Economic writers Steven Pearlstein and Robert Samuelson writing in the Washington Post in mid-June 2007 have warned about an impending US economic bust. Pearlstein's article concerned the extraordinary amount of debt compared to operating profits of companies currently subject to leveraged buyouts and warned that, when it is realised that the prices paid for these companies and the debt accumulated to support the acquisitions are unsustainable, the consequences will be disastrous. Samuelson warns of the prospect of rising interest rates and the consequent weakening of borrowing and the economy.

It will be useful to consider these fears in the context of the recent UN warning in its mid-year update that the US debt, now at well over \$3 trillion, could trigger the collapse of the dollar. It also drew attention to the slowing down of the US economy from 3.3 per cent in 2006 to 2.1 per cent in 2007, and that the persistent current account deficit in the US could lead to higher benchmark interest rates.

A failing economy has not necessarily meant an end to the imperialist policy of global aggression. It could on the other hand mean more war and more economic disaster until lessons are learnt.

Book Reviews

Problems of Defining a Nationality

***Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity*, MA Nuhman, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo 8, 2007, pp. 234 +xi, (price not stated).**

The book satisfies a long felt demand for clarifying matters relating to the evolution of Sri Lankan Muslims as a nationality, although the author prefers to stop short at identity as an ethnic group. The sections dealing with the emergence of Muslim awareness from among different group identities and the impact of the political changes since around the start of the 19th Century in shaping that identity and redefining it accordingly are well researched and lucidly presented.

The author correctly points out that the attitude of Tamil leaders like Ponnambalam Ramanathan not only helped to consolidate a Muslim identity as distinct from a Tamil identity and, at least in the South, to suspicion and distrust of Tamil political intentions. The author also draws attention to how the Federal Party, although not maliciously, denied a separate Muslim identity by designing a language based identity, namely "the Tamil Speaking People" and illustrating how this forced inclusion of the Muslims in the increasingly assertive Tamil national identity led to the worsening of relations between the Tamils and the Muslims.

The author also draws attention to a shift towards Sinhala as the medium of instruction in schools in the South and briefly comments on external factors like the lack of good Tamil medium schools, but does not go into that aspect in detail. He also draws attention to its implications for a common ethnic identity for the Muslims in terms of the warning by AMA Azeez in the 1950s, in his plea to the Muslims to retain Tamil as their language.

The sections on the process of Islamisation and the position of women in Muslim society are particularly instructive for non-Muslims,

and will help in shedding some of the biased views against Islam that are being systematically propagated.

The rest of this review draws attention to a few serious weaknesses in the book, which while not negating the usefulness of the book, could undervalue its worth and deserve to be addressed in a future edition or a sequel to the book.

Given the fact that the emergence of a Muslim ethnic identity and Muslim ethnic awareness are inseparable from political developments since early 19th Century, little is discussed in detail about important political events and issues, except the language issue.

An important aspect of the politics of the Muslims was their involvement in the left movement, the Communist Party in particular. Notably when the party split in 1964, the editors of the rival Tamil weeklies of the two factions were Muslims. Even into the 1970s the Central Committee of the Left Communist Party had several Muslims members. Interestingly, during the 1960s, when the communists were being hunted by the police in Jaffna, Muslims protected many party cadres in their homes. The relationship of progressive sections of the Tamils with Muslims was so warm that in the 1950s the communists were able to elect Abusally, a Muslim Mayor of Jaffna.

There has been a long tradition of respect for the distinct identity of the Muslims and warmth towards them dating back to the days of the reactionary Ponnambalam Ramanathan who had contempt not only for the Muslims, but also for all Tamils other than the Jaffna Saiva Vellala elite, based on caste, region and origin (in the case of Hill Country Tamils). His own brother Ponnambalam Arunachalam was far more enlightened than Ramanathan. The emphasis on Ramanathan to the neglect of movements like the Jaffna Youth Congress and the left tradition among Tamils, although traceable to the limitations of the sources of information, is damaging to goodwill between the two nationalities.

The rise of nationalism has hurt the left movement within every nationality. Among the Sinhalese the old left lost credibility by compromising with the chauvinistic national bourgeois SLFP, and among the Tamils owing to the old left being seen as party to Sinhala chauvinist oppression, but the genuine left is rebuilding among Tamils and Hill Country Tamils. Among Muslims the religious label is a serious

obstacle to left politics, and is an issue that needs to be addressed by progressive Muslims.

Since nationalism as well as other forms of ethnic politics have a distinct class identity, an analysis of the emergence of ethnic identity and with it nationalism cannot be complete without considering class interests within and outside the community concerned. The book has a tendency to emphasise the role of individuals over social phenomena and also runs the risk of over-estimating the importance of individuals.

Some of the statements about individuals like Baddiuddin Mahmud are from dubious hagiographic accounts. What seem to be benefits to the Muslim petit bourgeoisie are commended uncritically without examining the harm it has done to inter-community relations.

There are a few matters in which the publishers should act more responsibly. Copy editing, proofreading and compilation of the index should not be the burden of the authors alone.

SJS-

Sensational not Sensible

***The Queen of Deceit*, Victor Ivan, Ravaya Publication, Maharagama, 2007, pp. 189, Rs 500.00**

Sri Lankan parliamentary politics has never been a clean affair. Corruption in high places has been steadily on the rise since early days and has escalated following the opening up of the economy in 1978. Criminalisation of politics has accompanied corruption but it took much more to worsen the political climate and the continuing denial of a wide range of democratic freedoms and human rights.

The existence of newspapers and other media that stand up to threats posed by the state has helped significantly to bringing the dictatorial UNP regime to an end in 1994. Ravaya and its editor Victor Ivan have played a useful role in that context. Nevertheless, the role played by most of the media, including Ravaya, was not a conscious role of democratising the society. Theirs was an exercise in changing the pillow to cure the headache. They persuaded the people to change the pillow but the headache persisted even after the change, and they curse the pillow.

The allegations that the author of the book is making about the former president Chandrika Kumaratunga are serious and in any democracy worth its salt it would have led to an impeachment and even the stripping of political rights and a prison sentence. Such things cannot happen in Sri Lanka, except as acts of victimisation, because the political landscape has altered beyond recognition since 1977. Thus to speak about one politician today is to speak about politicians as a class and to denounce President Kumaratunga is to denounce the executive presidential system as a whole.

The book does not, however, follow that line of thinking. It picks out Kumaratunga and tends to convey the impression that she was the blackest of all the black sheep. There is absolutely no consideration of the role of chauvinistic politics or about the role of imperialism in bringing the country to its present sorry state. There is no thought given to class interests and class politics. Thus the book lies somewhere between a personal vendetta by the author against Kumaratunga and a somewhat subjective exposé of a corrupt head of state.

Some of the charges seem fairly well substantiated and make one wonder why the police are not probing into them. There are others like the claim that Kumaratunga orchestrated the bomb attack on her during the election campaign in 1999 which remind me of many conspiracy theories that float around, and built on flimsy evidence. Many questions remain unanswered about the murder of Kumar Ponnambalam. However, to suggest that a message with a wrong date from the President's office comprises incriminating evidence is demanding too much of an intelligent reader.

If Sri Lanka is, as the author suggests in his introduction to the Sinhala version, not a particularly civilised country and a particularly immoral country, I wonder what purpose is served by a book of this nature which only tells us what to expect or what we should have already known.

Had the author gone deeper into what underlies the ills that we see, he may have come out with some valuable insights. But that does not seem to be the aim of the writing.

-SJS-

Assassination of the Buddha

MA Nuhman

Last night in my dream
the Lord Buddha was shot dead.
Police in civilian clothes
had killed him.
Besides the steps to the Jaffna Library
lay his corpse in a pool of blood.

The ministers arrived
in the darkness of night.
“Why did you kill him—
when his name is not on our list?”
they fumed.

“No sir” they said
“No wrong was done.
We could not hurt even a fly
without shooting him.
That was why”

“Very well then,
conceal the corpse”
And the ministers left.

The men in civilian clothes
dragged in the corpse,
covered the body of the Buddha
with ninety thousand volumes
and set alight the Sikkhalokavada Suthra.
The body of the Buddha turned to ashes
as did the Dhammapada.

(1981)

Only the doves keep flying

Ashroff Shahaabdeen

During national festivities
all the national leaders
let fly doves alone.

At any time
in any nation
a corner is on fire.

All burning problems
are discussed
in air-conditioned space.

Problems remain problems
while doves keep flying

(circa 1998)

Blind to History

MA Nuhman

Push, push. Push some more.
The pressure will rise!
There will be an explosion!

Shoot, shoot.
Let a hundred men fall.
Swing around your gun and shoot—
Let them fall by the thousands. Only then
will they mobilise by the millions
for the guns to crumble away.

Do you know not
the orphan of the peacock throne?
You are blind, blind at birth.
You never recognise history.

(1980)

Announcement

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The Renegade

David Diop

(Senegal, 1927-1960)

My brother you flash your teeth in response
to every hypocrisy

My brother with gold-rimmed glasses

You give your master a blue-eyed faithful look

My poor brother in immaculate evening dress

Screaming and whispering in the parlours
of condescension

We pity you

Your country's burning sun is nothing but a shadow

On your serene 'civilised' brow

And the thought of your grandmother's hut

Brings blushes to your face that is bleached

By years of humiliation and bad conscience

And while you trample on the bitter red soil of Africa

Let these words of anguish keep to me
with your restless step –

Oh I am so lonely so lonely here

(Courtesy: Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry)

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