

# The Left's Choice: Revival or Surrender

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Two responses to my recent piece, “Resisting the Nationalist Right’s Framing of the Economic Alternative,” have appeared. One is by Uditha Devapriya and another, here in *Polity*, is by Shiran Illanperuma. Devapriya takes a sympathetic approach, raising underlying questions about industrialisation. Meanwhile, Illanperuma argues that my entire critique is misplaced. Rather than engage the latter in a point-by-point rebuttal, I take this opportunity to expand a bit more on some of the implicit themes and consequences of my argument.

My purpose is to strengthen the Left’s self-understanding. There are doubts about what defines the Left in Sri Lanka, whether it even exists, and, if so, how it should act in relation to other political forces. But, I argue, one of the first steps is developing a theoretical basis for understanding Sri Lanka’s current, multidimensional crisis from a Left perspective, even if all the other elements described above have yet to be worked out.

In my original piece, I draw a contrast between the progressive Left and the pseudo anti-imperialist Left that tails nationalists, or the Far-Right. For readers unfamiliar with, or uninvested in, the winding history of intra-Left debates, this may seem confusing at best. But my point is to argue that precisely because the Left is far from a coherent movement led by a clear set of organisations, we must distinguish the values that separate one approach from another as the basis for further institution-building.

Toward that end, I retain the use of ‘progressive Left’ to refer to a loose network of individuals and organisations that takes seriously the connection between social and class struggle and issues of democracy, including the national question. This is a more accurate description than, for example, the liberal Left because it implies a stronger focus on the *extra-parliamentary* character of working people’s resistance with the long-term aim of transcending capitalism.

Hopefully, the concept of a progressive Left would enable the many people who are becoming politicised in the current moment after the 9<sup>th</sup> July 2022 uprising to identify their collective strength. Rather than fixate on the pseudo anti-imperialist Left—meaning, those who use anti-imperialist arguments to defend regimes and actors of wildly diverse and even Far-Right political character—I focus now on the progressive Left’s potential challenges, insofar as it may come to represent the Left in its entirety.

We could argue, for example, that the Left is currently embodied in a faction of *aragalaya* protestors now confronting the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government, trade unions, foresighted elements within the cooperative sector, and even a silent majority enduring backbreaking austerity that could yet sustain a second wave of protest. But for me the point is to develop a critical perspective of these trends and their possible deepening. I wish to think through the problems facing a Left both in opposition and one that hopes to govern one day.

## Accumulation and Development

The first step is understanding what we mean by the economic programme of the Left. Devapriya argues, for example, that the Left must win back industrialisation from appropriation by the Far-Right. In my original piece, I mentioned economic challenges in a very offhand way. But here I elaborate a bit further on why we need an alternative way of conceptualising the strategy for development. Specifically, we need a more open-ended and flexible understanding of the relationship between rural and urban areas—including, for example, the possible scope of rural industrialisation—because the path is not straightforward for countries such as Sri Lanka.

In contrast to Marx’s own original assumptions, generations of Marxists, from Rosa Luxemburg to thinkers inspired by dependency theory such as Samir

Amin and Giovanni Arrighi, have argued that the path to development has often been blocked in the global periphery. This is with few exceptions, which had their own complex reasons, including the classic post-revolutionary regimes of the Soviet Union and China, in addition to the East Asian developmental States that emerged during a specific regional and global conjuncture. To understand why the situation persists, many Marxists argue that we must analyse mechanisms of exploitation on a global level.

Historically, countries in the core (especially Western States, such as the US and countries in Europe), have appropriated surplus value by taking advantage of lower labour costs in peripheral countries, in addition to outright dispossession, including slavery, land grabbing, and so on. This, along with the process of enclosure in England, provided the material basis for kickstarting capitalism. Marx called it primitive accumulation. In contrast to Marx, however, later theorists such as Luxemburg and Amin argued that primitive accumulation is not only part of the origins of capitalism; rather, it is essential to its ongoing reproduction on a world scale.

In this regard, we must also recognise that even States located outside the historical Western core now pursue their own accumulation strategies. They respond to problems such as over-accumulation by creating, for example, their own spatial fixes, including pursuing urbanisation at a dizzying speed. These strategies further provoke new social problems and struggles. As Harvey (2018) points out, tensions within the accumulation process in regional power centres such as Brazil and Turkey are part of the explanation for the wave of protests on issues such as public space and transportation that erupted in the 2010s (188, 192).

The fundamental question of accumulation on a world scale, in other words, persists regardless of relative shifts in the hierarchy of global powers. Accumulation strategies also depend on the character of regimes that consolidate. But it is wrong to categorically assume that non-Western States from Brazil to China, or Turkey to Saudi Arabia, do not generate new forms of dispossession because they did not participate in the beginning cycle of capitalist accumulation. Accordingly, the Left's metric for evaluating whether to align with regimes in these countries cannot simply be whether they are now opposed, for example, to US hegemony. In Sri Lanka's own South Asian context, what if, for example, the Modi regime suddenly decided to oppose the US? Would that make it the Left's ally?

Meanwhile, as Amin (1974) pointed out, for countries seeking to overcome the trap of dependency, a lack of industrialisation is an inadequate framing of the problem because core countries exploit the periphery regardless of the specific products they export (293-294). Marx himself held ambiguous beliefs regarding the transition. At least initially, he believed, "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future." This view, however, has been tempered by critical interpretations of his later work, including his engagement with Russian Marxists in the final phase of his life (Musto 2020: 66).

Regardless, Amin and other Marxists argued that the goals of accumulation and development often contradict each other in the periphery. The latter countries are not being exploited because of the nature of the products that they exchange on the world market, but because they provide cheaper labour despite maintaining rates of productivity equivalent to that of the core. Accordingly, if we assume that catching up through industrialisation must be the programme of Sri Lanka's Left, we ignore the fact that the global periphery is already incorporated into the world system. In this sense, there is no linear path to development. Moreover, the concept of development itself must be pluralised to consider each society's trajectory (Rodney 2018: 15-16).

### **Relations between Rural and Urban Areas**

How can Sri Lanka hope to overcome the resulting contradiction between accumulation and development? Left theorists have long framed this question in terms of transfers between rural and urban areas. For those Marxists who assumed that the countries in the periphery would simply follow the same path as those in the core, the answer seemed relatively straightforward: take the economic surplus generated from the agricultural sector and invest it in the industrial sector. The political consequences of this method, however, proved far more difficult to manage.

In the early Soviet Union, for example, fierce debates occurred about the need for primitive socialist accumulation. This strategy was later appropriated by Stalin, who imposed forced collectivisation. In response, later theorists from the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s believed that China appeared to offer an alternative, less destructive path toward agrarian transformation, although omitting closer scrutiny of the 'Great Leap Forward'. Nevertheless, the problem of transfers remains and must be dealt with in creative ways, especially in the context of a small peripheral country such as Sri Lanka with its representative democracy.

What would land redistribution and agrarian reform look like in this context? Previously, I along with Ahilan Kadirgamar put forward the tentative argument that the Old Left in Sri Lanka, chiefly the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP), failed to provide an adequate *solution* to this agrarian question. Not that they did not have their own diagnosis. We even acknowledged that through people such as N. M. Perera, who was Finance Minister in the United Front (UF) Government:

[The Left] began to articulate the need for mobilisation to create, for example, rural industries (Five-Year Plan 1971: 14–15). But having failed to organise in the countryside up to that point, the left was circumscribed in its action. It took power in a coalition at the precise point when it lacked the rural mobilising capacity to resolve the overwhelming crisis. (Gunawardena and Kadirgamar 2021: 272)

For reasons that we specified at length in our article, and barring outliers such as G. V. S. De Silva, we argued that the Left of the period, stretching from the 1930s to the 1970s, generally took an overly optimistic view of ‘scientific’ methods of planning. The problem is that this approach did not resolve the ongoing tensions between rural and urban areas. In addition, it forced the Old Left to rely on the plantation system for foreign exchange earnings. The Old Left was hobbled by structural conditions of dependency. This, despite its initial, principled approach, for example, to the question of Upcountry Tamil citizenship when Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948.

Because of the Old Left’s assumptions about Sri Lanka’s development trajectory, the majority of the LSSP and CP decided to partner with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964, which had split from the United National Party (UNP) in 1951. The Old Left, however, did not join this coalition from a position of strength, as its leader. Rather, it was a junior partner. Its subordination meant that even though the SLFP demonstrated initial sympathy towards the Old Left’s goals of import substitution, for example, *it could appropriate these ideas for its own ends*, including to strengthen the local capitalist class. Even provisional attempts at land reform were undermined (Jayasekera and Amerasinghe 1987: 41–42; Shastri 1983: 8–9; on the limitations of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) led by Philip Gunawardena and William de Silva, see Abhayavardhana 1962: 204).

Nevertheless, because of their linear interpretation of history, the majority of the Old Left believed that there was a class fraction, whether a national or petty bourgeoisie, and which the SLFP supposedly represented, that was oriented toward accumulation in

Sri Lanka. This contrasted with the comprador elements represented by the UNP. Many among the Old Left assumed that this bourgeoisie would create the material basis for the further development of an indigenous proletariat capable of achieving socialism over a longer period.

### Revisiting the Left’s Problematic

The path, as we have now seen, was far from straightforward. In fact, the Old Left remained subordinate to the SLFP. It was eventually turfed out of the SLFP-led UF government in 1975, when it was no longer considered useful. Meanwhile, the SLFP itself was defeated by the UNP in 1977, ushering in the period we have come to know as the ‘open economy’, or neoliberalism. All this is to say that given these results, any serious engagement with the Left requires understanding the contradictions that allowed it to be outmanoeuvred by the Right.

There is too much work to go into here in the space of a brief essay. But authors such as Kumari Jayawardena (1987) and Charles Abeysekera (1979), for example, have explored in detail the ways in which the Old Left found itself facing deeply uncomfortable moral and political paradoxes because of its coalition with the SLFP. Outcomes included the emergence of a New Left represented by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the birth of Tamil militancy in the North.

In the case of the rural South, the point is that the JVP *claimed* to represent rural grievances, regardless of its own class character, by taking advantage of the Old Left’s disconnect. In other words, *contra* Illanperuma, I do not imply that the insurrection of 1971 led by the JVP was a “popular peasant revolt”, as opposed to the struggle of educated under-employed youth with eclectic and adventurist ideas. Instead, what matters were the consequences as a symptom of the Old Left’s own moral and political confusion, including its participation in the UF Government’s bloody suppression of the insurrection.

For people who now see no other choice than to ally with anyone who claims to reject neoliberalism, regardless of their political character, my point in my original essay was to caution against renewed appropriation. In today’s case, this applies to the Far-Right, including elements represented in groups such as the *Uththara Lanka Sabhagaya* (ULS—Supreme Lanka Coalition). In this regard, the fact that we are still debating the Old Left and its strategic defeat is critical. The explanation of this outcome, however, cannot simply be, “Because of Western empire”.

Instead, we must ask, what were the internal contradictions in the strategy of the Left? What must be revised in its previous ways of thinking? I have argued that we must look in a much more careful way at the underlying problematic of industrialisation. This is especially urgent now that Sri Lanka is facing a deep and painful economic crisis, in which all the assumptions of the previous external-oriented development model are being challenged.

On this front, the real question is not redistribution *versus* growth. *Rather, by offering tractable solutions to immediate problems facing the people, especially relief and redistribution during an economic depression, can the Left reconceive the entire path of Sri Lanka's development?* This is a massive challenge that requires serious work on the levels of both theory and practice. It cannot be resolved in the space of the immediate discussion around my article. In fact, it would depend on further engagement, for example, with organisations oriented towards working people, such as cooperatives in the rural North, which in practice are experimenting with new solutions to basic problems of survival.

Industrialisation may sound like a quick and easy answer to this set of problems. But the reality is that until the Left in Sri Lanka figures out how to intervene in the imbalance between rural and urban areas as a question of *relations between social forces*, it will be condemned to repeat the mistakes of its predecessors. In this regard, applying an ahistorical maxim as Illanperuma does, such as the need to increase industry as a proportion of GDP, means stripping away the social reference points of these statistics. Such a reductive, economic approach can become an open-ended justification for all kinds of policy, and even dispossession.

One is reminded of the economic establishment's previous obsession with the fact that agriculture is "only nine percent of GDP but employs nearly a third of the workforce." They used that to justify, for example, a financialised service economy, which proved to be a mirage. As we now see, amid a devastating economic depression, people rely more than ever on domestic structures of food production. Poverty is not socialism. But neither is socialism a dismissal of the circumstances under which people must survive.

Instead, much deeper rethinking must be done in terms of how to measure development in a way that makes visible the distributional conflicts in which it is embedded. This is the real method that embodies the spirit of Marx's critique of vulgar economics. It means taking seriously the *interconnections* between sectors such as agriculture and industry insofar as they

represent a social totality, which further entails complex questions about the politically appropriate strategy for accumulation.

The key though is starting from the perspective of working people's reproductive needs. For example, the connections created through the processing and distribution of agricultural goods by cooperatives could become the basis for other backward and forward linkages in the economy. One possibility is to think with Amin (1974) about the need for different price systems in the same country, to ensure "national cohesion" (285-286). G.V.S. De Silva (1973) made a similar point in the case of Sri Lanka about the lop-sided emphasis on urbanisation and its social implications.

In addition, deploying industrialisation as the ultimate justification for an alternative to neoliberalism does not speak to the more egalitarian global order that the Left is presumably trying to help construct. That project depends on creating solidarity within the periphery, not by pursuing race-to-the-bottom, cut-throat competitiveness. What would an export-oriented industrialisation model look like, for example, under global conditions of increasingly severe wage repression? This, along with questions about internal imbalances within Sri Lanka, is the type that we should be asking if we are serious about articulating a *progressive* alternative to neoliberalism.

Meanwhile, we can return to creative thinkers such as the ones briefly mentioned above to try and do justice to ongoing struggles, especially around urgent livelihood needs. That includes the uneven distribution of reproductive work that is frequently borne by women. There is hope, however, in renewed engagement with concepts such as self-sufficiency. This could help us envision inter-linked industries as part of a future path of development that rethinks the basic categories of political economy, such as State-backed credit extended through a system of cooperatives that retain their autonomy.

### **Multipolarity or Global Unravelling?**

Despite accusations of pie-in-the-sky idealism, the reality is that this approach is in fact rooted in the assumption that the path to working out new social forms that can resist the exploitation of peripheral countries such as Sri Lanka will be long and arduous. As Marx put it, "There is no royal road to science." There are no easy answers. But one of the most counterproductive things that we can do is jump on the bandwagon of a new mercantilist bloc, whether led by the US or China, without thinking through the consequences ourselves. While the trend is



toward global polarisation and the incessant demand to pick a side, it remains a diversion from the urgent task to grapple in concrete ways with the daunting challenges facing working people.

This is where we need to focus more on Sri Lanka's own social and class relations, to understand what is at stake in the various struggles that have emerged in recent years. For example, to Devapriya's question, should the Left continue looking for a proletariat located in the classic system of industrial factories as the basis for further development of its political organisations? Or must we widen our understanding of the antagonism between capital and labour (Harriss-White 2012), to engage creatively with the different forms of resistance that have emerged, including struggles, for example, against microfinance, land grabbing, and so on?

The problem with relying on geopolitical actors to resolve these questions for us is that—in addition to the fact they face their own contradictions and struggles at home—doing so could also provide cover to Far-Right forces in Sri Lanka. The latter use the simplistic rhetoric of a good-versus-evil struggle—in today's case, a China-Led Rest (or 'Eurasia' in the new parlance) against the US-led West—to obscure social and class logics.

Meanwhile, the world does not appear to be headed toward a benign multipolarity. Instead, as Promise Li puts it, what we have so far observed instead has been the "uneven adoption and development of authoritarian strategies of governance", including those repressive tools originally developed by the US during the 'War on Terror' and now replicated in diverse contexts, such as the pacification of Xinjiang. Moreover, global unravelling, including the possibility of outright conflict, has profound consequences for the future of our very survival as a species on this planet. This is a moment of great danger when the US's hegemony is under strain while global capitalism reigns free. As a result, the costs of breakdown are imposed on weaker States until the whole thing snaps and contradictions violently erupt (Gunawardena and Kadirgamar 2023).

We are already seeing the consequences of an emerging debt crisis that could affect not only Sri Lanka but many other countries in the Global South. In the event of a failure to resolve the crisis on egalitarian lines, the political reaction that emerges could even acquire a fascist character. Accordingly, if we are in a 1930s-style moment in terms of political danger, it is even more decisive to critique those forces that could disorganise any potential Left that could emerge. We should not cheer on Far-Right actors because they say that they are willing to break with neoliberalism. Capitalism

itself can undergo many permutations. A reactionary alternative to neoliberalism can easily generate its own violent forms of dispossession.

Accordingly, caution and vigilance must be exercised to an even greater degree. Adopting this perspective is the exact opposite of the troubling idealism that assumes Sri Lanka's problems can be worked out by following a US- or China-led bloc. Any strategy for geopolitical manoeuvre to navigate the current crisis of financialisation, including identifying alternative South-South development financing options, must be discovered by returning to concrete engagement with the masses.

Furthermore, as we now know from Sri Lanka's own devastating history of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the reaction to it, any compromise with the Far-Right is bound to end in disaster for a Left still in the infancy of its potential renewal. In this regard, such a choice is no longer even a politics of coalition, as it was in the case of the Old Left. Rather, it is a politics of surrender. To put it as bluntly as possible: *Nationalist and Far-Right actors, such as those representing the ULS, who were discredited by the fall of the disgraced Rajapaksa regime should not be resuscitated in any way, even if they distinguish themselves from existing bourgeois opposition parties by claiming to break with neoliberalism.*

Conversely, accepting the latter as a sufficient justification would imply politics reduced to its basest sense, in terms of electoral calculation alone. It would mean ignoring the transformation in popular consciousness that emerged through the struggle. Given the nationalists' antagonistic attitude toward the 9<sup>th</sup> July uprising, it would in fact be tantamount to an explicit disavowal of that unprecedented demonstration of the people's collective agency. For the Left, closing this path to renewal laid out by the struggle would be catastrophic. If the Left wishes to avoid this fate, the spirit of rebellion must be sustained, not smothered. Accordingly, to work toward the Left's revival, especially with the aim of taking a more active leadership role in reconstructing progressive politics, requires keeping this perspective in mind.

That means avoiding framing its objectives in terms of the choice between electoral coalitions, though the arguments we construct may have implications for wider struggles to keep democratic space open. There is a need to maintain distance, at the very least until the Left can work out its ideological challenges in an intellectually disciplined way and establish its own consistent forms of political representation. This approach may not offer immediate consolation to those looking for a quick

solution to the Left's problems in terms of electoral choices. But it could provide a far more durable basis for facilitating the hesitant revival in the Left's engagement with working people and their everyday struggles: the true compass of its political orientation.

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