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When Autumn Came

Faiz Ahmed Faiz

*This is the way that autumn came to the trees:
it stripped them down to the skin,
left their ebony bodies naked.
It shook out their hearts, the yellow leaves,
scattered them over the ground.
Anyone could trample them out of shape
undisturbed by a single moan of protest.*

*The birds that herald dreams
were exiled from their song,
each voice torn out of its throat.
They dropped into the dust
even before the hunter strung his bow.*

*Oh, God of May have mercy.
Bless these withered bodies
with the passion of your resurrection;
make their dead veins flow with blood again.
Give some tree the gift of green again.
Let one bird sing.*

From the Editor's Desk

The 2007-2007 budget has been notorious for its negative features, mainly its nearly 63 billion rupee deficit and the 166 billion rupee defence allocation, surpassing last year's by 19%, as well as for the way that both the government and the opposition handled with the budget vote.

The New Democratic Party denounced the budget as anti-people and its Tamil monthly, *Puthiya Poomi*, November 2007 editorially pointed out that defence expenditure is not limited to budget allocations as further sums may be allocated by parliament when necessary for military purchases, as has been the practice for the past 25 years.

The people hoped for control of the prices of essential goods including a reduction in the sharply increased prices of items such as wheat flour and fuel, and wage increases to compensate the rising cost of living, but neither was forthcoming. Price increases have routinely been blamed on the war and the world market. The people are not at fault for either. The ruling classes are responsible for the poor economic growth and the decline of the rupee. While war is the main cause for the economic crisis, corruption, fraud, and abuse of power and position cannot be ignored. But the government has stifled parliamentary debate on corrupt and fraudulent acts by ministers, brought to light by parliamentary select committees.

The JVP said that it would vote against the budget as it hurts the people, and did so at the second reading but, despite pledging on the eve of the third reading to vote against, it abstained to enable safe passage of the budget. This was not unexpected as the defeat of the budget could have meant a general election and a drastically reduced parliamentary strength for the JVP.

The UNP opposition to the budget was for political advantage, but it was not far from the JVP when it came to the defence budget: the JVP

supports an increase in defence expenditure while the UNP will not oppose it. The UNP was counting on the JVP and the Tamil National Alliance MPs voting against the budget and the abandoning of the government by the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (which actually did), the CWC (which predictably did not) to defeat the government. Its hopes were dashed by the abstention of the JVP.

Parliamentary horse-trading apart, pressure was brought on three TNA MPs from the east by 'unknown elements' kidnapping their relatives with the threat that they will be killed if the MPs voted against the budget. As a result, the three refrained from voting. A fourth was removed as MP on the day of the vote for absence from parliament for over three months, although he was allowed to attend parliament on three occasions in the week before the crucial vote.

It has been said that there was a deal between the president and the JVP to scrap the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) and reduce the number of cabinet ministers to thirty in return for the JVP's abstention. The former is irrelevant as the CFA is in place only on paper. A reduction in the size of the cabinet could be evidence of a deal, but most ministerial posts are merely decorative with very little power and even less financial resources compared to earlier years, while a handful wield control over the bulk of the budget allocation. The reason why many MPs, especially those who crossed over from the UNP, are staying with the government has perhaps more to do with skeletons in their cupboards than the attraction of a cabinet post and, of course, the prospect of facing another parliamentary election.

The government is seen by the public as a failure on every front, except on the war front, and it seeks to survive by escalating the sense of insecurity among the people by whipping up fear about terrorist attacks. Harassment of Tamils in Colombo is now presented as part of the campaign against security threats. It seems that the government has no sense of direction except to plunge the country into total war.

What is certain is that the parliamentary system has no answers for the deepening economic crisis or the war which is its immediate cause. The two main issues to be resolved are the national question, based on the principle of self-determination, and freeing the country from the neo-colonial control and its agenda for globalisation.

Peddling Globalisation

Deshabakthan

Globalisation has had its advocates from among individuals and organisations besides the imperialists, their declared agents and allies. Globalisation is the fruit of the neo-colonial global economic strategy which the imperialists led by US imperialism have been working on since the latter part of the 1970. The term globalisation has been used by economists in the 1980s, and the name gained currency in the middle of the 1990s.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of 'socialist' governments in Eastern Europe and the states which once comprised the Soviet Union disheartened the section of the left which relied on a peaceful, and hopefully parliamentary, socialist transformation. The acceleration of the capitalist transformation of China, for which the foundation was laid in 1978, and the accompanying penetration of the Chinese economy by foreign capital further contributed to the mood of desperation of this section of the left.

Besides, the national bourgeois leadership of the former colonies of Asia and Africa had by the 1980s lost much of whatever anti-imperialist momentum it had up to the 1970s when the anti-colonial struggles in Africa blew off the remaining bastions of old-style colonial rule, with a few exceptions, mainly South Africa and Namibia (then SW Africa), and US imperialism suffered a humiliating defeat in Indochina. Deals between the opportunist left and the national bourgeoisie on the one hand hurt the credibility of the left movement as a whole and on the other dissuaded the national bourgeoisie from pursuing a vigorously

anti-imperialist economic and political agenda in collaboration with the working classes and other progressive forces. The bid for domination of the Third World by the Soviet Union, especially since the 1960s, owing to rivalry with US for global dominance also hurt the left movement internationally and contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Against such a background, the national bourgeoisie of the Third World, while paying lip service to anti-imperialism, yielded to imperialist economic domination which evolved into neo-colonialism, which in its present form is more vicious than old-style colonialism. Latin America, with the exception of Cuba, came under total US control and domination, and the imperialist agenda for globalisation was implemented with vigour in several Latin American countries, with disastrous consequences.

In East and Southeast Asia some countries showed a rapid economic growth through the 1980s to the middle of the 1990s owing to economic liberalisation and opening up to foreign investors. Once trapped by their dependence on foreign direct investment and international credit, they became unsuspecting prey to international speculators in not only their stock markets but also their free-floating currencies. When the bubble of the 'Asian miracle' burst in 1998 the result was economic chaos and disaster. Malaysia, however, was spared the misery by the timely intervention of the state against speculation, in defiance of the imperialists and institutions of global finance. Other exceptions included China, and South Asian countries including India, with some degree of state protectionism still in place and where globalisation had not penetrated sufficiently to render the economies vulnerable to the crises of 'global' capital.

The Asian crisis was accompanied by deepening economic crises in the US and Europe, from which recovery is at best partial. These and the adverse effects of practices related to imperialist globalisation in the Third World opened the eyes of several Third World advocates of globalisation to the reality. However, much of the criticism was confined to aspects of globalisation that failed to deliver on promises of prosperity and economic advancement. They failed to see that globalisation was an imperialist scheme designed to further subject the economies of the Third World to control by global capital.

Shift towards an export-oriented economy undermined self reliance in food and other essentials. Outsourcing of manufacture and services

brought short-term economic benefits to some economies already suffering under unequal terms of international trade, but made them increasingly dependent on and vulnerable to economic crises in the imperialist countries.

Migration of labour during the past two decades has meant that skilled personnel from the Third World moved out of their countries for better wages, thus depriving the countries of essential human resources for economic development. The highly sought after foreign direct investments were aimed at exploiting cheap labour and more importantly natural resources. The investors, generally with short term goals, were not interested in the development of an industrial base in the host country and went on to extract more than their investment as fast as possible by exploiting host government concessions like tax holidays, and the waiving of labour laws and trade union rights.

Many, including intellectuals, have been naïve enough to be persuaded that globalisation is something aimed at bringing mankind together through technological advances, especially in the fields of information technology and communications, not realising that such advances are not ends in themselves but means that facilitated the imperialist project of globalisation. It is true that anti-globalisation protesters have taken advantage of modern information technology to plan and execute their campaigns. But one cannot be blind to the long term dangers of the flooding of the internet with information and the selective streamlining of information in ways that will serve imperialist purposes. Like the working class struggles of the past taking advantage of every technological advance in confronting the capitalist class, forces opposing imperialism should use modern technology, while being constantly alert to the attendant dangers.

There are some who think that information technology is in itself a revolutionary tool. While it is true that the forces of revolution have in it a powerful tool to which they have access, they are not its owners and can be denied access at any time. Also, total dependence on such technology makes them vulnerable to subversion by the masters. State control over the electronic media and the internet persists despite the frustration of attempts by the state to collect information against people with links to the 'enemy'; and policing of all media in the name of national security is not something that can be readily ruled out.

Several illusions relating to globalisation and the information revolution are not easy to dispel. The change of course of the economy of Sri Lanka since 1978, seen in isolation from the escalation of national oppression by the UNP regime that came to power in 1977 and the systematic denial of hard won trade union rights along with the legal as well as illegal acts of repression against the opposition, could appear innocent against a background of shortage of a variety of foreign goods under the earlier government. Liberalisation of trade, privatisation of the state sector of the economy, and the opening up of the economy to foreign investors by settling up free trade zones were part of a sinister agenda, which the defeated parliamentary left and its SLFP patron were aware of. But much of the damage done by the seventeen-year UNP misrule was hard to undo; the PA government, comprising an alliance of the SLFP with an assortment of chauvinists and the opportunist left parties, which assumed power in 1994, rather than arrest the trend, surpassed the UNP regime in privatising state ventures and in pursuing the war of national oppression with even greater vigour.

This has come to be the tragic legacy of the opportunist left comprising the main Trotskyite party of the country and the revisionists calling themselves the Communist Party of Sri Lanka.

Confronting rightist advocates of globalisation at a theoretical level is easy. Their imperialist loyalties and class interests that coincide with those of reaction and chauvinism are transparent; the challenge is to mobilise the masses against the imperialist agenda advocated by them. Exposing the compromises by the national bourgeoisie of Sri Lanka is not hard either. Their bankruptcy was transparent since the mid-1980s from the unprincipled positions taken by the SLFP in its desperate bids to return to power. Since assuming power in 1994, it has, in practice, left no doubt about its position *vis-à-vis* imperialism and globalisation, despite mouthing the occasional anti-imperialist slogan.

The Tamil nationalists, including militants, ex-militants and the parliamentary leadership, have yet to dispel illusions about the imperialists. A small but sizeable section of the Tamil nationalists was briefly anti-imperialist in the early part of the struggle against national oppression. But that ceased to be when the main militant groups came under the influence of Indian hegemony which used the Tamil national question for its own purposes. Although the Tamil nationalists have paid dearly for their failure to tell the Tamil masses who the friends are

and who the enemies are of the Tamil people and the struggle for their rights. Yet, they hesitate to denounce imperialism as an enemy. Besides their reluctance to reject globalisation, the Tamil nationalists including the LTTE seem amenable to a liberalised economic policy.

Such pretence cannot last forever and sooner than later the choice before the Tamil nationalists will be limited to one between surrendering their cause at the altar of imperialism and changing the course of their struggle to join hands with the forces of anti-imperialism, in Sri Lanka and where necessary elsewhere. However, the ambiguity of the Tamil nationalists about imperialism has been the consequence of the lack of a stand based on the class interests of the toiling masses who have been the main source of strength for the struggle over the past two decades. As illusions about imperialism begin to fade, the Tamil nationalists will be forced to take a stand that will decide their role and the course of the struggle.

It is long since the opportunist left lost its way and ceased to be part of the left movement. Nevertheless they make vehemently anti-imperialist utterances, which they fail to match with deeds. For example the revisionist DEW Gunasekera who is also a government minister went out of his way to defend the decision of the government to borrow enormous sums of money from a consortium of private banks by the issue of bonds repayable over a short period, at a much higher interest rate than from imperialist governments or the World Bank. The revisionists and the Trotskyites in government dare not defy any decision of the government for fear of forfeiting their pretence to political legitimacy.

A pompous proposal endorsing globalisation was made not long ago by a Trotskyite clan at a seminar to felicitate Father Paul Caspersz, reputed for his defence of the oppressed in defiance of reactionary sections of the Roman Catholic Church of Sri Lanka. The proposal was contained in papers relating to the seminar theme 'Towards a Common Minimum Programme'. The participants were predominantly Trotskyites of some description, and the political identity of the others ranged from left liberals and revisionists to Marxist Leninists.

Following a discussion of the ills of the Sri Lankan economy and polity, prescriptions were doled out to cure all ills. The political reasons for the failure of the Sri Lankan state and the economy were not touched upon, and the terms 'class' and 'class struggle' hardly received

a mention. The need for struggle against imperialism was not even considered. The prescriptions seemed to be designed for consumption by the government and the ruling classes and its essence was: 'Play the game of globalisation or perish'.

I cannot help being reminded of JR Jayawardane's claim in 1977 that he will transform Sri Lanka into another Singapore. The price paid for the liberalised and open economic system was heavy for the toiling masses as well as the minority nationalities, all of whom were subjected to seventeen years of state terror. The country has since been unable to recover from the consequent disaster or to change course.

The proposals put forward at the seminar were rejected outright by several participants and could not be pursued any further even to be adopted in a severely amended form. Many of those present thought that it was the last they would hear of the proposals, but that does not seem to be the case. One of the authors has sought to revive them even more stubbornly in his columns in local newspapers. One column opened with the arrogant remark: "Many lefties who have grown too old to read and think, the majority NGO-types, and some radical folk, cling to outdated views about the global economy, insensitive to changes in the past decade". Drawing attention to the decline in the economic might of the US and the weakening US dollar, a new argument is put forward that the developing multi-polarity of the international political and financial power bases creates opportunities for everybody. In this context, comments by Professor William Robinson of the University of California at Santa Barbara in a recent interview published in the Greek newspaper "Eleftherotypia" (reproduced by the "Z-net" web-site) are of particular relevance.

"... (T)here is a new type of class fractionation between local and national fractions of capital, on the one hand, and transnational fractions on the other. Transnational capital is now the hegemonic fraction of capital on a world scale. Transnationally-oriented capitalist groups and elites are present now in all countries around the world, including in the state. These fractions, or their bureaucratic allies, exercise considerable influence if not outright control within most of the state apparatuses around the world. They often dictate policy.

“We need to see how capitalism has been reorganised into a new network structure, so that the system functions through interconnected webs that stretch across the globe...

“... (T)here still may be local and national capitals but they cannot compete with transnationally mobile capital. If they want to remain competitive, if they want to continue playing the game, they must link up with transnational capital, and they must do so, structurally, in a way that subordinates them to transnational capital”.

There are some among the broad left who identify imperialism with the US alone. But the case against globalisation is not against US domination *per se* but against the imperialist project of globalised domination of capital. Replacement of the US by one or several economic powers in whatever form that globalisation may take will not change things for the Third World, and especially for its increasingly impoverished masses. To quote Robinson again:

“Recent U.S. policies such as the imposition of neo-liberal structural adjustment programs and sponsorship of free trade agreements have served to further pry open regions and sectors around world to global capitalism, to transnational capital. The IMF and other transnational state agencies have not acted as simple instruments of “U.S.” imperialism....

“... (I)nterventionism and militarized globalization are less a campaign for U.S. hegemony than a contradictory response to the crisis of global capitalism – to economic stagnation, legitimisation problems, and rise of counter-hegemonic forces”.

Today, not merely the left, but progressive opinion in general has few illusions about globalisation. South America, which was the first testing ground for globalisation, is today the most disillusioned with globalisation; and the election of left and left-of-centre governments in the region during the past decade is the response of the masses to their suffering under globalisation. Today, globalisation is being denounced by not just the revolutionary left and other anti-imperialists but also by many disillusioned scholars, including the US economist Joseph Stiglitz, who were once advocates of globalisation.

There are, however, recommendations from some ‘leftists’ yesteryear that Sri Lanka should strengthen its ties with SAARC countries, India in particular. Some even go to the extent of prescribing

a common currency for South Asia to free itself of the domination by the US dollar. The Sri Lankan experience in trade agreements with India tell us differently and, given the prospect of the weakening of the US dollar, a common currency will simply mean that the weaker economies of the region will come under total domination by the most powerful state, economically, militarily and politically.

There are people who believe that economic self-reliance implies an insular economy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Self-reliance includes cooperation and collaboration between countries as well as exchange of goods, services, skills and knowledge. But what is important is that partnership and exchange should be of mutual benefit and on an equal basis. Despite solemn declarations about the free flow of capital and unrestricted trade, the more powerful economies have all along conspired to manipulate the exchange of commodities in the world market in ways that are increasingly disadvantageous to the Third World and, besides, continue to practice protectionism. Thus self-reliance requires that a country plans its production in a way that it will not be a victim of world market trends that are manipulated in the interests of imperialist hegemony.

The choice before most of the Third World and its oppressed masses has now narrowed to one between accepting an imperialist-dominated globalised economy and opting out. Opting out will be the safer option until the emergence of an acceptable alternative, since the Third World cannot sign itself into eternal bondage to imperialism.

The anti-imperialist movement and the left in particular should be conscious of the fact that inequalities have reached unprecedented proportions and are worsening, and that inequalities are not merely across the 'North-South divide'. Middle class consumer societies comprising a sizeable section of the population have emerged in India, China and several other Third World countries at the expense of a vast majority sinking into destitution. Thus polarisation under globalisation has begun to cut across national boundaries, even with the 'North-South divide' remaining very much intact in terms of overall economic and political strength. The following points made by Robinson deserve serious consideration by the genuine left and anti-imperialist forces.

“Social justice requires a measure of transnational social governance over this global production and financial system as a necessary first step in a radical redistribution of wealth and power

to poor majorities.... (I)t would require a reversal of neo-liberal policies at the nation-state level. But redistribution is not enough. It must be linked to the transformation of class and property relations. Local class and property relations have global implications. Webs of interdependence link the local to the global.

....

“.... Struggles at nation-state level are far from futile. They remain central to the prospects for social justice and progressive social change. But any such struggles must be part of a more expansive transnational counter-hegemonic project and a program to rein in on the global market and the power of global capital. An alternative to global capitalism must be a transnational project, involving transnational trade unionism, transnational social movements, transnational political organizations, and so on”.

It is important for us to take into account the reality of Sri Lanka in the global context. The economy has been distorted not merely by the war which has led to the death of over 100,000 so far, internally displaced half a million, and sent into exile a million, but also by its increasing dependence on migrant labour, numbering over a million in a population of 20 million, representing over a tenth of the able-bodied adult population. It has also been distorted by the creation of the Free Trade Zone and its reliance on the export-oriented garment industry facing an impending crisis.

The war is the main obstacle to economic development, and the political and economic instability of the country cannot be resolved without addressing the national question. While the resolution of the national question is as essential condition for any form of economic recovery, it is not a sufficient condition. The economy cannot progress unless the country frees itself of the economic policies imposed on it by external forces and takes full control of its economy.

Let us examine which external and internal forces stand in the way of resolving the national question and bringing an end to the war. Let us also examine which external and internal forces stand in the way of freeing the economy from the clutches of imperialist predators. We can see that the 'international community' comprising the imperialist West and Japan, despite its solemn declaration that it wants a peaceful and

lasting solution to the national question that will bring the war to an end and statements of concern about human rights, freedom of the media, and law and order, is continuing to protect the oppressive state and arm it under various pretexts. To say the least, the role of India has been even more cynical.

Against this background, it will be useful to look at another prescription by the Trotskyite advocates of globalisation, this time to the LTTE, which in their opinion is badly cornered militarily and feeling the pinch of restrictions placed on its finances by the international community. The recommendation seems to be that the LTTE, to redeem itself, should become a willing partner in the process of globalisation. The Marxist Leninists have on the other hand constantly asserted the need for the LTTE to transform the armed struggle into a mass struggle with clear anti-imperialist goals.

However, Anton Balasingam, the main LTTE spokesperson at the peace talks with the government, said at the time of the CFA that the LTTE had no objections to the 'open economic policy' of the Sri Lankan government. In fact, the LTTE has consistently refrained from criticising US imperialism for its invasion of various countries. But that does not seem to have made any difference to the attitude of the US-led international community towards the LTTE.

The lesson for all nationalities and the exploited classes of Sri Lanka to learn is that imperialism knows no loyalties and is driven by its predatory instinct. Imperialism has since the demise of the colonial rule been manipulating the prices and terms of trade in ways that made the poor nations poorer. Nothing has happened in the decade of full bloomed imperialist globalisation to change that pattern.

Advocates of assimilation of Sri Lanka to the system of imperialist globalisation have no strategy for Sri Lankan economic recovery but merely rephrase the imperialist prescription that Sri Lanka should stake its future in the gambling house of globalised capital. There is no doubt that it will benefit a greedy handful but not the country or its broad masses.

The Garment Industry and Export of Labour: the Sad Plight of Women

Sri

The export sector plays an important part in the economy of Sri Lanka. In terms of volume as well as value, made garments and labour remain two important exports. In 2006, the value of garment export was 320, 83 million rupees. This comprises 13% of the gross national product (GNP). Remittance by Sri Lankans living abroad is 223, 45 million rupees and comprises 10 % of the GNP. Thus 23% of the GNP may be seen to be from the garment industry and the export of labour.

The remittance referred to above is the sum that is sent to Sri Lanka through the state-approved banking system. The amount remitted through irregular money transfer channels remains unknown, but is substantial.

Since the above two sectors make up a major part of the country's foreign exchange earnings, they are major contributors to the country's economy. However, while these two sectors have a major impact on the economy, there are a variety of views about their impact on the families involved.

It is significant that in both sectors women constitute the main work force, comprising 80% of that in the garment sector and around two third of labour export.

Nearly one and a half million Sri Lankans work abroad. A majority work as housemaids in the Middle East. It should be noted that a total of around a million women work in the Middle East and in the garment industry. This comprises 10% of the female population of the country. It should be noted that most of them are from rural areas and belong to backward sections of the population.

The above facts demonstrate beyond doubt that in Sri Lanka export of labour is closely tied up with gender and poverty. The reality of Sri Lanka is that long working hours, adverse working conditions and low wages point to a severe exploitation of housemaids and garment factory workers.

One can see the ruin of families as a result of women facing problems of social degeneration and domestic problems in both sectors. Besides, since the women leave behind their husbands and children, there is the risk of the children going astray. Unmarried young women in garment factories are subject to sexual harassment and abuse by men. Women working in the garment industry and working abroad as house maids are victims to twin exploitation: exploitation of labour and sexual exploitation.

Annually a hundred thousand women go to the Middle East as housemaids. There are no proper statistics or estimates for the number of women who have been emotional or physically injured or of the families and children affected. Those in power are not interested in such matters. It should be noted that, in this male chauvinistic society, women even before joining work are subjected to various forms of oppression at their homes and in society.

It may seem that the severity of work is less in the garment sector than elsewhere and that the employees are relatively comfortable. It is only when their wages, accommodation, and their origins in remote villages are taken into account that the gravity of their problems could be appreciated.

A parliamentary select committee has been appointed to study work-related and other problems faced by Sri Lankans employed abroad. It should be noted that one member of the select committee is cabinet minister, Keheliya Rambukwella, whose job is to promote overseas employment. His inclusion in the select committee came under strong criticism since there was a conflict of interests. His interest is to send

people abroad by any means. It should be noted that he remains a person who is not in the least interested about the wages, facilities, welfare and rights of the people employed abroad.

At this juncture, a new piece of information has come to light. It is learnt that employers are imposing a condition that women who go abroad seeking employment as housemaids should not get pregnant during their period of employment and employment agencies here are forcing the women selected for employment to be compulsively injected with contraceptives.

Women make half the population of the country. Women workers in the garment factories and employees in the Middle East comprise Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Hill Country Tamil women. All of them are subject to exploitation based on class and gender. This exploitation transcending differences of race, language and religion is based on the position of women as second class citizens.

From the President down to the ministers and officials no one is able to provide them with any form of relief or salvation. The reason is that they belong to families of workers, peasants and other rural toiling masses. The rulers, in the meantime, are from wealthy classes.

Women who have been treated as domestic slaves have under globalisation become slaves in the form of domestic workers. There is a minister and a ministry to encourage and advance this. This disgraceful wage slavery is implemented under the attractively named title of "Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment". This tragedy continues since despite the means and resources available in this country, there are no appropriate plans to put them to good use.

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

Clash of Nationalities – Disaster for Toiling Masses

Shanmugam

There are in Sri Lanka, besides the four nationalities, namely the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils, national minorities such as Burghers, Malays and the Attho (the aboriginal community of hunters). Thus this country has historically been a multi-ethnic country. Although this reality is rejected by the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists, history has this fact on record.

The British colonialists practiced their divide-and-rule conspiracy, and members of the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elite were their loyalists. They considered it prestigious and a privilege to render slavish service to the white masters, and in return were rewarded with great wealth and riches. Meantime, they subdued the people of their own race, language and religion and exercised power over them. It was by dividing the people and ensuring that they did not unite with each other that they were able to safeguard their wealth and well being.

Meantime, by pleading with the British colonialists and pledging that they will be eternally loyal to the Empire they secured what was called “independence”. It is 60 years since that independence was gained. To this day the original pledge has been kept by the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim upper class elite leaders who persevere in their support and loyalty towards imperialism.

At the same time, the Sinhala upper class elite rulers are following in the footsteps of the British masters in using the divide-and-rule conspiracy to keep apart the nationalities and persist in their chauvinist stand. In the period following independence, nationalism has developed

at every stage, under circumstances where chauvinistic oppression was launched. Chauvinism has been advanced with arrogance and power by the forces of Sinhala ruling classes. The Tamil leadership failed to put forward any common programme comprising a progressive political outlook and farsighted anti-imperialist activities that could be carried out in unity with all the oppressed people of the country to oppose chauvinism. Since the Tamil leadership comprised elitist, upper caste, upper class leaders, it upheld a narrow nationalist outlook. Although upholding a narrow nationalist outlook ethnically, their stand as a class was supportive of capitalism and imperialism. Narrow nationalism and class compromise persisted even while bargaining at the parliamentary political level, while carrying forward *satyagraha* campaigns and, subsequently, when the youth rose up in armed struggle. To this day, loyalty towards and expectations of imperialism remain. That seems to be the case with the leadership of the other nationalities as well.

Chauvinism has been carried forward among the Sinhalese with arrogance and fanaticism; and hostility towards the Tamils and Muslims was cultivated in a weird fashion. It emerged as a chauvinistic rage which from time to time launched violent and racist attacks against Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils. As a result, a trend developed by which the Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils became hateful towards the ordinary Sinhalese people. Meantime the notion that Tamils are seeking to divide the country and integrate with India gained currency among the Sinhalese.

Likewise, the idea that the Hill Country Tamils are immigrants and should not be allowed to settle permanently in the Hill Country has been propagated among the Sinhalese. The trade union and political leaders of the Hill Country Tamils have not put forward any programme to rid the Sinhalese of such thoughts or to unite the Hill Country Tamils with the Sinhala working class on a class basis. On the other hand, they express slavish loyalty to the leaders of the Sinhala ruling classes to secure ministerial posts and to accumulate wealth. Meantime, they make narrow nationalistic utterances from time to time that would make the Sinhalese suspicious and fearful of the Hill Country Tamils.

In the same way, hatred towards the Muslims has been spread among the Sinhalese. Owing to business rivalries as well, anti-Sinhalese campaigns have been propagated among the Muslims, while upper class Muslim leaders join hands with the chauvinistic ruling

factions to secure posts and to accumulate wealth. Nevertheless, they advance their religious nationalism as a form of narrow nationalism.

The Tamil leadership has adopted an attitude and approach towards the Muslims that considers them as inferior. That has persisted from the time of Ponnambalam Ramanathan to this day. It is no secret that the caste-based thinking of the Tamil elite is being applied to the Muslims as well. The Tamil conservative attitude that the Muslims are subject to their control and domination continues. It is this that the Muslim nationalists term Tamil chauvinism and call upon the Muslims to rally against. They cite as contemporary examples the expulsion of Muslims from the North and attacks on the Muslims in the East. The validity of the examples is not disputed. But the response cannot be Muslim narrow-nationalism.

Thus, nationalism in Sri Lanka has spread rapidly among all nationalities to confine them to narrow boundaries. The danger exists that the reality that they are the folk of Lanka, the people of this country, and beyond that working people who are exploited and oppressed by forces bearing their own racial and religious identity will be concealed so that that they will be guided by the vicious hands of nationalism. Consequently, ordinary Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Hill Country Tamil people act as if they are mutual enemies. What has encouraged this and brought it to the fore is nationalism.

The ruling capitalist class has profited from it. The working class forces which have been subject to exploitation and social differentiation, and are facing political oppression, transcending boundaries of race, religion, language and region, have been divided and made to clash with each other. This is manifesting itself as the conflict of nationalities. It was the same weapon of nationalism that was used to bring down the Soviet Union and other socialist states.

Imperialism has used nationalism as a tool to weaken the Third World countries and make them dependent on it. The road for a revolutionary struggle embracing class struggle, social change and socialism has been obstructed and in its place nationalism has been whipped up among the nationalities in each country. Youth movements have been pushed forward with extremist slogans and enabled to carry arms. The role of imperialism here is one of running with hare and hunting with the hound. Forces of imperialism and regional hegemony have played a major role in escalating the national conflict from the

parliamentary arena to one of armed conflict and eventually war. Sri Lanka continues to suffer the consequences of these conflicts.

Sri Lanka has been enfeebled by these nationalist conflicts, lost its identity and is bowing down to imperialism and regional hegemony on economic, political and military fronts. Amid the conflict of nationalities, foreigners are on the one hand plundering the wealth of the country, and on the other boosting their sales of weapons. The very hands that give support and solace to chauvinistic military oppression encourage the forces that are struggling against it to persevere in battle. As a result, the ruling side and the resisting side have brought about a situation where both look up to imperialism and plead in submission that they be helped.

The side comprising the ruling classes pleads that imperialism should give it unconditional support to exterminate secessionism and terrorism. The Tamil leadership pleads that imperialism obtains autonomous powers for the Tamils. Imperialism, like an eel, smugly shows the head to the fish and tail to the serpent. The misery of nationalism is transparent here.

The war and the struggles in this country are a result of Sinhala chauvinism boasting of being the guardians of Buddhism for 2500 years, Tamil nationalism boastfully claiming a timeless ancestry, and Muslim nationalists speaking emotionally and forcefully about following a religion that is practiced worldwide. The clashes of such nationalisms make the rivers of blood and tears of the people. Thus, the lesson that history has taught us is that until the venomous characteristics of nationalism are realised, there can be no salvation to the country or its people, and only destruction will be on the rise. Such nationalistic positions will never help to secure self-determination, equality or democracy. This is a truth borne out by worldly experience.

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

Human Rights Violations and International Illusions

*[Translation of unsigned article from Puthiya Poomi,
November 2007]*

Kidnappings, arrests and killings are rampant in Sri Lanka, and have intensified during the past two years. Police inquiries and investigations about them have not been fruitful. There has been no progress on the killing of seventeen employees of a foreign NGO in Muthur or about the killing of five students in Trincomalee. Two members of the Red Cross from the Eastern Province were kidnapped and their dead bodies found in Ratnapura. Although it was reported that a former officer of the defence forces was arrested in that connection, nobody knows anything about the outcome of the inquiries. None of the inquiries is transparent; and the judiciary is unable to do anything about. There have been statements to the effect that inquiries will be conducted by commissions of inquiry and that foreign legal experts will be invited to oversee them. The experts have observed that the inquiries did not meet even the standards for normal inquiries. The views expressed by Justice PN Bhagavati, former Chief Justice of India and a reputed upholder of the right for social litigation, on the lack of standards, the deficiencies and partiality of the inquiries cannot be ignored.

The response of the Attorney General of Sri Lanka, CR de Silva to the observations of Justice Bhagavati was strongly worded, but not in keeping with the responsibility of his office. He stated that the Attorney General's Department has the duty to conduct inquiries. On the

contrary, the Department goes into the inquiries and events relating to Commissions of inquiry. Thus it is able to make findings that are not possible through normal inquiry. This is in a way an investigation. Further the Attorney General's Department is obliged to assist investigating officers.

Under these conditions, local and foreign human rights activists gave publicity to the inadequacies of law and order establishments, judicial establishments, and inquiries by special commissions in relation to human rights in Sri Lanka. These were brought to the attention of the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC). Subsequently officials of the Commission visited Sri Lanka. They recommended that a secretariat of the UNHRC be set up to observe human rights violations in Sri Lanka.

Last month, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour visited Sri Lanka. Although she was permitted to travel to Jaffna, she was not allowed to meet the affected individuals freely. She did not go to the Eastern Province; and she was refused permission to travel to Kilinochchi. Political prisoners who have been detained in prisons in Colombo for several years went on a hunger strike demanding that they should be allowed to meet Arbour. Arrangements were made for Arbour to meet five of them at a location outside the prisons.

At the end of her visit, Arbour criticised human rights violations in Sri Lanka and recommended that the Sri Lankan government should allow the setting up of a UNHRC office in Sri Lanka. That was rejected by Mahinda Samarasinghe, the minister responsible for human rights in Sri Lanka. Following this, four members of an advisory committee that function under his ministry resigned their posts. The four included leftists and liberals. They too stressed that an office of the UNHRC be set up in Sri Lanka. These advisors also criticised the Sri Lankan representatives for not providing responsible answers regarding human rights violations in Sri Lanka at the UN General Assembly in October.

President Mahinda Rajapaksha, addressing the sessions of UN in October declared that there are no serious human rights violations in Sri Lanka and that Sri Lanka was at the forefront of fighting terrorism. He appealed that the international community should help Sri Lanka to carry forward its steps to combat terrorism. President Rajapaksha continues to say that attention will be paid to solving the national question only after the eradication of terrorism. Kidnappings and killings

took place in the country even during Arbor's presence. Now, it is reported almost daily that suspects were killed by police shooting in the course of an attempt to arrest the suspect.

Such a climate existed during 1971 and 1987-89. But the current situation is worse than any before.

From the time that the Soviet Union was strong until its collapse, it cannot be said that the UN functioned entirely as an instrument of the US. There was some form of power balance there. Now the UN functions as the American tool for imperialist globalisation. The European Union too wields significant influence, as does Japan. Except for the veto power of China and Russia, the UN is under the control of the US.

It is against this background that some believe that pressure can be brought upon the chauvinist government of Sri Lanka by the Human Rights Commission of the UN. Tamil nationalist forces have excessive faith in this approach.

The international forces that dominate the UN have incarcerated their "impartiality" and "integrity" within the confines of their imperialist hegemonic interests. There is no mechanism in place to control human rights violations and anti-democratic acts of the nation states when mass political activity to oppose them is weak or absent. As a result, voluntary organisations and political parties tend to rely on imperialist and hegemonic pressures. Some parliamentary politicians, trade unionists and NGO activists who are under pressure to protest against human rights violations, owing to their helplessness, contribute the belief that it is possible to seek justice from the oppressive state, and portray their complaining to the "international community" as their highest form of action.

Meantime the 'international community', for reasons other than those given by the Sri Lankan government, is doing things that affect the independence and sovereignty of Sri Lanka. Entrapped by it, the Sri Lankan government merely issues statements in protest. Even if an office of the UN Human Rights Commission were to be set up in Sri Lanka, it will only report the violation of human rights; and it is wrong to expect it to do anything more. The reports could, however, increase the pressure on the government from time to time. But one cannot say that such pressure will lead to a reduction in the violation of human rights. If

the 'international community' is 'sincere', it can bring about other meaningful forms of pressure than to open an office. But it is paying more attention to interfering activities such as opening an office. Such is its interest.

Struggles in the country carried out against human rights violations could also have international impact. But to hand over to the 'international community' struggles that should be carried out on this soil will be an expression of helplessness and a move to cultivate hopes in vain. All activities handed over to the 'international community' lead to greater losses for the people and countries.

The parliamentary opposition talks about the human rights violations that take place here. Members of parliament from some organisations participate in protests. There is nothing constructive coming out of the left forces; and NGOs are immersed in their plans.

Under these conditions, the campaign by the government that it is winning the war against terrorism has a strong impact among the Sinhalese. They are made to believe that human rights violations are taking place as a part of anti-terrorist activities.

It is this impact that is going to be the basis for the loss of sovereignty and independence of Sri Lanka. Unless the war is ended and there is some degree of democratisation, the country cannot free itself from its present impasse. The condition should come about in which the Sinhalese realise that the war is the cause for the endangering of the sovereignty and independence of the country. If they are intoxicated by chauvinism and continue to be willingly deceived by forces of ruling class power, a situation will arise in which the loss of sovereignty and independence of the country will be inevitable. Under such conditions the entire people will pay heavier prices than they pay today.

NDP Diary

NDP Statement to the Media

Budget 2007-2008

12th November 2007

Comrade SK Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Party, issued the following statement regarding the present budget on behalf of the Politburo of the Party.

The present budget is only paving the way to carry forward the war, increase the cost of living, and push the people into starvation. The people are being deceived by pointing to the war and the world market. The people of the South have been distracted by telling them that the war to eliminate terrorism is more important than all else and have been asked through this budget that they should not demand wage increases or a reduction in the cost of living. As a result, the vast majority of the working people are being compelled to tighten their belts and live an unfulfilled life of hunger and starvation. At the same time, multi-national companies, big capitalists and the well-to-do elite are making big profits at their levels. Besides, the President and ministers and higher officials in state administration continue to enjoy comforts in life with high salaries, perks and privileges.

Thus the budget, when viewed on the basis of class and nationality, clearly indicates that the next year will be a dangerous year in which the entire people will experience severe crises due to war and economic burdens.

A sum of 166 447 million rupees has been allocated for defence expenditure. This money is to be spent to feed the cannons that will push forward the war towards the North. While the Tamil people will be destroyed as a result of it, the people of the South will be subject to

worsening economic crises and burdens of increasing cost of living. There is a sop thrown at government servants that there will be a wage increase of 375 rupees in the first six months and 750 rupees for the next six months. Meantime, there is no wage increase or concessions for the 650 000 private sector employees in this budget. Already the wage increase of 30 rupees given to the plantation workers by way of the collective agreement is in no way adequate to offset the increase in cost of living. Likewise, the several hundred thousand pensioners are finding it a struggle to survive with their pensions. In his budget speech, the President spoke on glorious terms about local resources and about boosting local production. But the truth that the peasantry and craftsmen have already lost everything and become bankrupt as a result of liberalization and privatization has been hidden.

Hence the reality is that this budget fully comprises anti-people features.

SK Senthivel
General Secretary, New Democratic Party

NDP Statement to the Media

Attack on Sunday Leader Press

23rd November 2007

Comrade SK Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Party, issued the following statement on behalf of the Politburo of the Party denouncing the arson attack on the printing house of the Sunday Leader, Morning Leader and *Irudina*.

The ferocious attack in the morning of 21-11-2007 on the printing house of the Sunday Leader, Morning Leader and *Irudina* is yet another attack on the freedom of the media. This cowardly attack on the printing press of Sunday Leader is an effort to intimidate the media to block the free

expression of views and criticism, informing the people of corruption and fraud, and exposing acts of high-handedness. This act is not only uncivilised but also a warning to the entire media.

The New Democratic Party very strongly denounces this attack.

Any newspaper has the full freedom to hold views and to make criticisms according to its stand. It is the culture and conduct of the media to confront ideas with ideas and criticism in response. To resort to high-handed action and armed threat is uncivilised.

The attacks on media offices and printing houses and the killing and disappearing of media personnel in the North East and in the South cannot in any way be accepted or justified.

There is a clear identity behind every act of high-handedness. The people can see it. The continuing attacks on the media have thus to be seen as a forewarning of a rule of darkness. The Party demands that the President and the Government take the necessary steps.

SK Senthivel
General Secretary, New Democratic Party

NDP Statement to the Media

Mass Arrests and Detention of Tamils

3rd December 2007

Comrade SK Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Party, issued the following statement on behalf of the Politburo of the Party denouncing the mass arrests and detention of Tamils in Colombo.

Arbitrary and uncontrolled mass arrests and detention of Tamils in Colombo and its suburbs and subjecting them to torture in detention should be stopped immediately. The Mahinda Chinthana government while declaring that it is not indulging in human rights violations is

carrying out mass arrests and detention of Tamils. This exposed the double-facedness of the government.

During the past two days, over three thousand Tamils have been arrested in Colombo and its suburbs and other areas and detained in police stations and other public places. Up to five hundred of them were sent to Boosa and Kalutura for further detention. The basis for suspicion is that they are Tamils. All of them belong to the North East, the Hill Country, Colombo and Puttalam regions, and had permanent residences or have taken up residence for the purpose of employment, education or other essential purposes.

Although they were in possession of adequate documentation to identify themselves, these Tamils have been arrested in large numbers. This is an act of racialism in its extreme and of racial discrimination. Such activities will only create a sense of fear, hatred and disgust among the Tamils and pave the way to ethnic alienation and will not bring the government any benefits. The actions of the police and the armed forces bears out the attitude and approach that the Tamils are second class citizens.

The full responsibility for this lies with the Mahinda Chinthana government. Hence the New Democratic Party emphatically demands that the government should act to stop forthwith racist steps such as arrests and imprisonment that plunge the Tamils into frustration and agony and subject them to second rate treatment. .

SK Senthivel
General Secretary, New Democratic Party

Appeal for Support

The New Democratic Party publishes the Tamil monthly journal *Puthiya Poomi* and the English quarterly New Democracy which play a valuable role in upholding democratic values and defending the interests of the oppressed sections of the population independently of ethnic, religious or any other such identity.

Puthiya Poomi and New Democracy are unique among publications in Sri Lanka by way of their high journalistic standards, quality of content and coverage of issues that remain unaddressed by the mainstream media and publications of political parties representing the interests of the exploiting classes.

Besides the increase in the cost of printing, the postal rates have recently been increased drastically. For the publication of the journals the party relies on financial support from some of its supporters and well wishers, who are themselves struggling against the rising cost of living. The Party neither uses NGO funding, nor has rich patrons. Thus, it has become necessary for the party to seek a broader base for financial support.

The Party appeals to readers and well wishers to contribute to the Publications Fund of the Party by adding to the annual subscription, by making a donation, or by sponsoring the publication of part or whole of an issue of either journal.

Payments may be made to:

S Thevarajah, account number 452868

Bank of Ceylon, Supermarket Branch

Colombo 11, Sri Lanka

Please mention 'Publications Fund' in the covering note attached to the payment. Address for correspondence:

47, 3rd Floor, CCSM Complex, Colombo 11, Sri Lanka.

Leaders

Kingsley A Gomez

I made a tube of gold
and tried stuffing it, again and again
but the tail of the dog would not straighten.
This lot too is likewise.

Our folk, paying subscriptions,
setting up and working for unions,
voting for them,
bowing and shrinking
until the back hunched,
only to be fooled.

Thought has dried up
through elevating the wicked,
living an insular life
within a tortoise shell,
Thought has lost its
mislaid address
through aimless blabber
with no idea of rights
or development.

We made a tube of gold
and tried stuffing it, again and again
but the tail of the dog would not straighten.

The dogs, however,
stay on
polluting the thrones
forever.

(Translated from Puthiya Poomi 2006 November)

Book Review

An Effort to Understand the Left on the National Question

Theorizing the National Crisis: Sanmugathasan, the Left and the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka, Ravi Vaitheespara, Social Scientists' Association, Colombo 05, September 2007, pp. 78+xvii, (price not stated).

The book comprises two articles, one on the left movement and the national question in Sri Lanka, first published and discussed in *New Democracy* in 2006, and another hitherto unpublished on the politics of N Sanmugathasan with emphasis on the national question. The foreword to the book is by N Shanmugaratnam.

The book is of particular value since the rise of Sinhala chauvinism and the consequent surge in Tamil nationalism have badly hurt the left movement and led to the obliteration of the positive role played by the left in the national question, which is the main problem facing the country. Vaitheespara's study of the role of Sanmugathasan (Shan) in the national question is the most extensive so far, and his examination of the role of the left in the national question brings out the distinction between the position of the Marxist Leninist tradition of the Communist Party from those of the revisionists and the Trotskyites belonging to the LSSP.

The first article "The wisdom of hindsight: Sanmugathasan, the left and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka" is well researched and seeks to explain the development of Shan's position on the national question. The interpretation is, understandably, more sympathetic than the assessment of Shan's role by erstwhile comrades who, while acknowledging his contribution to the left movement and Marxism

Leninism, are critical of what they consider his serious errors, in matters including his position on the national question.

Sinhala chauvinism has been on the rise since the arrival of electoral politics, and particularly since the language issue came to the fore, as has been the narrow nationalism of the Tamils in response to it. Thus, adherence to left ideology did not necessarily mean immunity from nationalist prejudices. Nevertheless, ideologically, the left parties were free of such thinking, until they went into opportunist alliances with the SLFP. The author seems to have either been misled by his source or has misread it in arguing that the faction of the Communist Party that split from the revisionists was “not a result of the international context but an attempt of a segment ... to free itself of the rising tide of communalism within the party itself” (p. 9). It is true that some revisionists resorted to communal attacks on Shan out of frustration that he took with him not only a sizeable section of the membership but also the bulk of the membership of the trade unions affiliated to the party. That such conduct was plain opportunism is clear from the fact that Pieter Keuneman, a Burgher by nationality, resorted to communal attacks while SA Wickramasinghe, a Sinhalese, refrained from such conduct.

The author seems to give Rohana Wijeweera more credit than due for joining the faction led by Shan because it was more radical and militant (p. 3). Wijeweera exposed himself as a chauvinist in early 1966 when he joined the communal protest by the SLFP, the revisionist CP and the LSSP against special provisions for the Tamil language. It was suspected that he was a ‘plant’ by the Soviet Union in the party led by Shan. It was too late when Wijeweera’s politics was exposed since he had already cultivated a following by inducing chauvinist thinking in the youth wing of the party of which he was put in charge. It seems unfair to correlate Shan’s accurate analysis of the class nature of JVP politics with his being partly blamed for the emergence of the JVP (p. 16).

The writing tends to speculate that if Shan and the party that he led had been supportive of Tamil nationalism things could have been different. This does not tally with the reality in places where nationalism has been on the rise. In East Pakistan(now Bangladesh), for example, the Marxist Leninists were supportive of the liberation struggle, but not its sponsorship by a neighbour. They did not only fail to win over the

people but also were victimised by the alliance of nationalists and the 'liberators' from across the border.

Errors of interpretation such as those above, although not many, seem to arise mainly from the subjective wish that the genuine left led by Shan could have found common cause with the nationalists. Otherwise, the portrayal of the politics of Shan, including his valiant struggle against opportunism, is highly commendable.

The second article titled "Towards a (Tamil) left perspective on the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka" raises searching questions regarding the changing position of the 'left' on the national question. The author, although incisively critical of the opportunism of the parliamentary left in its changing attitude towards the Tamil nationality and the national question, does acknowledge the commendable stand taken by the left until the opportunism of parliamentary politics got the better of them.

The article, although visibly sympathetic to the Tamil nationalist cause, in its effort to understand the behaviour of the left and place it in historical perspective, is a world apart from a whole range of Tamil nationalist interpretations made up of none but intellectually dishonest invective against the left as a whole, based on the conduct of a discredited opportunist left.

The author has correctly distinguished between the stands taken by the different left political parties and how some have degenerated and how others, especially that of the Marxist Leninists, have developed to address the national question in an objective fashion; and the analysis would be comprehensive if the evolution of the perspectives of the various factions of the Tamil nationalists are compared with those of the genuine and bogus left. This is very important since the Tamil nationalist perception of the political identity of the nationality has itself undergone many changes over the past century. Even today, many Tami nationalists find it had to digest the reality of the existence of three distinct Tamil-speaking nationalities in the island.

There are a few factual errors in the book to which I like to draw attention, since books of this nature are rare and in view of the value and political importance of the work.

A serious error concerns the use of the term "Maoist" to refer to the faction led by Shan in 1964 (Introduction pp. iv, x, and in the first article but not the second). The claim to the name Communist Party has been

a contentious issue internationally since the split of 1963. Wherever the revisionists were convincingly defeated, as for example in Indonesia and the Philippines, the Marxist Leninists used the name Communist Party. Elsewhere, they added the label "Marxist Leninist" to distinguish themselves from the revisionists. In Sri Lanka both the Marxist Leninists and the revisionists claimed the support of a majority, and each laid claim to the name "Communist Party of Ceylon"; the media referred to them as "Peking Wing" and "Moscow Wing". The revisionists switched to Communist Party of Sri Lanka following the renaming of the country, but Shan's faction stuck to the old name. The term "Maoist", was not in currency until the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1966-74; and for its duration the term "Maoist" was one of abuse to the enemies of Marxism Leninism. It was much after that some Marxist Leninist parties called themselves Marxist Leninist Maoist or simply Maoist. Shan renamed the rump of his party as Communist Party (Maoist) in the 1980s.

It is claimed in the Introduction by Shanmugaratnam that the splits from Shan were due to his "not going further than stating the general theoretical premises of the Sri Lankan revolution derived from the experiences of the Chinese revolution" (p. xi). He cites two splits, one relating to JVP, which he notes elsewhere in the introduction was a communal outfit right from the start, and the other relating to "Peradiga Sulanga". It is hard to see how the latter which launched a Chinese style 'long march' in 1968 could have split on the above account.

V Ponnambalam was not fielded the 1975 by-election to secure victory. The aim was to express opposition to Chelvanayakam, who had by then moved close to a secessionist agenda. The poor performance of Ponnambalam was not because of a half-hearted challenge, as suggested in the Introduction, but because of the loss of credibility of the revisionists. The Marxist Leninists, who had a strong presence in the electorate, had asked the people to boycott the by-election since the choice was between a reactionary nationalist and a revisionist supporter of a chauvinistic government.

Footnote 5 to the Introduction about deserters of the faction led by Shan is factually flawed. Karawita was not a prominent member of the party to lead the split in 1974, which was misguidedly engineered by several members of the Central Committee who opted to expel Shan in absentia than debate the issues in his presence. This group briefly called itself Communist Party (Marxist Leninist), then adopted the name

Working People's Party, and was defunct by 1980. The New Democratic Party, founded as the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (Left) in 1978 following a thorough debate with Shan, was not a splinter from this group. Also it was the founders of the NDP who rectified certain erroneous positions held by Shan on the national question before the split, and the NDP did not take the cue from Shan as suggested in the footnote.

A major omission in the book concerns the role of the Marxist Leninists in the mass movement against caste oppression and the politicising of the plantation workers, to both of which reference is made in passing in the Introduction. The significance of the former to Tamil youth militancy cannot be ignored; and these matters are particularly important since Tamil nationalism has always tried to paper over the caste contradiction and consistently failed to address problems specific to the Hill Country Tamils and the Muslims, whom they claimed to represent, with or without their consent.

In the above context, It is strange that Shan is accused introductorily (p. xi) of "not go(ing) much further than stating the general theoretical premises of a Sri Lankan revolution derived from the experiences of the Chinese revolution". Before passing judgment on the roles of Shan and the party that he led, one should take into account the treachery of the parliamentary left, the rise of Sinhala chauvinism, and its use to undermine Shan's position nationally as well as within his party, especially by Wijeweera. Shan made serious errors of judgment and tactics and has had his personal failings, but his party as a whole is collectively answerable for the consequences. However, the failings of Shan and his party alone cannot explain the course of events in the country over the past four decades.

Despite the few shortcomings, the articles as well as the introduction are lucidly written, and make interesting and illuminating reading. In summary, I would say that the book is a welcome addition to literature on the national question and the history of the left movement, and recommend it strongly to researchers and students of social sciences.

Sri Lankan Events

Balancing the Budget Vote

The saga of the budget 2007-2008 surpassed many a thriller fiction movie, with its unexpected turn of events and its quota of kidnappings and conspiracies.

MPs are tradable commodities and the one who knows the price of each and can offer it wins. The UNP played the game as late as in 2001 when it bought over SLFP ministers; President Rajapaksha has improved tremendously on the game.

Although it was known that the JVP will get cold feet when it came to the crunch, no chances were taken. The kidnapping of the relatives of three Tamil National Alliance (nominally Federal Party) MPs from the east, was a clear illustration of the kind of crude and cruel farce that parliamentary politics has become. If the UNP was serious about exposing the government as anti-democratic, it could have called for the boycott of the budget vote unless all MPs could cast their votes free of outside threats and any form of harassment. But that was not to be, as the UNP has no serious interest in the matter. The TNA could have done it to drive home a point since they had nothing to lose. But they failed to, perhaps because their inherent loyalty towards the UNP got the better of their political sense.

Whether the UNP leadership seriously expected to defeat the government and thereby march on to a snap poll that they hoped to win is anybody's guess. But if the UNP seriously expected the JVP to help them to topple the government or for that matter to do anything that will make them face the polls, the UNP deserves to be eternally in opposition.

The fact remains that an anti-people budget that has nothing to offer to the people except greater war spending has been passed. The conduct of the political parties has shown that they are lacking in vision and that one is as bad as the other in its care for the interests of the people.

The Crime of being a Tamil

Earlier in the year there was an attempt by the police to expel large numbers of Tamils from Colombo. That was thwarted by a Supreme Court ruling. But the harassment of the Tamils in the city persists. The government in the course of justifying its pursuit of a military solution to the national question is seeking to portray every Tamil as a potential terrorist.

Following a bomb blast in a store in the Nugegoda suburb of Colombo, up to three thousand Tamils were rounded up and taken to police stations and other detention centres, despite possession of the necessary identification. Of them an estimated five hundred had been remanded, and it was again a petition to the Supreme Court by the CWC that made it possible for those remanded to be released on bail.

The arrests and detentions were not based on any evidence and what is worrying is that the incident seems to be yet another episode in someone's agenda to cleanse Colombo of Tamils as well as the prospect of such incidents recurring in the near future.

Moragoda and the Media Maharaja

The Committee of Public Enterprises (COPE) had named Milinda Moragoda in its report for serious financial irregularities involving large sums. This was followed by a call for a parliamentary debate on the matter.

Besides attempts by the government to stall the debate, the MTV-Sirasa-Shakthi electronic media empire took it upon itself to prevent such a debate and for nearly a whole month in September-October the news bulletins took up the cause of Moragoda. News included the reading out of character references by various politicians and character assassination of his opponents.

Charges against Moragoda are still not in the public domain, and what was at stake was the prospect of a parliamentary debate. It was strange that the private tri-lingual electronic medium reputed for challenging leaders of the JVP for various indiscretions should go to great lengths to stifle debate on a matter of national interest.

Parting Shot?

British High Commissioner Dominick Chilcott, addressing a ceremony commemorating Dudley Senanayake, his last public appearance before completing his term in Sri Lanka, called upon the government to improve its rights record and warned that it would be a mistake to view something as sensitive as human rights as a purely internal matter.

He argued against demonising human rights campaigners and UN agencies. He also cautioned that the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a country need not be upheld and that non-military intervention, ranging from arguing and persuading to economic and political sanctions, is possible.

His statements provoked angry reaction from the government. The Sri Lankan government took particular exception to the statement: "I am not saying that the political aspiration for Eelam is illegitimate.... What is crucial, however, is what methods are used.... And the LTTE's methods are simply unacceptable." But his government stood by him.

Although several Tamil nationalists were gleeful about the speech and particularly about the above statement, the fact remains that the Sri Lankan government has continued to be treated fairly well by the "international community" including Britain, at least as far as its pursuit of the war is concerned. Also, notably, the British government had President Rajapaksha as a guest of honour at the passing out parade for naval officers, to witness his son's graduation.

It is one thing to find solace in the words of people like Chilcott that suit one's beliefs, but quite another to hope that the British or any other western government will interfere on behalf of an oppressed minority.

International Events

Venezuela: Lessons for the Left

Until barely a few weeks before the Venezuelan referendum on constitutional reforms, euphoric enthusiasts of the Bolivarian Revolution of Chavez, readily denounced as Stalinism, dogmatism etc. any constructive criticism or words of caution. The defeat of the proposals, although narrow and amid the abstention of 45% of the electorate, show that the warnings made sense. It by no means signals the fall of the Chavez government with an 80% majority in parliament; nor does it make Chavez unpopular. But the Bolivarian project is facing a fresh challenge from the reactionaries and the exploiting classes who have lost political control but wield control over sizeable sections of the economy as well as the media. The defeat has encouraged them in their efforts to derail the socio-economic reforms of Chavez and compel him to compromise with the old elite if not oust his government.

James Petras in his essay of 5th December in Radical Notes (internet journal) rightly attributes the defeat to the mobilisation of right wing reaction and its middle-class followers with support from the various US agencies operating within the country, including political NGOs, the major business associations of Venezuela, the bulk of the private mass media, and the Catholic Church hierarchy. There was also the political buy-out of some of the supporters of Chavez. Their opposition interpreted political reforms including the lifting of the restriction on re-election of the President as moves to impose a dictatorial government.

Petras also draws attention to the negative role of social democratic academics who persuaded left and progressive students to vote 'NO', and to how "Trotskyists split up sectors of the trade unions with their pseudo-Marxist chatter about 'Chavez the Bonapartist' with his 'capitalist' and 'imperialist' proclivities, incited US trained students and shared the 'NO' platform with CIA funded CTV trade union bosses".

The campaign for the amendments had its shortcomings. A section of the poor abstained for genuine unaddressed grievances. There was economic sabotage by producers and retailers. The failure of the government to address such issues adequately enabled its opponents with US backing, especially in the big business sector, to take advantage of popular discontent to derail constitutional reforms.

The defeat could be transformed into a good thing since it has put to rest illusions of a smooth transition to socialism, even with a popular government. The main lesson of the defeat is that reactionaries do not give up easily. The situation in Venezuela is far better than that in Chile three decades ago, but there can be no compromise with reactionaries, especially the landowner-capitalist alliance in Latin America. The essential lesson is that the oppressed and exploited class forces that want social justice need to be politicised, mobilised and encouraged to take the initiative the struggle against imperialism and local reaction.

Whether the Chavez government will be forced by a need for survival to accommodate economic liberalism and eventually fail in its Bolivarian project or learn from the defeat and rectify errors to persevere in struggle for social justice and economic independence of the country depends on the how well the progressive alliance of class forces is organised, mobilised and conducts itself.

Anti-imperialism, is strong among the people in South America as a whole and in Venezuela in particular. It should be encouraged and taken advantage of. But it is wrong to assume that the balance of forces between the exploiters and the exploited will be stable for long. One will prevail over the other, and what is needed is not compromise with the exploiting classes but confronting reaction and imperialism to transform society by mobilising and arming the broad masses with the ideology of the working class.

It is correct for Marxist Leninists and other progressive forces to be constructively critical of the Chavez government. But to denounce it and call for its defeat is wrong since it is a powerful bastion of anti-imperialist struggle in the region and should be supported in its continued defiance of imperialism.

Pakistan: Drifting towards Disaster

Benazir Bhutto knew what she was doing when she helped Musharraf to get elected President. His subsequent declaration of a state of emergency and the use of emergency powers to dismiss the Chief Justice again and several other judges, detain and arrest politicians including Imran Khan, arrest lawyers leading the opposition to his dictatorial style and other protesters did not surprise any. The state of emergency was formally denounced by the US but support for Musharraf continued. Expulsion of Pakistan from the Commonwealth was eyewash, and could be reversed now since the emergency has been lifted after Musharraf had consolidated his power.

That the return of Pakistan to democracy will be a farce is amply clear from various events including the differential treatment of Bhutto and Nawaz Shariff, both found guilty of serious corruption during their tenure as prime ministers. It is no secret that Bhutto is as much in the pocket of the US as Musharraf is and that there is a deal between the pair. The current protests by Bhutto and her party against the abuse of power by Musharraf are essential theatre for her to establish her credibility in the forthcoming elections to be held in a climate where Musharraf is very unpopular.

Pakistan has no parliamentary political leadership that can be trusted to defy the armed forces and US imperialism which wields considerable influence through the armed forces and corrupt political leaders. The left is weak, but not ineffective. The democratic movement has strong mass support but needs to see through the fallacy of parliamentary democracy in the context of a state dominated by the armed forces, and to organise accordingly. Boycotting the elections is the best option. But the parliamentary 'opposition' to Musharraf will not like it.

The emergence of Islamic fundamentalism as a strong force in opposition to the Musharraf regime or its successors will further divide Pakistan. Thus Pakistan faces a serious political crisis, with the US seeking to dominate it and India seeking to undermine it. The US war against 'Islamic terror' in the region is increasingly becoming Pakistan's burden. It is only the emergence of an effective anti-imperialist democratic resistance that could arrest the drift of Pakistan towards disaster.

India: Nandigram and the Naxalite 'Threat'

The 'Marxist' CPI(M)-led government of West Bengal is now further isolated from the masses as well as its one time allies.

Having been humiliated by mass resistance to the attempted land grab in Nandigram in the East Midinapur District, the CPI(M) sent out its goons once more in November to 'retake' the village and restore its 'prestige'. The goons drove away the people to establish their reign of terror, and blocked the media and journalists from entering Nandigram for four days since their operation began. A group of reputed social activists, writers, intellectuals and artists led by Medha Patkar visiting Nandigram on a fact-finding mission and to express solidarity with the residents evicted from their hearths and homes were attacked by the CPI(M) goons. The 'success' of the CPI(M) further undid its credibility.

The respected former judge VR Krishna Iyer who has been a friend of the CP(M) for long has called into question its notion of development in his letter to the Governor on Nandigram published in *Mainstream*, Vol XLV No 47 of 14 Nov 07. Gopalakrishna Gandhi, handpicked by the CPI(M) bosses to be the state governor, also denounced the excesses of the state government. Ninety-three intellectuals with progressive credentials denounced the shameful events including the attack on the team led by Medha Patkar. Partners of the CPI(M) in government too have further distanced themselves from Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya on the issue.

As the a call for the dismissal of the state government from the right wing opposition got louder, the CPI(M) has been compelled to make a deal with the central government whose nuclear deal with the US it vehemently resisted only weeks earlier. What compromises will be made on the unpopular nuclear deal is yet to be seen.

Interestingly, the pro-CPI(M) fortnightly, *Frontline*, published by the *Hindu* media establishment, went into hibernation on the subject for months, possibly because its reputed columnists were disgusted by the conduct of the state government and the party goons. It has now come out strongly in support of the CPI(M) thugs, declaring that there is now peace after 11 months of turmoil, amid continuing silence of the columnists. Its distortion of facts is a good a match to that of *the Hindu* on matters relating to the Sri Lankan national question.

The CPI(M), the state government of W Bengal, and the amoral defenders of the conduct of both in Nandigram had initially pinned the blame on the right wing opposition for the debacle in Nandigram. It was true that Mamta Bannerjee, leader of the Trinamul Congress sought to gain political mileage out of Nandigram. But that story had few buyers even among the 'left' allies let alone the central government. Now the CPI(M) leadership has found a better selling product, the Naxalite threat, to find common cause with the centre, while continuing to denounce all and sundry for criticism of the CPI(M) atrocities.

There is no doubt that the oppressed masses of Nandigram need support to defend themselves and will be supported by all Marxist Leninists and genuine progressives. But the CPI(M) now points in the direction of the Naxalites in the hope that it will help it to secure the support of the central government which has declared war against the Naxalites who continue to gain support across the country.

A spate of arrests has begun, including that in Kerala of the editor of the journal 'People's March'. These are signs of the times, and one cannot help being reminded of the notorious Emergency Rule of Indira Gandhi a little over thirty years ago and the shameful role of the CPI.

Myanmar: Democracy and Liberation Struggles

The campaign for democracy in Myanmar has suffered a setback and the campaigners have retreated in the face of ruthless oppression. Negotiations between the ruling SLORC, renamed State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, and the detained democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi, with or without the involvement of UN mediators, are not likely to lead to progress in the direction of democracy. The concern of the West, as elsewhere, is not democracy or fundamental rights.

Myanmar (then Burma), rich in its natural resources had a backward economy, and assumption of power by the armed forces led by Ne Win in 1962 drove the country into further isolation, with a largely unskilled and educationally backward population. The free-market policy since 1988 changed little but to create a class of comprador capitalists collaborating with the top SPDC generals.

Chinese policy towards Myanmar has all along been one of non-interference in internal affairs; the party-to-party relationship that existed between the two communist party factions of Myanmar and the Communist Party of China ceased after China's regime change. Western pressure on China to persuade the SPDC to yield on human rights is based on the desire to gain access to Myanmar's natural resources and to bring Burma into the ring of encirclement of China.

It is unlikely that neither India nor China or for that matter ASEAN countries will do much to change things in Myanmar, and it is a matter for the democracy campaigners to organise better based on the broadest possible united front of oppressed masses.

What global enthusiasts for democratic change fail to note is that the Karen, Kachin, Shan, Mon, Arakan, Chin and other nationalities and ethnic groups have since Burmese independence in 1948 fought armed struggles to assert their right to self determination. Peace agreements and ceasefires signed from time to time failed to resolve issues of autonomy and federalism. Also the Burmese Communist Party, which was active against the British and Japanese occupations, launched a rebellion against the government in 1948 that lasted for 40 years in the rural areas of the north along the Chinese border. There have been powerful urban movements, workers' movements with socialist leadership, peasant uprisings, pro-democracy protests and popular rebellions with no sympathy or support from the 'international community',

What the struggle for democracy needs today is the unity of the forces for democracy with the struggles for national and ethnic liberation based on the principle of self-determination and firm opposition to any form of foreign domination. This will be achieved only when the democracy movement and activists free themselves of the influence of the 'international community'.

Palestine: The Struggle and the Sellout

The situation in Palestine continues to deteriorate. The international blockade of Gaza and the ongoing illegal collective punishment of its residents by Israel have led to soaring food prices and shortages if not unavailability of many foodstuffs, medicines and other goods including

building materials. Fuel is becoming increasingly scarce and expensive. Unemployment is soaring and often those with jobs work without pay for months. Palestinians in urgent need of medical treatment are dying for lack of access to hospitals outside Gaza owing to the closure of border crossings.

As the forces of Israeli occupation continue to kill Palestinians indiscriminately, Hamas is making a strong counter-attack. But the blockade and political isolation are taking their toll. As the situation deteriorates Hamas could be pushed to a hard line position. Meantime, President of the Palestinian Authority, Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad suffer the illusion that they can win concessions from Israel if they succeed in disarming the Palestinian resistance. What is evident from the not very auspicious start of the much hyped talks at Annapolis on 12th December 2007 is that they may be endorsed as ‘moderate’ and “reasonable”, but cannot extract any meaningful concession, territorial or political, from Israel. Nor will the US exert pressure on Israel to do so.

Sadly several factions, including the so-called Palestinian Left, have opportunistically aligned with the Fatah, in their desire to sideline Hamas. In the wake of this failure by the Palestinian left and the ongoing brutal Israeli occupation of Palestine, the weeks after the talks will be crucial for the Palestinian liberation struggle. Whether or not Abbas and his regime will be able to continue as they have is in doubt. If Hamas can maintain control of its forces in Gaza and withstand the blockade for some time, they will place themselves in a strategically good position; and Abbas cannot continue to ignore them and will be forced to the negotiating table. Even if Abbas and Fayyad persevere in their efforts to disarm the resistance, it could push friendly factions closer to Hamas, and isolate Abbas and Fayyad. However, if Hamas loses control and fails to stave off defeat in Gaza, they will revert to their former hard line positions rather than capitulate to Abbas, the quisling of the US.

In any event, if a united Palestinian liberation struggle is not forged, the biggest loser will be the Palestinian people.

A poem by Roque Dalton*

After four hours of torture, the Apache and the other two cops threw a bucket of water at the prisoner to wake him up and said: "The Colonel has ordered us to tell you you're to be given a chance to save your skin. If you guess which of us has a glass eye, you'll be spared torture." After passing his gaze over the faces of his executioners, the prisoner pointed to one of them: "His. His right eye is glass."

And the astonished cops said, "You're saved! But how did you guess? All your buddies missed because the eye is American, that is, perfect."

"Very simple," said the prisoner, feeling he was going to faint again, "it was the only eye that looked at me without hatred."

Of course they continued torturing him.

* Eminent Salvadoran poet and revolutionary activist, 1932-1974

Three Poems by Oumer Ba*

Justice is done

Beaten up
Robbed,
Hospitalised?
And the witnesses?
Many as grains of the sand:
Kadiel is one;
Ndoulla
Ndyan Bele is one;
Even the birds can testify ...
But you forget that the chief
Has his son as judge
And his son-in-law as interpreter.

Familiar Oxen

You tell me you have right on your side?
And those oxen that I see
In the chief's herd?
If I call them
They will respond to their baptismal names.

Nobility

Don't you know
That an ox of seven seasons
Can become a soldier
And take your place for military service.

[Oumer Ba, b. 1900, is a reputed Mauritanian poet]*

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