

The New-Democratic Marxist-Leninist Party in its 35th Year

*(Drafted by the Committee for Compiling the 35 Year History
of the Party)*

The Communist Movement in Sri Lanka

The Communist Movement in Sri Lanka commenced in the last century in the 1940s. The Communist Party of Ceylon was founded on 3rd July 1943. For nearly two decades the party gave correct direction and leadership to the working class and other toiling masses. But since that party took the parliamentary road, a revolutionary Marxist Leninist communist party, which called itself the Ceylon Communist Party, was founded under the leadership of Comrade N. Sanmugathasan. Revolutionary struggles took place at various levels between 1964 and 1978 in the South, the North-East and the Hill Country under the leadership of that party, and comprised broad uprisings by the masses including workers, peasants, people oppressed by caste, women and youth.

There were debates and differences in views on the question of steering the party and its forward march through the changed conditions on the basis of the experiences and successes and failures of the past. While there was full concurrence of views within the Ceylon Communist Party led by Comrade Sanmugathasan in its revolutionary stand against revisionism, parliamentarism and trade unionism, strong differences emerged within the party on four major issues. They concerned the stand of the party on the 'Three World Theory'; the national question; united front activities; and building the Party as a revolutionary organization based on democratic centralism.

The Founding of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (Left)

At this stage, the party leadership was afflicted by egoism, dogmatism, obstinacy, lack of democratic centralism, and the cult of the individual. As a result, Marxist Leninists in the Ceylon Communist Party led by Comrade Sanmugathasan were forced to leave and found a new political party. Thus created was the present New-Democratic Marxist-Leninist Party, founded on 3rd July 1978 as the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (Left). The course of events proved the newly founded party correct in its stand on the key disputed issues, except on the question of the 'Three World Theory'. The Ceylon Communist Party was correct in its rejection of the Three World thesis, and the New-Democratic Marxist-Leninist Party, has since acknowledged its error and made public its self criticism.

Delegates who congregated in Jaffna to establish the Party, besides agreeing on the name, set up an Organizing Committee to conduct the first All Sri Lanka Congress of the Party. The delegates unanimously agreed that the Organizing Committee will act as the founding leadership of the Party until the Congress and elected Comrade KA Subramaniam as the Secretary of the Organizing Committee. The Party which started its journey along the revolutionary path held its

First Congress in Jaffna in September 1984. A Central Committee was elected and Comrade KA Subramaniam (Comrade Maniam) was elected General Secretary of the Party at that Congress. Comrade Maniam and the Central Committee worked with dedication to build the Party organizationally and at a mass level. Activities were expanded in the Hill Country to strengthen the youth movement and through it the Party. The Party had to function amid pressures and threats from rival sectors of Tamil nationalist militant groups as well as the armed forces of state. The presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces in the North-East between 1987 and 1991 further intensified pressures. During this period, leading members and activists of the Party were targeted with several detained and tortured, and some killed by the LTTE. Several leading members were forced to flee Jaffna in the face of assassination attempts. Comrade Maniam, while functioning as General Secretary, died in exile in Kandy in 1989 owing to serious illness.

Renaming as New Democratic Party

The Central Committee elected Comrade SK Senthivel as General Secretary until the next Party Congress. The Second All Sri Lanka Congress of the Party was held in May 1991 in Colombo, under the theme “Let us restore national democracy and secure the right to self determination for the nationalities”. The Congress resolved to change the name of the Party to New Democratic Party; and elected Comrade SK Senthivel as the General Secretary of the Party, Comrade E Thambiah as National Organizer and Comrade S Thevarajah as Treasurer.

The Party had since recognized the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils as the four nationalities of Sri Lanka and the existence of minority nationalities comprising the Burghers, Malays, and the Attho (the aboriginal people of Sri Lanka) among others; and emphasized the need to address the national question, taking into account the national aspirations of the nationalities as well as the aspirations of the national minorities.

The Party which had boycotted all parliamentary and other elections since its founding had since the Second Congress decided to contest the elections as the only feasible way of taking its political message to the people under the repressive conditions that restricted mass political work. The Party has, however, been clear about the limitations of parliamentary politics and that it cannot be a substitute for revolutionary politics.

The Third All Sri Lanka Congress was held in June 1997 in Colombo and the Congress formally recognized the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and the Hill Country Tamils as the four nationalities of Sri Lanka and the Burghers, Malays, and the Attho (the aboriginal people of Sri Lanka) among others the as minority nationalities. It emphasised that, while the class contradiction was the fundamental contradiction, the national question had become the main contradiction with the continuation of the war further aggravating the contradiction so that it was important to strengthen the anti-war campaign and emphasize the need for a peaceful resolution of the national question based on the principle of the right to self determination. It was also resolved that the anti-war campaign will be carried forward in collaboration with friendly left, progressive and democratic forces.

A left front was organized in 1998 in the wake of the Third Congress to address challenges posed by imperialism and chauvinistic capitalism, based on a minimum programme. The organization, named the New Left Front (NLF), comprised the New Democratic Party, the Nava Samasamaja

Party, the United Socialist Party, the National Democratic Organization, the Diyasa Group and the Muslim United Liberation Front. The NLF contested elections to the Provincial Councils held in April 1998. Its performance in the districts that it contested was indicative of a return of public confidence in the revived left movement, and Dr Vickramabahu Karunaratne of the NSSP was elected to the Western Provincial Council. The NLF suffered a split in 1999 owing to the unprincipled conduct of the leader of the NSSP in warming up to the chauvinistic JVP, whose sole purpose of tempting the NSSP leader was to break up the NLF, in which it succeeded. As a consequence, prospects for left unity suffered a serious setback from which the Sri Lankan left has yet to recover.

The Fourth All Sri Lanka Congress was held in November 2002 in Jaffna when negotiations for peace with Norwegian facilitation were in progress between the government and the LTTE, following the Ceasefire Agreement between the two parties and the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding. The Party, while welcoming the opportunity for peace, warned about foreign interests taking advantage of the peace process and stressed the need for compromise to ensure lasting peace. The fears of the Party proved correct when dishonesty on the part of the government and the LTTE along with Indian meddling led to the collapse of the peace process and the resumption of war, which was further intensified since the election of Mahinda Rajapaksa as President in 2005 November.

The brief spell of peace during which Party engaged in open mass political activity was sharply disrupted by the resumption of the war; and the intended All Sri Lanka Congress of the Party had to wait until after the end of the war in May 2009.

The Fifth Congress

The Party took the important decision to change its name to New-Democratic Marxist-Leninist Party in the Fifth All Sri Lanka Congress held in June 2010 in Colombo. The decision was based on discussions with international fraternal parties and in view of the term “new democratic” being used not only by reformist parties but also by reactionary political parties in other parts of the world.

The Congress discussed the international and national political situations in great depth, reviewed the experiences of the Party —especially since the Fourth Congress — and published an extensive Political Report which reasserted class contradiction as the fundamental contradiction in the country with imperialism and the reactionary chauvinist capitalist and bureaucrat capitalist classes, which retain several of their feudal characteristics, as the main enemy of the toiling masses. It also re-affirmed the national question as the main contradiction which, besides being used by the ruling elite to divide the oppressed people of the country is also used by imperialist and hegemonic forces to interfere in the affairs of Sri Lanka. The Congress while asserting the need to politicise the working class and resolve the fundamental contradiction through Proletarian Revolution, emphasised that, in order to advance towards socialism, the New Democratic stage of the Revolution had to be fulfilled, with the peasantry and other toiling masses united under the leadership of the working class. The Party firmly committed itself to work towards a broad united front of left, progressive and democratic forces led by the working class to address the immediate issues facing the country and the people.

The Fifth Congress elected Comrade SK Senthivel as the General Secretary of the Party, Comrade V Mahendran as National Organizer, Comrade E Thambiah as International Organizer and Comrade S Thevarajah as Treasurer.

Facing Oppressive Politics

It is remarkable that, during most of the thirty five years since its founding, the Party has passed through a period of severe economic crises, political repression, and national oppression transformed into war. The present constitution with the executive presidential system was established in 1978 by JR Jayawardane and the UNP who were elected to power in 1977. The present constitution and the Party are of the same age, but they have remained poles apart. From the very outset, the Party has opposed that constitution and warned of its grave dangers.

That constitution paved the way to transforming the economy of the country into a neo-colonial economy and reinforcing the neoliberal economic policy through liberalization, privatization and globalization. That economic trend is still being carried forward, and JR Jayawardane, R Premadasa, DB Wijethunga, Chandrika Bandaranayake Kumaratunga and now Mahinda Rajapaksa have presided over it by wielding state power as executive presidents.

At the same time, each of the executive presidents, none less than the other, has presided over the unleashing of cruel chauvinist oppression against the Tamil people through the transformation of the national question into war. No initiative was taken with even a minimum of political honesty to find a political solution to the national question. While chauvinism has been the basis for that failure, ruling class attitude has also been an important factor. The forces of big capitalism in the country and foreign imperialism have been together in carrying forward the war of national oppression.

The war served as a shield for the big capitalist ruling class to implement liberalization, privatization and globalization under a neoliberal economic policy for the country. While many thousands of Tamils were killed on the broad landscape of a national question transformed into war, the economy and resources of the country were being appropriated behind the scenes by local big capitalists and profiteering foreign multinational companies and the imperialist powers housing them. That trend persists even after the end of the war.

The comprador bourgeois forces of the country, while implementing their ruling class stand dictatorially in ways characteristic of fascism, also unleashed chauvinistic military oppression against the Tamil people in the form of a cruel war. Both of these have over the past 35 years been like two sides of one coin. It is through this period that the Party has undertaken its political journey in accordance with its class allegiance. The Party has, amid most severe political pressures and repression, functioned as a Marxist Leninist party that has kept its good sense.

Even with repression under the state of emergency and anti-terrorism legislations, the Party faced the repression to carry out mass political work among the people. Thus far, the Party has held five congresses on an all island basis, which have analysed the problems of the country and possible solutions at the political, economic, social and cultural levels based on a Marxist Leninist class approach; and has formulated its policies and programmes accordingly.

The Party has made it clear that the fundamental contradiction of the country remained the class contradiction while the national contradiction which had been transformed into war is the main contradiction. It pointed out that the worsening economic crisis is aggravating the exploitation and oppression of the toiling masses of the country including the workers and peasants, based on class. The Party has besides exposed and opposed the tendency of the state to use anti-democratic and anti-people means to nip in the bud public opposition to such moves. It also opposed the continuing denial of a political solution to the national question which had become the main contradiction and been transformed into war.

The Party has adopted the Marxist Leninist approach to analyse the national question in the specific context of Sri Lanka. In particular, the Second All Sri Lanka Congress of the Party recognized the existence of four nationalities in the country, namely the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils and national minorities comprising the Malays, Burghers and the Attho, among others. The Party adopted a sober approach on the national question in defining and explaining the national question and putting forward a solution to it. It put forward as its political solution autonomous structures for the Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and Hill Country Tamil nationalities based on the principle of the right to self determination. The proposals were further enriched in successive congresses of the Party. In particular, the 15-point proposal of the Party for the solution of the national question emphasized not only the rights and livelihood of not only the Tamil and Muslim people in the North-East but also of the Sinhalese who have lived there for generations.

It was a challenge for a sincere Marxist Leninist party to function on the basis of its stand of class struggle without opportunism or compromise and without isolation or capitulation amid the chauvinistic military oppression of comprador capitalism on the one hand and struggles of narrow nationalists with their demand for Tamil Eelam. The Party, while confronting state oppression, had also to face the anti democratic tyranny of the LTTE. The Party had to conduct its activities in regions under the control of the LTTE by adopting a variety of appropriate tactics; in the process, a number of leading comrades and supporters had to face various crises and threats.

Comrade S Thuraisingam and party supporter S Nadesu, both of Changkanai, were abducted by the LTTE which after detaining them for several months announced their killing. Also, party comrades from various regions had been tortured in the name of 'inquiry'. The General Secretary of the Party, Comrade KA Subramaniam who escaped attempted murder by the LTTE by a hair's breadth was forced to live undercover in a village in Kandy. Other leading comrades too, having cheated death, had to embrace clandestine life. Most of the armed organizations for Tamil Eelam were incapable of coming to terms with the ability of the Party to continue to function as a Marxist Leninist party.

In February 2007, the government, in the name of action against the LTTE, used its mechanism of oppression against democratic forces as well as extra-parliamentary left forces. Five comrades of the Party from the Hill Country were arrested and suffered prolonged detention under remand. In 2008, a comrade from Vavuniya too was arrested and remanded. All but one of these six comrades were released without charge after two to three years of detention. Comrade Suhesanan, after prolonged detention, was sent for rehabilitation for a period of one year and

released in September 2013. All six of them were young Party comrades. It is remarkable that even after their imprisonment they still at one with the Party and Party activities.

Facing the Current Political Climate

Firstly, in a climate in which, the economic activities of the country, as said earlier, have been fully surrendered to foreign forces over the past 35 years, the political, social and cultural spheres of the country too have been transformed to suit that climate. Secondly, the transformation of the national question into war has thrust forward chauvinism and Tamil narrow nationalism; and secured for them a place in the political arena. Thirdly, the snare of de-politicization put into operation by NGOs and the advent of modern communication systems have had an adverse impact on the lives of the people. Overall, the left movement and working class activity had become isolated as a result of liberalization, privatization and globalization. Trends of identity politics were on the upsurge. Each nationality built a fence around itself. Past experiences impressed upon the Party the challenges and hardships that a Marxist Leninist party faces in keeping itself alive under such circumstances.

The Party has carried out its political work based on its class stand as well as its activities in the fields of art, literature and culture in the North, the Hill Country and Colombo. It has by that means been able to deliver its Marxist Leninist politics to the people. It has through mass organizations carried out political work among the people to the best of its ability. Despite lack of resources and financial difficulties, it has published its Tamil political periodicals “Paattaali” (1978) “Cempathaakai” (1979) “Puthiya Poomi” (1987) and “Puthiya Neethi” (2012). The theoretical journal of the Party, “New Democracy” (1999) is since 2012 published under the title “Marxist Leninist New Democracy”. The Party has also, from time to time, published a number of books and booklets on theoretical and current political issues. The Party supports the Deshiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai to function as a people’s art and literature forum and the publication of its magazine “Thaayakam”.

The Party through establishing mass organizations for people’s issues has played its role in addressing the problems faced by the people. These and other mass political contributions of the Party will be documented in fuller detail when the 35 year history of the Party is compiled. At this stage we remember with sentiment departed comrades, Founder General Secretary Comrade KA Subramaniam who worked with dedication at the forefront to establish the Party, Politburo Member S Navaratnam, Central Committee Member RK Soodamani, Hill Country Regional Committee Member P Chandrakumar, Northern Regional Committee Members Comrade Mahadevan (Lingam), Comrade K Rasiah, Comrade T Tharumalingam and Comrade S Thuraisngam. Among comrades who are remembered with revolutionary sentiment are Comrades S Thuraisingam, M Kandappillai, S Rasadurai, P Ratha, P Pasupathi and K Paramu who were all members of the Party.

Every comrade who has over the 35 year history of the Party has through his/her abilities and dedication contributed to the defence and development of the Party deserves to be remembered with honour. Of them some are not with the Party today and continue as separate individuals. The Party has never rejected them. Although they may have distanced themselves from the Party for various reasons, the Party remembers with respect their contributions at various stages.

The Party is proud to be a Marxist Leninist Party that has been functioning on this soil for 35 years. This pride is not a matter of complaisance. The Party takes joyous revolutionary pride that it has been able to stand with its head erect as a Marxist Leninist party of the proletariat amid opposition, accusations, abuse and negative criticism in an adverse international climate and a deteriorating domestic situation.

We wish to conclude with the assurance that this brief account of the 35 year history of the Party will soon be followed by an extensive document recording the history of the Party.

[Edited translation of text in Tamil]