

ELECTIONS: WHY DO THEY BEGET VIOLENCE?

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Two recently held elections, which are localized and therefore not crucially important in terms of their national significance, have been marred by violence. The first is an election to choose members for the board of a rural co-operative society. The second concerns a still smaller community, the student council of a mere faculty of a university. In the first, a murder was committed when activists of one political party attacked their rivals. In the second, one group of contestants assaulted, two days before the election, their main rivals resulting in a number of university students sustaining physical injuries. When the election results were announced, the student group that lost the contest took the Dean of the Faculty and twenty two other members of the staff, demanding that the entire election be declared null and void hostage.

These two events, linking elections to violence, are not isolated ones. Almost every election in Sri Lanka, whether national or local, has developed a peculiar tendency to generate violent behaviour among the contestants. If elections are the essence of representative democracy, why is it that a culture of violence has taken over that splendid dimension of democratic governance?

Reported details of these two elections indicate the sheer banality to which the principle of elected representation has been pushed by groups who consider power as a means to achieve ends other than public good.

The incident of murder in the co-operative society election occurred in July in Mahawa, in the North-Eastern province. Elections for the society's board were scheduled to be held on June 06. The night before the election, thugs attacked the houses of three UNP candidates. When the attackers opened fire, a supporter of one of the UNP candidates died. The newspapers also reported that on election day, acts of violence and intimidation occurred at a number of polling centers. According to press reports, armed gangs had arrived at polling centres in vehicles, assaulted opposition candidates and intimidated voters. At some places, the attackers had snatched

polling cards from people who had come to cast their vote. Local politicians affiliated to the ruling PA are allegedly involved in these incidents of violence.

The other incident of violence occurred in the Colombo university when elections were held for the Arts Faculty student union. Two student groups were the fray, one affiliated to the JVP and the other an alliance of a number of anti-JVP groups which has been controlling the Arts Faculty union for many years. Two days before the election, activists of the pro-JVP group physically assaulted activists of the other group and a number of them sustained injuries. And when the results of the election, which was held on June 4, was announced that evening, the losing party, the pro-JVP group, surrounded the office of the Dean of the faculty, who

officiated as the returning officer. Nearly three hundred of these students demanded that the election results be declared null and void on the argument that the election itself was corrupt and fraudulent. When the Dean refused to comply with their demand, the students pre-vented the Dean from leaving his office, threatening him with physical harm if their demand was not granted. Twelve academics and ten administrative staff members who assisted the Dean of the Faculty to conduct the election

and count votes, also remained hostages for ten hours throughout the night. In this gherraho strike, the undergraduates were reportedly carrying iron rods, clubs and similar weapons and constantly abusing and threatening those hostages inside the Dean's office. The drama ended at three in the morning when the Dean agreed, under duress, to suspend the election results, pending an immediate investigation into allegations of corruption and fraud.

These two incidents demonstrate in varying degrees a particular political culture of power that has developed in Sri Lanka in recent decades. The fact that the two events occurred in two contrasting political locations — one in the rural countryside and the other in the heart of the capital city — warrants closer attention in our attempt to understand the disturbing link between elections and violence.

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Fragmented Domains of Power

An election to a rural cooperative board should, under normal circumstances, be a peaceful affair. Cooperative societies are not a part of the formal political structures of state power as are gramodaya mandalayas, pradeshiya sabhas and other local government bodies. The management of cooperative societies by boards directly elected by the people is a fine principle that should, theoretically speaking, promote participatory democracy at the grass-roots. Again theoretically, elected boards can ensure direct accountability to people and provide mechanisms for the people to have a say, through their representatives, in the affairs of their own cooperative societies. But, the incident in Mahawa points to an entirely different dimension attached to the elective principle. And what happened in Mahawa is not new. As we commented in previous issues of *Pravada*, many elections to cooperative society boards have been interspersed with such incidents of violence as organized attacks on candidates and their supporters, shooting, throwing of bombs, arson, intimidation of voters and electoral malpractices.

Why is it that gaining control of a cooperative society board has become an event that has necessitated violence? At least, there are two factors that justify, from the point of view of the practitioners of violence, winning at any cost a cooperative board election: economic and political.

Cooperative societies are organized on the basis of old electorates, with each society having a large number of branches spread all over the electorate. In rural areas, they constitute important resource centers involved in the distribution of commodities as well as agricultural inputs, purchase of agricultural products, running credit unions and even fuel stations. In other words, they are comparatively big economic concerns in rural society. Seizing control of such a major economic resource center by an organized group — organized within the framework of solidarity provided by a political party — is then not an affair that should be treated as just ordinary. Opportunities for even small scale capital accumulation and the control of economic resources are not treated lightly by those who are really committed to economics of politics. What appears is that those who are willing to kill an opponent and also willing to die in a fight equally share that amazing commitment.

Polarization of Rural Society

The political dimension is perhaps more persuasive as a source of violence than the economic. A cooperative society, just like a gramodaya mandalaya or a pradeshiya sabha, is a domain of political power. Sri Lanka's polity today is fragmented into a multiplicity of political domains, both at national and local

levels. These domains are inter-linked in a peculiar way. 'Be local but act national' is the driving motto of local political activists. The overriding concern here is to either maintain or capture domains of power on behalf of political parties. Sri Lanka's two-party system, presently operating in the form of the ruling People's Alliance and the opposition United National Party, has very neatly created a competitive regime of political bipolarity in the countryside, leaving vast space for the binary categories of 'we/enemy.' Strangely enough, loyalists of one political party treat their counterparts in the other party purely and simply as enemies, and not as adversaries or competitors in a democratic contestation for public service. This political party-based construction of the enemy is one of the most volatile developments in Sri Lanka's indigenous form of democratic political culture.

In this peculiar construction of politics, losing an election, even a cooperative society board, is viewed with deadly seriousness. If one loses an election, one is not simply a loser in a contest; one is conquered by the enemy. And to be conquered by the enemy means losing control of a domain of power which is both localized and linked to the national grid of political power.

The Rural areas are generally vulnerable to this particular logic of power. In the countryside, civil society is relatively weak. The only active institution of civil society in rural Sinhalese Sri Lanka is often the village temple the activities of which may be either totally apolitical. If they are political, that politicality is constrained by the partisan equi-distance which the monks are supposed to maintain.

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On the other hand, the entire space of civil society is occupied by politicians who belong to the PA and the UNP. Against this backdrop, politicians who belong to the party which controls the central government — in the present instance, the PA — also control the civil society space through the deployment of almost all state institutions in the area. The

police, the local army detachment, the divisional secretariat, the grama niladharis, the pradeshiya sabhas, the agricultural office, the forestry office, and the branches of state banks — all these institutions of the state are required to serve the interests of local political bosses of the ruling party. The hegemonic control thus exercised over the public sphere in the countryside is so perfect that a challenge is not easily tolerated. Intimidation and violence of opponents have thus become the ingredients of the practices of hegemonic control. In fairness to the PA political bosses of the countryside, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that this particular political process was inaugurated by the UNP when it was in power.

Peculiarity of University Politics

The above discussion also provides the broad context for violent political practices so prevalent today among uni-

versity students. As political entities, the universities constitute a peculiar phenomenon in which normal laws of the country do not seem to be valid at all. The university is a place where a student may violate the criminal law of the land against another fellow student, but enjoy total immunity from legal proceedings. Our universities are also peculiar political domains which approximate on the state of nature which Thomas Hobbes describes so poetically in his Leviathan.

If there is a political covenant to which all student political groups appear to commonly subscribe, it is the principle that political power is nothing but an immediate consequence, or reward, of coercive power. But no student group in the university system would publicly acknowledge that it venerates the utility of coercion as the sole means of gaining and retaining power. On the contrary, students will publicly deplore it, denounce it and project themselves as the greatest of the democrats. But in actual practice, they have no moral or political qualms whatsoever about the practice of violence as the most easily available means of hegemony and power.

Sri Lankan universities have a tradition of tolerating and explaining away student violence. The infamous practice of ragging is the most pervasive manifestation of this tradition. In ragging, the notion of private space and individuality is totally denied. The worst dimension of Sri Lankan culture regularly enacted in the practice ragging. For example, the violation of individual space is not viewed as an act of violence in our culture. It is a socially tolerated form of imposing hierarchy, authority and power. Personal abuse, physical torture, gender violence and public harassment of helpless individuals are thus most tolerated forms of undergraduate socialization in the universities.

Practices of student politics are then defined and made valid against this background of privileging individual violence. A part of the informal and socialized learning in the university is the notion that most effective political power emanates from the sphere of violence. The peculiarity of this phenomenon is that a few may practice violence, but large numbers of young men and women offer their obedience to violence, with absolutely no protest or resistance. University student politics is thus defined by a strange logic of violence and obedience. Max Weber's definition of the state is

eminently meaningful to describe university student politics. With only a slight change in the wording of Weber's formulation, we may say that university student politics is 'a relation among men, a relation of men dominating men and women, claiming the legitimate exercise of violence.'

Like party politics in the countryside, university student politics is presently characterized by a condition of extreme bipolarity. Students affiliated to or sympathetic to the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* and the others who are opposed to the JVP have organized themselves into two activist bodies. Annual student council elections are at present an intense and highly organized battle for supremacy between these two groups. As repeatedly demonstrated in their election campaign posters, these groups view each other in extremely adversarial terms. Opponents are always portrayed as traitors, murderers, enemy agents and spies whereas the image of one's own group is projected in a discourse of self-victimology. In an extremely interesting dialectic of political behaviour, the self-proclaimed innocent would then reserve the right to unleash violence against the 'aggressor.' In many incidents of bloody clashes among university student groups, all parties involved have come out

with the explanation that they are innocent victims of the adversary's 'thuggery.' Like what happens after a traffic accident in Sri Lanka, whenever two student groups clash, the tendency is always to portray one's own group as the totally innocent party while placing the entire blame on the adversary.

Violent politics among university students is a paradigmatic manifestation of what one may call the sheer irrationality of identity politics. Identity politics divides members of civil society — of the same community of citizens or the social class — into groups with irreconcilable antagonisms. And these antagonisms are negotiated in a political practice of violence, which is often meant to establish mini-domains of group supremacy. The university students who are now sharply divided into antagonistic identity groups are members of more or less the same social class; they are the children of the rural peasantry or the lower-middle class salariat. In the university where civil society is thoroughly fragmented along seemingly superficial group identities, group supremacy has become the most sought-after goal of the political conduct among student activists. ■

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