

Student Agitation: A Marxist Perspective

By: Surendra Ajit Rupasinghe:

A Deadly Conjunction:

Once again, the season for scapegoating and bashing university students has arrived with storm and fury. Students have been baton charged, hounded, suspended and arrested in hundreds. Journalists covering the baton charges have been struck down by the police. The repression is aimed at the Janatha Vimukthi Peramune (JVP) and the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), spearheading the agitation. It is claimed that the JVP is affiliated with the IUSF, which appears to be the dominant, though not necessarily the popular, force on the campus. The JVP has now come to oppose the regime, which it had served with tooth and nail to bring to power and served with religious fervor to annihilate the Tamil National Movement. The JVP has appeared as the driving force of the Opposition raising the banner of freedom for retd. General Sarath Fonseka who has been ingloriously incarcerated for thirty months. This development constitutes a mortal threat to the regime, since this call is echoed in the hearts of millions of Sinhala Buddhists, which is also the political-ideological base of the regime. So, the stakes are deadly and decisive.

The Grand Reactionary Consensus:

There seems to be a growing reactionary consensus that sees the students – and the IUSF – as the core problem- as just ritual anarchist rabble-rousers who stand in the way of social peace, stability, democracy and development. It is claimed that these disruptions violate the right to education of other students. Of course, there are students, privileged or not, without any social conscience, who wish simply to get their degree and do not engage in any issues of justice or equality and prefer to go along with the status-quo. Recent student agitation and protest is being likened to a malignant cancer within the democratic body politic that has to be surgically exorcized by the baton and the gun. The regime is busy building up the grand consensus to crush the student movement. As reported, it has given the Inspector General of Police and the Minister of Higher Education some months to squash it. Hon. S.B. Dissanayake has stated that he would even send thousands of students to jail, if he has to. He had been humiliated by students who had booed him when he had spoken at the Peradeniya Campus. Hon. Mervyn Silva has typically gone into his Mafia mode to warn the students. (As an aside, I wonder where the children of all these legislators are being educated and how they have come to afford it?) At this rate, it may not be long before the armed forces are mobilized against striking workers, protesting peasants, unemployed graduates and the poverty-stricken masses. What is frightening in this scenario is that the mainstream media has joined in this orchestra to vilify and target the students. (Only the Sunday Leader carried an article that tried to come to grips with the underlying causes for student unrest).

Cause and Effect:

Such a campaign of repression will only serve to further entrench the politics of terror to a whole new level, and bury all voices of dissent in pools of blood. Suddenly, the accumulated crimes and aggressions of the State and the endemic violence of the political order are to be displaced and forgotten. Scapegoats are always around to cover up for the bankruptcy of the system. As in the case of the Tamil national question, here too the method and strategy is to project the effect for the cause, the symptom for the disease, *so you may kill the victim and protect the killer*. Our party does not hold a brief for the JVP. We regard it as a party that has long since betrayed the science of Marxism and the path of Socialism. It has turned into an extremely chauvinist, revisionist, war-mongering political formation.

However, the struggle of the students should be analyzed in its own terms, irrespective of the fact that some misguided anarchist trends maybe exploiting genuine student frustrations and tensions.

Causes:

What are the causes for the present agitation by university students? They do have genuine issues and grievances about the lack of facilities and frustration arising from facing an elite, arrogant, *politicized* bureaucratic administrative structure. However, the main reason, I feel, is the deep and genuine insecurity regarding the very near prospect of private universities, particularly, *foreign* private universities being permitted, even *encouraged* to operate in the country. Where does this insecurity arise from, that would propel such direct, repeated and provocative agitation, even in the face of death, torture or imprisonment? A good number of university students come from oppressed classes whose families bear a tremendous financial-economic burden to educate their children. Students from the oppressed and subordinate classes represent a marginalized petit-bourgeois intelligentsia with a characteristic volatility. This volatility is a concentration of the anger and frustration experienced by the youth from these oppressed classes. Most of them are driven to dissipate their tensions and frustrations either in grand frenzied musical shows, where they dance like crazy till dawn, or engage in frivolous sex. Others, a minority, dare to challenge the prevailing order and change the world. These students are fettered from all around. For the vast majority who come from poor and oppressed class backgrounds, they have no way to give free and full expression to their creativity and realize their optimal productive potential. They are trapped in a nowhere robotic education. Except for the elite who come from highly privileged class backgrounds, the vast majority of graduates are employed, if at all, in drone occupations far below their human value or creative potential. To get anywhere, they have to serve their political masters. Everywhere, and throughout time, they are required to sacrifice their dignity.

Neo-Colonial Structure of Domination:

They are being suppressed and marginalized by a neo-colonial structure of domination commanded by the English-speaking, privileged and dominant Comprador elite. This Comprador class is structurally and organically connected with the units and circuits of International Capital and depends of them for survival and growth. They are nurtured and sustained by a neo-colonial economy which is dependent on ever increasing, multiplying penetration of foreign Capital. This economic-political structure denies and suppresses the creativity and productive potential of an oppressed mass of people, including workers, peasants, fishermen, local handicraftsmen, traders and lower level professionals- the vast majority of the people. These classes of people are systematically denied and deprived of their right to enjoy the fruits of social advancement and human achievement. They live at subsistence levels, struggling to survive. The rising cost of living adds to the desperation and fuels the seething anger of the youth who belong to these classes against the hypocrisy, arrogance and injustice of the system. This ensemble of oppressed classes are in constant contradiction with the Comprador State, its ruling class and dominant elites.

The Felt Threat of Privatization:

In this context, foreign private universities are identified as part of the instruments of neo-colonial domination and suppression which deny the full flowering of creativity and productivity of social forces that belong to oppressed and marginalized classes. The struggle of the students arises from this neo-colonial structure of class contradictions and is, in essence, a vital part of the historical class struggle of the oppressed people for independence and liberation. Concretely, the fact is that both in terms of academic standards, professional administration and quality of residential facilities, university education – as with other public services – has gone steadily down the tube. What the students fear is that once (foreign) private universities arrive, these structural weaknesses and handicaps will place them in a fatally and irrevocably vulnerable position. They will face a critical disadvantage, not only in terms of the quality of

education, and because of that, at the job market. It will be the case that private universities will offer a specialized tracked syllabus and approach targeting high profile and attractive job market opportunities. They would be better situated and equipped to fine-tune the quality of education and the content of educational qualification with a greater correspondence with global demands and trends, than local state universities. Besides, only the upper classes would be able to have access to these elite private universities, both financially and *culturally*. These classes would have the added advantage of being proficient and conversant in English and in other foreign languages. Intellectually and culturally, they will be far more attuned to international discourse and cosmopolitan values, norms, ethics and lifestyles. This intellectual and cultural milieu tends to alienate and frustrate oppressed classes who define their identity and find their pride of place within the traditional value system. Being steeped in traditional values, they tend towards nationalism- even chauvinism. The policy of privatizing higher education will rigidify the class structure even more, ideologically, socially and economically, where a privileged comprador technocratic elite would further entrench its domain, at the expense of the oppressed and disadvantaged.

Sustainable Development to Sustain Whom?

However, this is not to say that we should not access the summits of science and culture, universal knowledge, the most advanced technical and technological skills and be a dynamic part of the global order. But, on what terms? Students who agitate and protest demand that they not be locked out, but have *equal* opportunities to access the fruits of the 21st Century. They demand that development and modernization should not be on the backs of those who toil and produce the means of life, in order to fulfill the needs of a minority of privileged elites and perpetuate a political system commanded by an extremely parasitic and corrupt Comprador-Capitalist ruling class, in league with foreign Capital. Development and modernization should be to empower these toiling, poor, marginalized and oppressed masses to reap the fruits of the new age, so they could liberate themselves from the condition of their endless oppression.

Towards A Democratic Solution:

While I see the essence of student agitation in this context of class struggle, I do not deny that this struggle is being controlled and mobilized by political forces who wish to advance their own agendas. But then, what's new? All political forces strive to advance their own agendas through the class struggle by cultivating influence among various constituencies. There are politicians who have valiantly defended human rights victims and stood for worker's and student rights to advance their political career, who have transmogrified into monstrous despots once they have reached the pinnacles of power. The fact that the JVP and its affiliated IUSF exercise ideological and political influence among students does not justify the massive violent repression being planned by the state against both. If it is that the IUSF resorts to coercion and intimidation of other students – which I am sure they do – there should be an effective legal mechanism to discipline them and provide redress and justice to the victims. Police brutality and violent repression is just not the way to resolve this contradiction. Who is there to discipline the Police, when they go on a rampage? Rather than discipline the Police, there are being given even more powers to crush the student movement. In that case, all those who have engaged in killing and intimidating voters at elections should be crushed with batons. There simply won't be enough batons. Ministers who tie citizens to trees should also be strapped to trees publicly. If we follow this logic, almost the entire ruling class would be on trial. But, then, the system itself, which relies on systematic terror, would not survive. The threatened repression smacks more of a witch hunt to eliminate any and all opposition and resistance to the State, lest the virus infects the workers and oppressed masses, and pave the way for open sell-out to global Capitalism..

Privatizing Higher Education:

The fact is that the State has no sustainable, integrated and comprehensive program or policy to develop education, and the system and standards of state universities in par with foreign private universities. *The democratic solution to*

the 'student question' is to invest the required commitment and capital to fully modernize and expand the entire university system in the country, in par with foreign private universities. Of course, we cannot dream of Oxford, MIT or Harvard under this rotting dependent feudal-neo-colonial order. Nor do we have to. Exceptional students can and do access these prestigious elite institutions. Nor would these highly prestigious universities jump at the commercial prospects being offered. Education has become one of the most lucrative, profit-making enterprises. A system of scholarships and grants could be provided for the disadvantaged to attend these ivory tower universities, as they do in India, China, Japan and elsewhere. If the State can simply squander trillions on foreign trips, grand tamashas, ever recurrent elections and ego-embellishing mega projects, why cannot it invest in upgrading, modernising and expanding our education system? It is not the university students that are to be blamed for the violent disruptions, but the whole system of education that serves to perpetuate a highly oppressive, alienating and discriminatory Comprador class structure.

The Structural Generation of Decadence:

The decadent culture of ragging is a concentrated expression of the prevailing decadent Comprador political culture; a product and expression of a patriarchal, egoistical, bestial culture generated by a defunct Comprador-Capitalist state and political order. The solution does NOT lie in cracking heads, abducting, torturing and killing students and leaders. This policy will not begin to address the simmering, seething contradictions that lie below the surface. It will only serve to intensify the contradiction even more and drive it underground. The emerging situation is most explosive and decisive. If a blanket, -no-holds-barred repression is unleashed against the student movement as a whole, as is imminent, it would lead to a regime of open white terror, even more terrifying than ever before. This is all the more real, since the main opposition United National Party, mired in a pathetic, ego-centric leadership crisis is simply rotting away, unable to respond to any crisis or fatal threat to democratic freedom. Indeed, it has become a partner in crime.

Conclusion:

What I have here stated is nothing new, except that I have tried to frame the question in Marxist terms. So many Commissions, including the respected Sansoni Commission, have submitted reports addressing these issues from within their bourgeois-liberal perspectives, only to rot on shelves. The deep structural issues that underlie student agitation cannot be resolved through state repression. Either the State addresses and resolves these burning issues democratically, or the people will rise to resolve them themselves. That is the proven logic of history.

[Received by BannedThought.net on Nov. 2, 2010]