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May Day! Mayday!!

May Days were once occasions for the demonstration of the strength of the organised working class. Parades, rallies and meetings symbolised their determination to wrest their rights from the bourgeoisie and to carry forward their struggle for socialism. May Days now are not such occasions, nor have they been for over two decades. They are now demonstrations of popularity by political parties.

Several factors have contributed to this situation. The entry of left parties into various forms of coalition governments, the propensity of workers in the expanding public sector to organise themselves in trade unions affiliated to ruling bourgeois parties for short term gains led first to the cooptation of May Day by the government; that in turn led to the formation of anti-government demonstrations by the opposition. Thus May Day ultimately became the site of a popularity contest between the government and the opposition.

This year the contest was won handsomely by the opposition. However, even while watching the enormous crowd of exuberant marchers in the opposition parade, I could not help being overwhelmed by feelings of despondency as I listened to the slogans, read the posters and pondered on the ideological implications of opposition unity.

Slogans shouted at May Day rallies are not necessarily a demonstration of the depth or complexity of a political party's ideology but they are an indication of the way a party selects the ground on which an appeal is to be made to the electorate.

The main thrust of the slogans and posters in the SLFP parade, particularly of the very interesting bits of street theatre within it, was on the Udugampola revelations. These revelations were, however, used in a peculiar way. The impression was created that all the killings of SLFP supporters in the 1988-90 period had been carried out by the 'black cats', a para-military vigilante organisation functioning under the orders of the UNP leadership. Even the killing of Vijaya Kumaranatunga was specifically attributed to the black cats. This was in effect an exoneration of the JVP, a denial that the JVP had indeed carried out a campaign of murder and assassination. This impression was further strengthened by a poster that had a drawing of

Wijeweera and underneath, a legend to the effect that, were he alive, he would be walking with the joint opposition.

This raises some fundamental questions, particularly when one considers some other features of the rallies. The ambience of the rallies was almost totally Sinhalese. Demonstrators in the MEP part of the procession shouted slogans about the need to affirm national identity and support a national ideology and a national culture; it was quite obvious that they were thinking only of the Sinhalese. There were a few hand-drawn posters in Tamil but not one party banner, not one organisation banner, had a place for Tamil. There were a few, a very few, posters asking for an end to the war in the North, but no posters or slogans about the ethnic conflict or of the political steps necessary for the conclusion of the war. Instead, there were numbers of large posters denouncing the proposals made by Mr. Thondaman and reinforcing the fears of a Malayanadu in the hill country.

One is prompted to ask whether the ethnic conflict has ceased to be an issue for the parties of the opposition; I am also told that no speaker at the opposition meeting at Campbell Park referred to the ethnic question. One might with justification surmise that the principal party of the opposition, the SLFP, is reverting to the path of Sinhala chauvinism. This party, which was ready to offer a share to the JVP at the height of its terror, now appears ready to forget that terror and to make a renewed bid for the 'patriotic' constituency.

Another question concerns the presence of the DUNF in the same parade. If the SLFP genuinely and sincerely believes that the assassinations of members of the party during the last few years were carried out by vigilante groups operated by the UNP, how can they now march in unison with two of the most prominent UNP ministers of that period?

To me, the ideological content of the opposition rally was totally retrogressive. I was overcome by feelings of despondency that we may be moving to a new phase of Sinhala chauvinism and the continuation of this fratricidal war. The sight of the LSSP and the CP submerged in this miasma was particularly disheartening. Parties that can still shout that they are taking the path that Fidel Castro took can end only in the mire of nationalism.

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