

Sri Lanka
The Tasks for Socialists
Today

Key - note address by
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on the occasion of the
60th Anniversary of the Party.

The socialist movement in Sri Lanka and the Lanka Samasamaja Party are celebrating their sixtieth year today. It is the Lanka Samasamaja Party's distinction that it founded the socialist movement in this country. Through the years the LSSP has been that movement's path-finder. Its anti-colonial struggle with its militancy stretching to the British-owned plantations, and its fight for independence, are high-water marks in the L.S.S.P's colourful history. In the further struggles the Hartal of 1953 was the first militant effort to safeguard welfare measures in the agitation for which, from the days of the malaria epidemic and the Suriya mal campaign of the early thirties the LSSP played the major role. But by no means has the socialist movement been confined to the LSSP. With time, other parties and groupings have entered the movement giving strength to it and taking strength from it.

The LSSP has today, together with the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, achieved a dominant position within the country's socialist movement. In the last few years these parties reached out to all democratic forces, mobilising them in the overthrow of the UNP with its 17 year misrule. The ending of government through emergency regulations, the abolition of the Executive Presidential system, the restoration of democratic rights, processes, and institutions, and the ending of the ethnic war were principal objectives held high in the course of this struggle. With the defeat of the UNP the rule by emergency regulations has also ended. But the other objectives remain, and they need to be fought for and won.

The LSSP has not shirked in the task of fighting for the protection of minority rights. It has always understood that without due respect for the rights of minorities Sri Lanka cannot continue to be a united country. In this the opposition it has met has been from the bourgeois parties of both the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The realisation of Sri Lanka's unity as a nation thus became, from about the commencement of the country's post

Independence history, the task almost exclusively of the socialist movement. Included in this task was the opposition to the deprivation of citizenship rights to the plantation workers of Indian origin, the denial of official status to the Tamil language, and the attempt to compensate the Tamil minority by regionalising their language and their rights.

The Provincial Councils system established through the 13th Amendment to the Constitution has its genesis in the socialist movement. The socialist movement reacted pointedly to the major consequence of imperialist exploitation of Third World countries in conditions of under development. That was the internal under development of the periphery in contrast to the centre. The marginalisation of the rural economy and its intelligentsia which included its youth, and the national minorities, were seen as direct consequences of the conditions of underdevelopment within the country.

In 1970 Dr. N.M. Perera in his first budget speech as Finance Minister of the United Front Government projected a novel concept of economic planning for the country.

He said,

"An entirely new structure for planning is being established which will bring people into much closer participation in the process of formulating the social goals, preparing the national and local development plans and co-ordinating their implementation. Under this new set up each local authority area will be the focus for development planning and plan implementation."

As planning was not part of the Finance portfolio this projection did not see realisation on ground. The UNP's District Development Councils with their Presidential appointees as District Development Ministers failed to reach up to what was expected here. It was the LSSP's interest in participatory systems of management and government that gave the impetus to Leslie Goonewardena to introduce to the socialist movement a democratic system of district administration and development which was meant to show up the bogus District Development Councils

of the UNP. It was intended to bring the people actively into the processes of government.

At the heart of our socialist movement has been the mobilisation of the masses to intervene in decisions and other matters that affect them. The general strikes of the late 40s and the Hartal of 1953 constitute extra-parliamentary action. The socialist movement has succeeded in asserting itself through the exercise of the franchise itself. Whilst the UNP has been the compradorist party of imperialist interests the socialist movement has confronted and even displaced it from governmental power through the adoption of such devices as no-contest pacts and United Fronts. In 1956 the UNP was defeated for the first time through this strategy. Although the language question loomed large in the campaign it could be said that what was really in issue was the fate of the welfare measures that continued from the period of the last world war. This has continued to be a major concern of the electorate ever since. But by 1970 the socialist forces were able to take the masses into the area of demanding structural changes. Dr. Colvin R de Silva described it picturesquely as the entry of the class struggle into the arena of the State. The 1972 Constitution was its major result. For the first time in the history of this country - 25 years after formal independence, Sovereignty - the source of State power, was recognized as vested in the people. The People exercised it through its elected representatives in Parliament, or, as it was called, the National State Assembly. The artificially erected so called checks and balances in the Soulbury Constitution wholly as a strategy for maintaining the status quo, were removed. Parliament was recognized as the supreme instrument of State power. While the legislative power of the People was exercised by Parliament, the executive power of the People was exercised with direct responsibility to Parliament. The judicial power of the People was exercised through courts and other institutions established by law. This in great measure can be seen and realized as constitution - making within a socialist perspective. The "People" here is no fiction. They played an active role in

the achievement of the Constitution. As the socialist Ferdinand Lassalle stated several years ago constitutions are determined by the balance of class forces. Concessions were certainly made to the backward consciousness of some layers of the petty-bourgeoisie which were also part of the United Front- but these were no more than gestures. As far as the language rights of the Tamil community were concerned the status quo was adopted. The socialist movement had not the backing of class forces to go beyond this point. However the chapter on Fundamental Rights and Freedoms with its declaration that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law and its provisions against discrimination on grounds of race, were relied on for the protection of minority rights.

This Constitution together with the district administration thought out for the LSSP by the General Secretary Leslie Goonewardene should have succeeded in involving the people in the business of administration and the exercise of political power at both the national and regional levels. But this was not to be. The 1978 Constitution, made by the UNP, with its Executive Presidential system changed power relations and pushed the People out of the political arena. With its concentration of powers at the centre represented by the Executive President - a system of devolution of powers to the periphery cannot be satisfactorily worked out. A principal task of the socialist movement today is not only to abolish the Executive Presidential system but also to ensure that adequate constitutional provision is made for the devolution of political power to the provinces or regions.

Dr. Colvin R de Silva, addressing the All Party Conference which was convened in 1984 for finding a viable solution to the ethnic conflict, presented to the Conference the proposals on devolution as thought out by Leslie Goonewardene and said,

"They were conceived and shaped in the perspective of the socialist society for which the LSSP stands and works, and the kind of state structure which socialism calls for in the light of the basic tenet that it is the masses moving through the class struggle

who clear the way to socialism and build the socialist society."

The point should not escape us that the solution to the ethnic conflict needs to be found and worked for by the socialist movement itself. Bourgeois systems like the Executive presidential system relevant for the needs of that class, and its imperialist master today, are incapable of accommodating the political structures that ensure to every person equality of status in relation to the state and the administration. The LSSP's proposals as pointed out by Dr. de Silva projected such structures not only for the North and the East but also for the rest of the country. Said Dr. de Silva:

"There is no reason why the various regions of our country and the people who inhabit them should not be enabled, within the single Sri Lankan state, to run much of their affairs as bear a regional character in accordance with their traditions and genius. Incidentally, that is the only democratic way to hold our multi-racial and multi-religious society together as an organic whole."

It is the task of the socialist movement now, as it was then, to push for a political solution to the ethnic problem. Between 1984, which was the year of the All Party Conference on the ethnic issue, and today the socialist movement's achievement on the matter of a feasible political solution has been considerable. It is to its credit that the SLFP has accepted devolution of political power, and a widening of it beyond the confines established by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution as the needed political solution. Chandrika Kumaratunga and the late Vijaya Kumaratunga, as leaders of the Sri Lanka Mahajana Pakshaya, were part of the socialist movement. The fact that Chandrika Kumaratunga as the country's President continues to be with the socialist movement on the issue of the political solution is important in a situation in which the stepping up of the war and the battle for Jaffna has to some extent spread confusion in the SLFP ranks. This by itself makes it imperative that the socialist movement take an unreservedly class attitude to the war. Mere mouthing that this is a war against the LTTE and not against the

Tamil people will no longer suffice. All the circumstances are such that the Tamil people would have no option but to realise that they as a people are forced into an involvement in a war which is not of their seeking. They are a people turned into refugees by the stepped up war, and are subjected to tremendous hardship. It is not possible any longer for the socialist movement to stand aside from this war without taking a position on it. The damage, destruction and trauma it has caused to the Tamil people, the crimes the LTTE has committed against innocent Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils in the pursuit of their goals through the methods of terror are too heavy for the socialist forces to refrain from taking steps to ensure an immediate and effective cease-fire. The military operations carried out by the security forces is presently having an unparalleled effect on the country's economy with its heavy drain on resources. Decisive to the ending of the on-going military operations is the legislative enactment of the provisions of the Devolution package now under discussion. It is the task of the socialist movement to defeat the chauvinists on this matter. It is a fact that the socialists among the Tamils have been silenced by the LTTE. It is the progress of the package that will enable the socialist movement to re-emerge amongst the Tamils too.

Sri Lanka's socialist movement has always concerned itself with the country's economic development. It has been an article of faith that the capitalist class, with or without its compradorist ally in collusion with imperialism, cannot achieve this. The socialist movement did not consider that without a much higher level of development of productive forces socialism was possible. The Lanka Samasamaja Party has never fallen prey to the simplistic idea that socialism in its true sense is possible in any country except as part of a predominantly world socialist order. The task that was seen possible in current circumstances, through the mediation of a non-capitalist government, was no more than the laying of a foundation for the building up of a socialist society. "It assumes" said Dr. N.M. Perera in his budget speech in 1970, the

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that is a developing country cannot leave development at the mercy of the inter-play of forces which are motivated solely by the profit instinct. Development it was understood, had to be within a socialist perspective.

Economic development and the just distribution of the benefits of development was the declared goal of the United Front government of 1970. In this the State and a viable public sector had to play the central role. Economic circumstances have by no means changed so as to alter this. Nevertheless from the 1980s the pressure of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund has been for the shedding of the regulatory role of the State and for the liquidation of the public sector through privatising it.

This is a wholly new situation that has confronted the socialist movement the world over. The heavy debt burden of the Third World countries, the paucity of resources for investment in development, dependance on aid and assistance from and through the world Bank and the IMF, and the apparent success of the capitalist economies like those in Germany and Japan, and the forging ahead of the "Asian Tigers" made the World Bank- IMF indicated path of economic development attractive to these countries. The collapse of the USSR, and the market-oriented debate and discussion that preceded it has left many socialists too totally confused on the issues involved. How can a Third World country get the needed investment resources and technology if not through capitalism itself they ask. Surveying the wide scene, Kari Polanyi Levitte, the daughter of Karl Polanyi who in his *The Great Transformation* exploded the myth of the free market in its relation to industrialisation, commented recently, "From Chile to Brazil to Jamaica - not to mention Europe - prominent personalities of the 'Left' have reappeared as recycled advocates of 'free market' capitalism." No satisfactory theoretical positions have evolved in this regard. There appears to be no disagreement on what is needed. That is that degree of industrial development that advanced capitalism has achieved and the

need to keep abreast of it. The disagreement is on the means for achieving this. Is it the capitalist state and the capitalist class that will achieve this, and if that be so where does the socialist movement come in is a question that validly poses itself.

The basically liberal capitalist State has, in the period between the two World Wars, taken different forms - ranging from democratic to fascist. The present day NICs share in varying degrees characteristics of the fascist state. The state representing essentially the interests of industrial capital intervened in a leading way in setting the stage for economic progress in a keenly competitive market. Labour was suppressed or co-opted and industrial harmony was achieved and maintained through doubtful means. Not even lip service was paid to democratic and fundamental rights. Embarrassed commentators used on them the euphemism, "Developmental State."

The World Bank and the I.M.F. appeared to hold these up as the best examples of late developers that benefitted from the "Open Economy" and the "Free Market". But in fact these were very closely regulated economies up to their take-off point of time. Even today the sore point of US capitalism appears to be the protectionism of the Japanese, and even the South Koreans.

The UNP government of 1977 lost no time in selling to the people the prospect of achieving NIC status by following the World Bank -IMF policies relating to an open economy and the so called free market. It overlooked the basic contradiction between the means and the end. The Open Economy and the free market were in no way the means adopted for their development by these NICs. In fact these were the means which the developed economies of the West adopted, under the banner of the Global Economy, to combat the efforts of the so-called Second and Third Worlds to industrial development without subjection to Western imperialism. What we need to learn from men like Polanyi is that even though the NICs have enjoyed the favoured position of client states of US and Japanese imperialism in the post-War period, they could not have achieved their development through

adherence to free market and "Open Economy" policies.

It is thus not surprising that the UNP regimes of 1977 to 1994 failed dismally to establish even a launching pad to their dream of NIC status by subjecting the country to the policies of the Open Economy. Instead what happened was that the Presidential system of government commenced the transformation of the State itself to one with strong and recognizable fascistic characteristics. It failed to bring in foreign investment of any significance. What they promoted through the sale of State property was a capitalism described aptly as crony capitalism, a term used in respect of what Marcos promoted in the Philippines. The socialist movement in this country saw quite clearly the need to pull down that whole system, and it made this its task when it dedicated itself to defeating the UNP.

There is no reason to suppose that the PA government can succeed in achieving the very same policy objectives as those of the UNP by following the policies dictated to it by the World Bank and the IMF. The PA government, in pursuing these policies, can fall into the dangerous situation of not knowing what it is committed to. This is clearly demonstrated in the attempts it has made to sell the plantations in the guise of a 50 year lease of these to the private sector. The haste with which this is being pursued is explained by the need, shown in the recent Budget, to realise immediately at least Rs. 5 billion from privatisation in a situation in which war expenditure has risen to a fantastic Rs. 38 billion.

From the arrangements made by the Public Enterprises Reform Committee, or PERC, for what is virtually the privatisation of the plantations it is clear that the PA government has not had the opportunity to give necessary consideration to the consequences of this move. The plantations hold within them the largest component of the working class of this country. The plantations also bring to the country its foreign exchange. They also constitute an asset that can be ruined by mismanagement. The working class here has its own problems and non-attention to these can take an ethnic dimension. In these circumstances can the

State unreservedly leave the management of the assets involved to the care of private companies? This remains a question which has received no political thought from the PA government. It is of significance that the trade union movement has reacted to this, and the parties within the PA, and those associated with the PA government, have expressed their disagreement.

The matter of the plantations presents to the socialist movement the kind of problem it has to address itself to. The manner in which it faces that problem and the solution it brings to it will certainly define for the socialist movement its tasks within the People's Alliance. The PA government's commitment to democracy and the abolition of the Executive Presidential system and its commitment to an expeditious political solution to the ethnic problem, make it imperative that the socialist movement define its immediate tasks from within the perspective of maintaining the government of the People's Alliance in power. This also means, and even more importantly, that the immediate task of the socialist forces is to keep the PA government within the accepted political perspectives of the People's Alliance.

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