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The Maoist Movement in Sri Lanka

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‘More than Maoism: Rural Dislocation in South Asia’ is an ISAS research theme focusing on socio-economic, political and security dimensions of “Maoist movements” in South Asia. The institute conducted a closed-door workshop on the research theme and the presentations are being put together as a series of ISAS Insights and ISAS Working Papers. This is the fourth paper in this series.

Abstract

This paper examines the rise and decline of the Maoist movement in Sri Lanka. It provides a background to the history of Sri Lankan Maoism and looks at the split between the Pro-Moscow and Pro-China groups in 1964. The high point of Maoism in Sri Lanka was the close relationship Nagalingam Sanmugathasan of the Ceylon Trade Union Federation (CTUF) developed with Chairman Mao Tse-Tung and other leaders of the Communist Party of China during the Cultural Revolution. Though some conditions were favourable for Left mobilisation, the movement fizzled out in Sri Lanka. The paper also provides possible explanations for the failure of the movement. These include a disconnect between Maoist doctrine and socio-political realities, the ‘right’ turn in China’s foreign policy, the Sino-Vietnam and Sino-Albanian schisms, and the Tamil ethnicity of Sanmugathasan and his age, which precluded him from participating in armed struggle. A notable feature of the Maoist movement is that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which resorted to major armed uprisings twice within twenty years, resulted from a split within the Maoist party.

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The story of Sri Lankan Maoism is a paradox. Apart from Nepal, Sri Lanka has been the scene of the most efficacious, armed and ideological insurgencies in South Asia. It has seen two such insurrections launched by the same party, the JVP; the first in April 1971 and the other in 1986-89 which seriously threatened state power. Thus, Sri Lankan Maoism must be viewed against the backdrop of two significant attempts at armed insurrection.

The fact that though the attempts did take place – thereby indicating the availability of a clear space for a revolutionary Left – they did not spring from a Maoist movement indicating the failure of Sri Lankan Maoism. However, the fact that the JVP, though not itself a Maoist movement emerged from the bowels of the Maoist movement and its leading cadres were for the most part ex-Maoists, is evidence of the fecundity of Sri Lankan Maoism.

When the Maoists split from the pro-Soviet party in 1964, the new movement was distinguished by the fact that it had been able to carry the main trade unions of the pro-Moscow party with it, which was a rarity in most parts of the world. The CTUF was led by Sanmugathasan, who was the initiator of the breakaway from the pro-Soviet party and took the union federation along with him. The cadre leading the All Lanka Peasants' Congress also went along with Sanmugathasan.

Even more striking was the role played by the Sri Lankan Maoist leader internationally. Sanmugathasan was a well-known ideologue of the national rather than merely the regional or youth sections of the parent Communist party, unlike the leaders of most Maoist breakaways the world over. Sanmugathasan's skills with the English language and his knowledge of Marxist-Leninist doctrine made him an ideal instrument for the Communist Party of China in the global polemic with the pro-Moscow parties and splinters. The histories and anthologies of political literature of that period showed the Ceylon Communist Party, as the Maoists were known, the chance to punch above their weight.

The high point of Maoism in Sri Lanka were the meetings that Sanmugathasan had with Chairman Mao and the zenith was clearly the May Day on which he stood by Mao, taking the salute as the sun rose and Mao was hailed by hundreds of thousands of Red Guards in Tiananmen Square.

It was downhill all the way after that. Several key youth and student leaders of the party broke away from it. These included Rohana Wijeweera who went on to form the JVP, launched two insurrections fifteen years apart, and died at the hands of the government in November 1989.

When the April 1971 insurrection broke out, Sanmugathasan who had been one of the most acerbic ideological critics of the JVP was jailed along with them by Prime Minister Sirima

Bandaranaike, to whom they all looked and sounded alike. Sanmugathasan was to suffer a double blow. When he was released from jail, his party had split, with a faction adopting the new foreign policy of China, best exemplified by its line on Sri Lanka and Sudan where it supported governmental suppression of communists and radical leftists it suspected were under the influence of the USSR. This rightward shift in China's foreign policy was the cause and consequence of its new rapprochement with the United States under Richard Nixon.

Sanmugathasan was not entirely and utterly orphaned, though. Having opposed Deng Xiaoping's alleged restoration of capitalism in China and supported Albania (not to mention about obtaining support from the latter), he broke with it and guided his vastly diminished party into the Revolutionary International Movement (RIM), which coordinates far left Maoist insurgencies in Asia, including the Naxalites of India.

Preaching Maoist dialectics, Sanmugathasan was fond of emphasising the primacy of internal over external factors in the development of a phenomenon or process. Using the same methodology, one may say that Sri Lankan Maoism was undone far more by internal rather than external factors, such as the turn in China's foreign policy, though it did play its part. Three factors can be identified:

1. Ethnicity: the Maoist leader Sanmugathasan was from the Tamil minority and therefore would be unacceptable to the Sinhala majority – a point made by the most significant of the youth dissidents Rohana Wijeweera (who was to become the founder-leader of the JVP), albeit *sotto voce*, and more hinted at than openly expressed.
2. Generations and political practice: Sanmugathasan was an old man, known to have a bad back and an upper middle class lifestyle; therefore he was perceived as preaching People's War but incapable of the practice of armed struggle.
3. Disconnection between doctrine and socio-political reality: Maoist formulae were criticised as being irrelevant outside their time and place, namely colonial or semi colonial societies with backward agrarian structures characterised by large landholdings. Sri Lanka, by contrast, was a modern nation state, capitalist rather than feudal, with capitalist relations or petty commodity production predominant in the countryside. Thus, the 'stage of the revolution' was held to be 'socialist' rather than 'new democratic'.

Of the three reasons listed above, the third seems especially relevant because of the failure of other Maoist organisations, led by younger, educated Sinhalese (which therefore were immune to 1 and 2 above).

However, the fact that the JVP with its unusual admixture of ultra-leftism and Sinhala xenophobia was easily the strongest and most consequential of all anti-systemic or anti-capitalist formations to appear in Sri Lanka, also lends weight to the salience of factor 1.

The Maoist splinters from Sanmugathasan's party, which had followed the rightward shift of Chinese foreign policy and adopted the Theory of the Three Worlds² (enunciated by Deng Xiaoping at the United Nations (UN) General assembly in 1974), joined the mainline Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of the Bandaranaiques. Having played a part in the anti-Soviet, anti-Vietnam, anti-Cuba polemics during Sri Lanka's stewardship of the non-aligned movement, these elements dissolved into the SLFP, supporting more populist, Sinhala nationalist and in some cases, anti-Indian policy stances and personalities within and by that party.

The history of Sri Lankan Maoism contains a mystery of a development that was not. In the late 1960s, the Jaffna branch of the Maoist Party of Sanmugathasan, then in its heyday, had led a violent mass struggle, prefiguring those of today's Naxalites in India against caste oppression in the mainly Tamil North. Though this struggle was displaced by the emerging Tamil secessionist movement, the left wing of that movement had been influenced by and had considerable respect for the struggle waged by the Maoists. However, despite the invocation of the slogan of a national liberation struggle and the arguable approximation of the conditions in the Tamil areas to those that Asian Maoism took root in, and despite the Tamil ethnicity of the founding father of Lankan Maoism, none of the Tamil Eelam armed movements were Maoists [except for a small, short lived group called the National Liberation Front of Tamil Eelam (NLFT) which soon spawned a breakaway, the People's Liberation Front of Tamil Eelam (PLFT)].

The lasting residue of the Maoist movement in Sri Lanka then seems to be an ideological gloss and glossary for anti-Indian sentiment that erupts intermittently within the JVP and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The abiding irony of history, though, is the poignant relevance of the essays written by Sanmugathasan in the mid 1980s, reminding the emergent Tamil armed movement of Mao's Rules of Discipline and Points for Attention, cautioning the young militants against terrorism and killing of civilians, and preaching the doctrine of Protracted People's War in which, mass organisations form the foundation and politics in command ('all political power flows from the barrel of the gun but the party commands the gun and not the gun the party'- Mao). Had Velupillai Prabhakaran heeded this advice of an older Tamil militant leader who once stood

² Speech by Deng Xiaoping at the Sixth Special Session of the UN General Assembly, 10 April 1974. *People's Daily* (11 April 1974), p.2. 'In 1974, Deng Xiaoping delivered a speech at the Sixth Special Session of the UN General Assembly on behalf of the Chinese government, in which he systematically set forth Mao Tse-Tung's thesis of the three worlds', www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-06/25/content_342508.htm.

alongside Mao, his militia and he may not have been obliterated on the banks of the Nandikadal lagoon in 2009.

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