

SENDERO LUMINOSO IN PERU: A DARKENED PATH

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The capture and imprisonment of Dr. Abimael Guzman, the Chairman of the Peruvian Communist Party (popularly known as *Sendero Luminoso* or Shining Path), has drawn new attention to a movement that remains one of the very few communist guerilla groups in the world today. The New Peoples' Army in the Philippines is perhaps its closest parallel. In El Salvador where a major Left-wing guerilla war was conducted by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, the conflict ended late last year after international mediation resulted in a peace agreement between the guerrillas and the government.

Dr. Guzman was arrested by the Peruvian police on September 12, along with seven of his colleagues. Television viewers all over the world watched the bearded guerilla leader, in prison uniform, unrepentant and shouting revolutionary slogans at reporters. This was a particularly surprising sight in an age where rebel leaders rarely remain alive following their capture. President Fujimori of Peru vowed to pass the death sentence on Guzman, also known as Chairman Gonzales, although Peruvian law allows no more than life imprisonment to convicted rebels. After a brief trial by a military tribunal, Dr. Guzman was given a life sentence.

An elated Fujimori and the Right-wing American press predicted a quick end to the Sendero movement. Since Guzman was arrested, more guerilla leaders have fallen into the police dragnet. Given the extreme social and economic conditions that exist in Peru, coupled with the brutalities of the state, it is too early to foresee an early collapse of this reportedly highly organized and determined rural guerilla movement. What is necessary for Sendero for its long term political presence is a radical shift of its strategy, from the sectarian and 'ideologically purist' guerilla politics of the old mould. That would however require a self-critical internal debate within the movement. The paradox, nonetheless, of most guerilla movements is that the discourse of armed struggle very rarely leaves discursive space for other alternatives.

A comparison of Sendero's recent setback with the fate of Sri Lanka's JVP would be useful. When Wijeweera and almost the entire membership of the JVP's Politbureau and Central Committee were captured and eliminated in late 1989, the movement had already lost a large number

of its members. After Wijeweera's and Gamanayake's deaths in November 1989, the task of the armed forces was more or less a mopping-up operation. Shocked and leaderless, the remaining cadres of the JVP could not continue their campaign due to one fundamental reason: till the news of Wijeweera's death was out, they were operating under the unreal assumption that the capture of state power by them was imminent - a matter of just a few weeks. A false optimism about an impending collapse of the old order prevented the second level leadership, as occurred in 1971, from having a fall-back strategy, for example, aimed at a political measure to save the movement and the lives of the remaining cadres.

The case of Sendero Luminoso however, may be different. Although as violent and ruthless as the JVP, it is a rural guerilla movement with a significant support base among the peasantry, particularly among the highland Indians in the Ayacucho province. Significantly, the Sendero movement has an ethnic base too as its appeal has been specifically wide among these native Indians in the backward mountain regions. Therefore, uprooting the Senderistas from the rural areas would not be as easy as the relatively quick elimination of the JVP. One should, meanwhile, not forget one important comparison; economic and social conditions among the rural and urban poor in Peru are infinitely harsher than they are in Sri Lanka.

Origins of Sendero

The origins of both the JVP and the Sendero Luminoso show some close parallels. Both were products of the crisis within the pro-Moscow Left in the early sixties. Originally a break away group from the Peruvian Communist Party, the group led by Guzman embraced Maoism. Guzman was at that time a teacher of philosophy at a provincial university in Huamanga, Ayacucho. This was a period of student radicalism. The Huamanga university's student population was predominantly native Indian, children of poor peasants who were able to receive higher education due to educational reforms carried out from the fifties. Guzman worked with them and had also established close links with the National Teachers' Union.

After forming the Maoist faction of the Communist Party, Guzman visited China, where he spent nearly a year



during the cultural revolution. On his return, he began to train his cadres in the Maoist style following the cultural revolution. He sent student cadres to the countryside 'to learn from the peasants' and provide direct services to the poor Indian population who had been consistently neglected by the central government. Like the JVP's Rohana Wijeweera, Abimael Guzman remained an independent Maoist in the sense that he was not affiliated to the global Maoist network, headquartered in Peking. He claimed to have developed a uniquely Peruvian doctrine of native agrarian communism.¹ Wijeweera's own claim to originality, quite interestingly, was also a similar one; that he, instead of 'parroting Maoism', had 'adapted Marxism-Leninism to apply to the specific conditions of Sri Lanka.'

The name Sendero Luminoso signifies the nativism of this Guzman brand of Marxism. The full name of Guzman's organization is *Partido Comunista del Peru, Por el Sendero Luminoso de Mariategui*, which means, the Communist party of Peru, following the Shining Path of Mariategui. Who was this Mariategui whose 'shining path' the Peruvian Maoists profess to follow?

Jose Carlos Mariategui was a Peruvian Marxist who made an important contribution to Latin American Marxist debates in the 1920s and the 1930s.² He founded the Peruvian Socialist Party in 1928, and a few years later, the Peruvian Communist Party. Christobel Kay notes that Mariategui was the first outstanding Marxist to apply Marxism to the concrete conditions of Latin America. His insightful analyses of the Peruvian situation is said to have led to the revision of some Marxist theses accepted at that time. Some even regard him as a Latin American Gramsci. In 1928, he published a major Marxist study on the Peruvian situation, titled *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality*. Two of his theoretical ideas have had a lasting impact on Left wing politics in Peru.

The first is the notion that feudal and capitalist relations in Peru were part of one single economic system and did not constitute two separate economies as argued by another contemporary Peruvian Marxist, Haya de la Torre, in his dualistic thesis. He saw imperialist capital as linked to and profiting from pre-capitalist relations and that the development of capitalism would not eliminate surviving feudal relations. The political conclusion he drew from this analysis was that the socialist revolution could not wait until capitalism had fully developed in Peru and that the indigenous peasant communities could constitute the germ of the socialist transformation in the countryside.³

The second was somewhat related to the first. It concerned the indigenous Indian population and the ethnic question. Challenging the prevailing view that

the 'indigenous question' was merely a racial and cultural issue, Mariategui asserted that the problems of the Indian people and their emancipation were rooted in the land question, i. e. in the system of private land ownership and the predominance of feudalism. He concluded that finding a solution to the Indian problem was not only necessary for emancipating the Indian population, but also for solving the national question and achieving national integration.⁴

In its political analysis, however, the Sendero Luminoso appeared to be more in line with Maoism of the thirties than Mariategui's ideas developed at the same time. After entering the path of armed struggle in 1980—the latter being 'the only way of beginning to define and resolve Peru's development problems'—the Senderistas presented 'eight theses' concerning the Peruvian revolution:

1. Peru is a dependent, semi-colonial, semi-feudal country, in which the peasantry is the main potentially revolutionary force and the countryside the site of the principal contradiction.
2. In a country like Peru there cannot be democracy or even bourgeois institutions except in caricature.
3. The military regimes that ruled Peru from 1978 to 1980 were fascist.
4. From 1968 to 1980 Peru was in a situation of stalemated revolution but since 1980 it is in a situation of unfolding revolution which presents the people with a choice between the 'democratic road' and the 'bureaucratic road.'
5. The revolution does not build its strength in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country by participating in the electoral process or utilizing bourgeois legality. Those leftist forces that attempt this are opting for 'bureaucratic cretinism.' The only true leftist force is built by armed struggle.
6. The Peruvian revolution must be national and democratic, anti-imperialist and anti-feudal. Its social base is the worker-peasant alliance, but the peasants are the principal motor force while the proletariat is being formed and developing into a leading class.
7. The only form of revolutionary struggle to take power and form the new democratic state is armed struggle. People's war starts in the country and advances to the city. The People's war is a peasant war or it is nothing.



8. The party is forged and developed in the course of the armed struggle and, as a political organization, seeks to convert the armed struggle into a true people's army.⁵

These eight theses indicate the specific style of revolutionary politics preferred by Guzman and his party. They were violently sectarian. Considering themselves to be the only true revolutionary force in Peru—the JVP too had a similar self-assessment and follow-up action—Senderistas not only refused to form an alliance with other left groups, but also directed their armed violence against all other left parties and organizations. The mainstream Communist party leaders and cadres were specifically targeted for assassination. Until very recently they did not make an attempt to organize the urban workers and the poor, although conditions in the proletarian districts in urban Peru were as miserable as in the country side.

The revolutionary strategy mapped out by Guzman was aimed at the goal of mounting a general uprising in the Andean highlands, which would, in turn, bring about the collapse of urban society and ultimately destroy the regime in Lima. Here the old Maoist strategy of surrounding the city by the countryside was in action. To establish revolutionary authority in the countryside, Sendero systematically eliminated government authority in rural areas under its control. The power vacuum thus created was filled by the Sendero cadres. After carving out so-called 'revolutionary zones,' they began to establish their own administration under which wealth was re-distributed, 'class enemies' eliminated and 'revolutionary justice' administered. On this score, the Sendero were more in line with Naxalite politics in India in the late sixties than with Sri Lanka's JVP. Although the JVP did practice the rather macabre policy of killing the 'enemies'—labelled 'traitors'—and administered 'justice' by means of summary trials and on-the-spot executions, there was no political strategy of re-distributing land; nor were there 'liberated zones' as prescribed by the Maoist People's War school. Interestingly, many private land owners in rural districts were reported to have prevented their land being 'peopled' by the JVP by donating large sums of money to rebels.

Unlike both the Naxalites and the JVP—they suffered decimation at the hand of the enemy—Sendero has in a number of occasions demonstrated a remarkable ability to survive in situations of concentrated military offensive by the state. In this sense, Sendero offers an analogy with the LTTE. When their rural Andean base was attacked by the military in the mid-eighties resulting in heavy losses, Sendero revised their strategy of locating themselves in the countryside and moved to the cities. They also de-centralized their organization and the com-

mand structure into five autonomous strategic zones under military leaders who could act independently. The second instance was in 1986 when nearly 300 of Sendero cadres were killed in jail when the Peruvian military quelled riots in three prisons in Lima.⁶ Among the killed were some top military leaders of the guerilla organization. This loss was amply compensated politically when a backlash of sympathy was generated for the party among students and the revolutionary Left, expanding its base for recruitment in the city.⁷ Following this incident, Sendero in fact made a major strategic shift, from protracted rural warfare to an accelerated, urban-based revolution.

The spread from within the Left of a highly sectarian armed guerilla formation, using violence as the main strategy of mobilization and dedicated to a project of state power through armed revolution posed an acutely problematic challenge to other Left parties. In this sense, the Naxalites in India, the JVP in Sri Lanka, the NPA in the Philippines and the Sendero in Peru have a remarkable similarity. The problems that occurred particularly in Peru and Sri Lanka for the Left are very similar. They can be summarized under three categories:

1. Threat to the life of leaders and cadres of the Left (threat of extermination), not, or not only (as in Peru), from the repressive agencies of the state, but immediately from an underground guerilla organization, claiming to be Leftist, or anti-state,
2. Near total closure of the space for reformist Left and even for competing radical Left formations. All varieties of the Left discourse, other than that of the 'true revolutionary party,' would be invalidated not by means of debate and polemics, but by means of an armed critique.
3. The problem of relating to the state which alone has the means and capacity to confront guerilla violence that is directed not only against the state, but also most, if not all, political formations.

Sendero and the Rest of the Left

When it comes to fragmentation, the Peruvian Left is no exception to the general pattern on the Left worldwide. Petras and others, as far back as 1983 estimated thirty five Left 'parties' in Peru, with splits and regroupments occurring on a regular basis.⁸ Left unity has been an illusive theme in Peruvian Left politics too. There are two main Left centres that evolved in the eighties, the United Left (IU) and the Socialist Left (IS). The IU has a fairly significant support base in urban



Peru. At the municipal elections in June 1986, it emerged as the leading opposition party. At subsequent elections, the IU's vote went down as the newly formed Right-wing coalition FREDEMO (Democratic Front, led by the novelist Mario Vargas Llosa) gained considerable voter support.

The IU—*Izquierda Unida*—is a front of six Left parties and many 'non-party Leftists.' The pro-Moscow Peruvian Communist Party (PCP) is the leading member of this coalition. Its radical faction is composed of three parties—the pro-Chinese Communist Union of the Revolutionary Left (UNIR), the Unified Mariateguista Party (PUM) and Trotskyist Worker, Peasant, Student and Popular Front (PSR). Senderista's guerilla warfare and the extremely violent counter-insurgency measures of the government led to a major debate within the IU in 1988-89. The alliance, consequently, developed two tendencies, moderates and radicals. The moderates—Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Marxist Revolutionary Communist Party—advocate a non-violent, electoral path to power.

The radical Left too has given rise to an armed guerilla movement called Revolutionary Movement of Tupac Amaru (MRTA). It was formed in 1983 by radical sections from mainstream Left-wing parties. Their main objective was to create an alternative to Sendero Luminoso. Basically an urban-based movement, MRTA's main slogan is: "For the cause of the poor, with the masses; up in arms." It has also engaged in many armed actions, but unlike the Senderistas, they have carefully avoided actions that would instil fear among the people. They have preferred spectacular armed attacks and hold-ups to attract attention and publicity. One of their favourite actions is to hijack food-trucks and then to distribute the loot among the poor in urban slums. This 'Robin Hood' image has helped the MRTA to attract to its ranks the disaffected youth of the urban middle classes. However, Sendero Luminoso has not accepted MRTA as a fraternal organization. On the contrary, at Sendero's national congress in February 1988, the MRTA was denounced as "the principal enemy of the revolution... that must be confronted because there can not be the triumph of two revolutions."⁸ Despite its militancy, the MRTA, unlike Sendero, has been conciliatory towards the mainstream Left. Neither has it ruled out the necessity and possibility of taking part in electoral politics.

Violence, Democracy and Political Change

The bloody guerilla and counter-guerilla war that has been raging in Peru for the past several years has taken its toll in many ways. One prime victim is democracy. One of the poorest countries in Latin America, it has had

a history of military oligarchic rulers. Bourgeois democracy has not taken root in Peru, although regimes of the liberal-Right, allied with Western capital, have emerged from time to time. Free-market economic strategies implemented in the eighties have had a disastrous effect on the rural as well as the urban poor. Sendero claims to liberate people through its bloody guerilla warfare; yet the result so far has been the increasing repression brought on the people by both the government and its self-proclaimed liberators. Sendero's rather insane policy has been to make the state more and more repressive in the belief that people will ultimately turn to them for 'liberation.' The JVP too shared this senseless tactic of 'exposing the enemy to the people.' The response of the state has been to counter guerilla violence with infinite ferocity and brutality. For the past several years, Peru has been one of the worst examples of disappearances, torture and summary executions carried out by government forces. Most of the victims of these competing campaigns of terror have been innocent civilians. Sendero have shown little or no concern for this dimension of human predicament. Like Sri Lanka, Peru too provides an acutely negative example of political violence which begets still more violence.

Protracted counter-state violence represents a specific political discourse which reduces revolutionary political processes into a narrow project of seizure of state power. As the examples of both Peru and Sri Lanka testify, this power project totally obliterates voluntary mass participation in the emerging political process. Mass participation is artificially and forcibly induced by means of threat, intimidation and coercion. Indeed, the JVP's appalling technique of organizing 'general strikes' and *hartals* through threat and punishment in 1988-89 proved so counter-productive that once the news of Wijeweera's death in army custody was out, people began to openly express an unmistakable sense of relief. Violence may be useful to mobilize some sections of society against the state, because in any society there is limited space for counter-state violence; yet it is hardly a durable and viable means of mass mobilization.

The concern for human suffering in situations of political conflict is a major ideational force that has indeed subverted the moral legitimacy of counter-state armed struggles of the conventional type. In today's world, political movements can hardly claim the 'liberationist' mantle so long as they remain oblivious to human suffering brought about by their own actions. Protracted armed struggles and prolonged suffering can perhaps be withstood by the dedicated cadres of underground political groups, but not by the people whose entire social being is ferociously disrupted by competing forces of terror. As the recent experience of Sri Lanka's North and the South exemplifies,



people in desperate situations tend to prefer one agent of terror to multiple agencies.

The other issue concerning the politics of armed struggle relates to the stand towards the formal institutions of democracy—parliament, the electoral process etc.—however much they may be seen as being manipulated by ruling groups. The magic of elections in any political system, notwithstanding varied forms of electoral malpractices that may exist, is that they offer an opportunity for the people to express their political will and make their choices with minimum risk and danger.

The Sendero Luminoso has a history of disrupting elections. Just before the 1989 municipal elections, Sendero declared a 'Red October,' specifically to disrupt the electoral process. In five weeks, there were 420 killings attributed to Sendero; nearly 300 candidates withdrew from the election in fear of being killed. They stole polling cards, killed voters, bombed electoral centres, and cut-off ink-marked fingers of voters. At the Presidential elections held in 1989 too, they went on a killing spree. The JVP in Sri Lanka launched similar campaigns to interrupt elections held in 1988 and 1989. Unlike in Sri Lanka, however, something else occurred in Peru; all Peruvian political parties staged a 'march for peace' to encourage voter participation at the elections.

Quite apart from the question of atrocities committed by Sendero and the like, there is a fundamental issue concerning political strategies: is armed struggle an effective means of achieving political and social change? The accumulated experience of all forms of counter-state armed struggles in recent times—Left-wing, radical, nationalist, patriotic etc.—has been so negative that

'revolutionary violence' no longer evokes the political romanticism it did in the past. One major drawback in armed counter-state movements today is that their violence is directed against civil society as well. This prevents them from becoming moral forces of a new civilisational order. Guns and bombs may demoralize the enemy, but would also rob the 'agents of liberation' of their claim to moral authority over the enemy. As the experience of the JVP in 1988-89 amply illustrates, it had lost the moral war long before it was militarily crushed by the state; and it was a self-inflicted defeat. No political movement can, in the contemporary world, conceivably replace the existing state—however corrupt, fraudulent, and exploitative the individuals who run the state may be—unless the emerging movement can claim politico-moral superiority over the adversary.

Notes:

1. Sandra Woy-Hazleton and William A. Hazleton, 1990, "Sendero Luminoso and the Future of Peruvian Democracy," *Third World Quarterly*, April 1990, p. 22.
2. My source of information on Mariategui and his work is Cristobel Kay's exceedingly informative book, *Latin American Theories on Development and Underdevelopment*, 1990, London: Routledge. Also see Kay's essay on Latin American Marxism in this issue of *Pravada*.
3. Kay (1990), pp. 16-17.
4. Kay, p. 17.
5. Quoted in James Petras, Morris Morely and Eugene Havens, 1983, 'Peru: Capitalist Democracy in Transition,' *New Left Review* 142, p. 54.
6. Hazleton and Hazleton, *ibid*, p. 23.
7. Petras, Morely and Havens, *ibid*, p. 45.
8. Cited in Hazleton and Hazleton, *ibid*, p. 26.

If the [the Bolsheviks] succeeded in making their expectations and promises come true, it would be a tremendous accomplishment for them and for the Russian people and, indeed, for the entire international proletariat. The teachings of Marxism, however, could then no longer be maintained. They would be proved false; but, on the other hand, socialism would gain a splendid triumph, the road to the immediate removal of all misery and ignorance of the masses would be entered in Russia and pointed out to the rest of the world. How gladly I would have believed that it was possible.... The most powerful, best founded theory must yield when it is contradicted by the facts. However, they must be facts, not mere projections and promises.... [M]y expectant benevolence did not last long. To my chagrin, I saw ever more clearly that the Bolsheviks totally misunderstood their situation, that they thoughtlessly tackled problems for the solution of which all conditions were lacking. In their attempts to accomplish the impossible by brute force, they chose paths by which the working masses were not raised economically, intellectually or morally, but on the contrary, were depressed even deeper than they had been by Tsarism and the world war.

Karl Kautsky, *Bolshevism at a Deadlock*, 1931.