CHANGING UNIVERSITY STUDENT POLITICS IN SRI LANKA: FROM NORM ORIENTED TO VALUE ORIENTED STUDENT MOVEMENTS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the causes of student political activism in Sri Lankan universities by paying attention to the history of student politics starting from the 1960s when the first traces of such activism can be traced. Towards this end, it makes use of the analytical framework proposed by David Finlay that explains certain conditions under which students may be galvanized to engage in active politics. Analyzing different socio-political contexts that gave rise to these movements, and the responses of incumbent governments to such situations, it concludes that in order to mitigate the risk of youth getting involved in violent politics, it is necessary to address larger structural issues of inequality.

Keywords: Student Politics, Violence, University Education, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Student politics is a significant phenomenon in University education in Sri Lanka. The involvement of students in politics has a long history and has always reflected the social and political changes in the country. Consequently current student councils are highly politicized bodies and the universities are strong centers of youth led agitation. In a sense it could be stated that the universities are barometers of social and political discontent.

When tracing the history of student politics, it is evident that Sri Lanka did not have a single student movement until 1960. However, with the expansion in the number of universities student councils became a

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wing of the radical or leftist political parties. After 1971, university student politics became a part and parcel of insurrectionary violence and guerrilla warfare in Sri Lanka. The causes behind changing student politics is closely linked to the expansion of university education and changes in the selection of members to student bodies.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper is to examine the causes behind changing student politics in Sri Lanka. This paper is therefore divided into four major parts. The first part deals with the analytical framework of the paper. The second part deals with factors that have contributed to student politics among university students in the country. The third part examines the nature and type of student organizations. The fourth part examines the response of the government or the university towards student movements. The concluding section contains observations and recommendations.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework of this discussion is based on the analysis made by David J. Finlay's (n.d.) pamphlet titled "Youth and Politics: A Pre-theoretic Model" which has been of special relevance to this paper. Youth are perceived of as actors in any political system. If a political system is to persist, one of its major tasks is to provide for a minimal level of support for a regime of some kind. Yet political systems generally do not conceive of students as participants in politics. Where students find themselves ignored by or barred from participatory roles in the adult power structure, "they are likely to seize the initiative in an effort to make their demands known" (Finlay, p.2). The result is confrontational politics between students and authority.

According to this analytical framework Finlay argues that confrontational politics arises out of three main reasons. The first is the lack of integration into adult power structures and decision making processes. The second is the degree to which a political authority is recognized as being legitimate. Confrontation politics may result when students feel that authority is not acceptable or legitimate. The legitimacy orientations of students are an expression of their evaluation of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of authority, particularly a political regime.

There are three possible legitimacy orientations: supportive, oppositional and acquiescent. When students regard authority as legitimate, they will tend to perform supportive or acquiescent roles in relation to the political system. However, when students do not grant legitimacy to the system, their behavior is oppositional and confrontational.

According to David J. Finlay the third cause of student involvement in politics is the process of politicization. Politicization means the degree of political awareness and involvement in the world of politics and government (Ibid). According to him the level of politicization contributes to the level and type of political participation of students.

He further argues that the levels of politicization correlate with the levels of participation. There are three politicization levels as minimal, moderate and high. A high level of politicization leads to riots and rebellion, moderate participation results in demonstrations and the formation of parties and minimal politicization confines the orientation to voting and discussion (Ibid).

In addition there are some systemic variables influencing the political behavior of students. They are as follows:

1. The structure of the educational system

2. The propensity of the authorities to sanction political opposition

3. The degree of relationships between the student population and the political elite

The structure of the education system may be elite or mass in both quantitative and qualitative terms. If the legitimacy orientation of students in an elitist system tends to be supportive, the salience of oppositional activity decreases. It does not leave space for oppositional politics due to the small student bodies, residential accommodation of quality standards, and close student supervision through low student-faculty ratios, tutorials and geographic isolation of the campus.

The mass educational system does not give any guarantee of elite status to students. On the one hand, students have more time and freedom to enroll in national politics as compared to the elite system mostly because of the lack of supervision. On the other, in countries where the economic infrastructure fails to keep pace with educational expansion, career opportunities are likely to be insufficient to meet the high expectations of graduates. Thus the introduction of mass education may lead to student frustration and alienation. As a result what emerges is a class of career students, unable and perhaps unwilling to leave the university, who are active dissidents in the political process.

The second variable is the ability of the political elites to employ sanctions against oppositional political activity.

The third variable is the congruity of the student and political elite. At least three factors must be considered when deciding the degree of congruity or incongruity between students and political elites.

The first is similarities or differences in social backgrounds and recruitment. The second is the existence and extent of competition among elites. The third factor is the extent of shared (or opposed) attitudes, beliefs and values (Ibid).

On the basis of the above-mentioned model the roles of students can be presented as follows:

1. In a mass educational system with a low sanction, student politicization will be acquiescent or supportive in the minimal or moderate activity ranges if elite congruity is at the moderate to high end of a continuum.

2. If however, elite-student congruity is low for significant proportions of the student population, supportive orientations will be less frequent and oppositional orientations will increase and will be directed against the regime.

3. In a mass educational system in a closed political system with a high propensity to sanction (but with the sanction function still low) if student-elite congruity is high, participation will be largely ritually supportive or acquiescent, oppositional activity will be more sporadic than sustained and will be at a high participation level when it does occur. For example there will be fewer attempts to form political parties but demonstrations and riots will occur involving a large number of participants.

4. If student-political elite congruity is low, supportive orientations at any level of participation will largely disappear as students move into increasingly sporadic opposition. Oppositional politicization is at its height in this category with the largest number in the perceptually-related but minimally participant category. The discussion stage of oppositional politics will be at sustained levels initiated by the highly politicized participants. It is this cell of the model that provides instances of student riots that precipitate government or regime change in developing countries.

5. In an elitist educational system in an open polity if the student-political elite

congruence is high, the politicization distribution will be normal and legitimacy orientations will be supportive.

6. If however, student-political elite congruence is low, legitimacy orientations will shift to ambivalence or opposition and levels of politicization will correspondingly depart from normal as the ambivalent take refuge in inactivity and opposed become more active.

7. In an elitist education system in a closed polity where the sanction function is at high levels, if student-political elite congruence is high, legitimacy orientation will be supportive and politicization levels will skew toward higher participation, particularly if a mobilization system demands overt manifestations of support.

8. If, however, elite-student congruence is low, legitimacy orientation will again move into the ambivalent or opposed categories but activity will diminish to inactivity or minimal activity. The high sanction function combined with the careerist-orientation of elitist students will severely mitigate overt opposition at any level (Ibid).

Given the possible combinations of these three systemic variables, what kind of situations are conducive to student activism in politics? What conditions determine whether student activism will be directed mainly against the authority structure of society or whether it will be expressed through traditional affiliations with status quo political parties or social fraternities?

To answer these questions it is necessary to differentiate two types of student movements. The first are those student organizations which are norm-oriented, that is interested in affecting particular norms or means to attain agreed upon social values. Generally, such student movements are concerned primarily with particular issues such as student rights, university reforms, or a particular government policy. These movements tend to be transitory. Periods of intense activism on specific issues are often followed by a sharp decline in activity once that issue has declined in salience.

A second type of student movement is value-oriented, that is, concerned with ultimate ends or basic conceptions about social institutions. Value-oriented movements tend to press for more extreme and ideological programmes than do norm-oriented groups.

Norm-oriented student movements tend to arise in either elitist or mass systems when there is low congruity between students and elites and a low propensity to sanction by authorities. The low sanction function enhances the probabilities of successfully resolving particular issues, and with success militancy declines.

Value-oriented student movements tend to develop where congruity between students and elites is low and where a high propensity to sanction exists. The high sanction function minimizes opportunity for activism and alienates students. Thus, for those who are highly politicized, radicalism is virtually the only available alternative to acquiescence, and it is the highly politicized students who are affiliated with value-oriented movements (Ibid).

CAUSES OF STUDENTS POLITICS

University education in Sri Lanka began with the establishment of a University College in 1921 with 115 students. The University of Ceylon was established in 1942 with 904 students. Currently, there are 14 conventional universities, three campuses, 9 undergraduate and 7 post-graduate institutions providing education to a student population of 72, 000 students in the country. The rapid expansion of free education from primary education to tertiary education has led to this rapid enrolment and completion rates in primary and secondary education and

the demand for tertiary education. There are also degree awarding fee levying institutions and 72 cross border universities. The Open University which has 27 regional centers provides broad based distance education (Samaranayake 2010).

The transformation of systems of education from an elitist-oriented education to a mass based system over the years has contributed to the change of political participation of students in Sri Lanka. According to David J. Finlay the main cause of student involvement in politics is the process of politicization. According to him the level of politicization contributes to the level and type of political participation of students. A high level of politicization leads to riots and rebellion, moderate participation results in demonstrations and the formation of parties and minimal politicization confines the orientation to voting and discussion.

The expansion of university education contributed to the politicization of the student population in two respects. The first is the structural changes in university education. David J. Finlay perceives a dichotomy in the educational system between elitist and mass educational systems. According to him an elite system is one in which restrictiveness of the upper-levels of the educational pyramid virtually guarantees the elite status of those in institutions of higher education.

The early days of the education structure at the University of Ceylon could be safely referred to as an elitist one with English as the sole medium of instruction. It provided residential facilities and was an exclusive university with a limited student population. The structural focus was on imparting the British model of education. The curriculum, examination and teaching patterns of the university were derived from the University of London. The University of Ceylon built on the Ox-bridge model was initially established in Colombo in 1942 and moved to Peradeniya

in 1952 (Warnapala 2011).

With the expansion of university education along with the change of the medium of instruction from English to Sinhala and Tamil, the admission policy of university education in Sri Lanka moved from Elite to a mass model. The most significant feature of mass university education was the changing socio-economic composition of the student population from the period 1960 onwards.

A study of university students by Murray Strauss in 1951 reveals their socio-economic background (Strauss 1951). According to the study most of the university students belonged to the urban middle class families. There was a marked transition from the high representation of the Urban English speaking middle class to a high representation of rural Sinhala-Buddhists among student cadres. This trend has been a result of the standardization and district quota system introduced in 1973 (De Silva 1974). Furthermore, the change of the socio-economic backgrounds of the student population is vividly indicated by the employment structure of the parents of the university students. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC) Statistical Handbook of 1988/89, the employment structure of the parents of the students in that academic year was weighted to the low-income category. Nearly 40 percent of the parents of the university students had a monthly income of less than Rs.1000 (The Statistical Handbook of 1988/89).

The expansion in the number of universities and the student population was not marked by a concomitant expansion in facilities for extra-curricular activities, sports and infrastructural services. Furthermore, staff-student relations have not developed but deteriorated. The current staff-student relations in universities do not encourage meaningful academic relationships.

In spite of the structural changes in the system of education from elite to mass, there has been no corresponding change in the aspirations of the students. The emphasis continues to be on white collar employment. This emphasis necessitates rapid economic development to meet the aspirations and expectations of university students. However, due to the slow growth of the country's economy, opportunities for employment are fast dwindling. An additional 20,000 who graduate annually enter the labour force leading to a steady expansion in the rate of unemployment among graduates (Samaranayake 1996). The government therefore is compelled to absorb these graduates into its cadres in the public sector even though there is no real necessity to expand the public sector.

Underemployment is another facet of the economic dynamics related to student unrest and their involvement in political violence organizations. The level of underemployment is manifest in the type of employment opportunities offered to social science graduates. Around 8000 graduates were temporarily absorbed into the public sector in 1994 for a monthly salary of RS.2, 500 amounting to a daily wage of Rs. 113 (Ibid). As a result, university education has become a source of frustration rather than a means of upward mobility. The structural changes in education and the decline in white collar employment opportunities are causal factors of the politicization of university students.

Ability to impose sanctions is another facet of student discontent related to student unrest and their involvement with confrontational politics. "Ragging" within universities which has become a widespread problem can be cited as an issue where authorities have failed to impose sanctions effectively. Initially, ragging began as clean fun but has now degenerated into one of the worst forms of student behavior and has increased

dramatically. Consequently, the smooth functioning of law and order within universities are under threat and the authorities are not in a position to enforce discipline.

What is significant about the growth and development of the student movement is the decline of student organizations which belong to elite political parties such as the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and orthodox left-wing parties, and the emergence of student organizations dominated by the clandestine or semi-clandestine youth movements. These developments show the changing relations between the political elite and university student bodies in the country.

TYPES OF STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

Student movements can be distinguished as either norm-oriented or value-oriented movements. A norm-oriented movement is an attempt to restore, protect, modify or create norms in the name of a generalized belief. It is concerned with a specific limited issue such as student's rights, university reforms, or a particular government policy. A value-oriented movement refers to a student movement that is fundamentally oriented toward rendering some change in the social structure. It is characterized by a concern for broad ideological issues and is associated with revolutionary organizations.

With the change of the education system the typology and pattern of student organizations have changed. Prior to 1977, they were more norm or theoretical oriented and belonged to the national political parties. During this period student politics were dominated either by the Lanka Jathika Shishya Sangamaya, the Student wing of the Pro Moscow Communist Party (CP) or the Lanka Shishya Sammelanaya, a student wing of the Lanka Sama Samajaya Party (LSSP). In terms of ideology, the CP was committed to the Soviet line while the LSSP followed the Trotskyite

ideology. These two student organizations were subsequently challenged by the Socialist Student Union (SSU) which was the student wing of the pro Mao-Communist Party (MCP). During this period student issues were dominated by issues of student welfare (Samaranayake 1996).

However this situation changed from the mid 1970s and resulted in more value or action oriented student organizations. Consequently, the ideology and perception of the student movement shifted from interpretations of Marxism to varying interpretation of ethno-nationalism. The student bodies perceived themselves as a vanguard of social change. This shift in ideology led to a process of alienation where student politics separated from national politics and merged with underground organizations controlled by the militant youth.

The shift in paradigms also changed the centres of agitation. Issues were no longer confined to on-campus educational issues, but also involved secondary educational and national issues. Of these issues the following are noteworthy: the issue of the North Colombo Private Medical College, and the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 (Samaranayake 1996).

Student councils play a significant role in politicizing the student population in the universities. Until 1968, student councils were selected through the system of election based on halls of residence (Samaranayake 1992). Since 1968, the election system changed into a direct election at university level. Currently, the open election system has been done away with and student councils are selected through systematic manipulation. A significant development has been the importance attached to the batch, which has become the nucleus of student politics within the university. The general student meeting is replaced by the batch meeting. The decisions taken at batch meetings are not disputed and are accepted as the general will of the students. Each batch elects two students as batch representatives per academic year. These batch leaders become leaders of the students union. Representation in the student union is also based on batch representations. These changes in the system of union have contributed to the imposition of the will of the student union on the university student population in general. This also discourages the formation of alternative student groups.

The student council with the blessing of the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) converts new students through the "ragging" (a system of induction for new students) and indoctrination classes, and mobilizes students for confrontational politics with administrative and decision making institutions including the Vice Chancellors of the respective universities (Wimalasuriya 2012). Furthermore, it mobilizes students for national issues based on the political agendas of hidden forces. A key mobilizing factor is the issue of free education and opening up tertiary education to the private sector.

The Inter University Students federation (IUSF) is another development in student politics in the country. The organization serves as a bridge between the student polity and underground organizations. The Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), a cat's paw of the militant Janatha Vimkuthi Peramuna (JVP), manipulates student politics for its political agenda. Currently university student politics is controlled by the Inter University Student Federation. Although it is not a legal entity recognized by the University Act of 1978, it functions as a de facto student federation. It serves as a bridge between student politics and insurrectionary movements in the country.

The direct impact of student politics on insurrectionary movements is witnessed

in the composition of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) polit-bureau before the insurrection from 1987 to 1989. Of the 13 members in the polit-bureau of the JVP 9 were university students. In the Central Committee out of 49, 10 were university students. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC) 300 students were reported missing due to the insurrection from 1987-1989, and 227 were in custody while 49 were reported dead (Samaranayake 1996). Thereby, the legitimacy orientation of university students has changed. Consequently, the nature and scope of student politics has shifted from pro-system oriented politics to confrontational politics.

In an elite education system, the general atmosphere is not conducive for highly politicized student bodies which challenge authority. The authorities maintained a monopoly of the university decision making process as exemplified in the University Acts of 1972 and 1978. The universities were also in a position to maintain law and order in the absence of a decisive challenge from the student body. As a result, the university was in a position to impose sanctions where and when necessary, and maintain law and order without upsetting the university calendar.

However, the change in the education system from elite to a mass system, change in the level of politicization, and the legitimacy orientation of the university students had a direct impact on the authority of the university. The policy making authority of the Ministry of Higher Education, University Grants Commission and the university has already been challenged by the Inter University Student Federation. It has developed a parallel organization to the UGC concerning student affairs.

The change of the higher education system to incorporate fee levying or private universities to the system is a tenacious issue that has implications on national politics. The

confrontational politics spearheaded by the student unions which have targeted decision making bodies such as the Ministry of Higher Education and the University Grants Commission has placed these institutions in a difficult situation where change management and maintaining the normal functions of the universities are of primary concern. In such an operating environment all forms of change, even minor ones, are difficult and it is imperative that the universities do not precipitate national crises at a time when delicate and decisive social and economic measures are being undertaken by the Government of Sri Lanka.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Given this situation, the response of the government is important in the context of student and youth confrontational politics. Increasingly, successive governments have appointed commissions and brought in legislation/acts in order to align the university system with their desired form of change. Of these, the Educational Act of 1972 was a landmark in the development of universities and student politics in Sri Lanka. Through the act all the universities merged as the "University of Sri Lanka". This merger gave rise to the Inter University Student Federation (ISUF). This act also made provision for Student Councils to nominate representatives to the senate and the faculty board, and introduced the student counseling system.

However, the University Act of 1978 once again created separate universities and left no provision for student councils to forge links forming an integrated body. Besides, the act abolished the system of nominating student representatives to the senate but made provisions for nomination to the faculty board. In 1978 a separate minister was appointed in charge of university education. The most significant event was the abolishing of the student councils by

the University Amendment Act of 1985. According to the act student councils were to be replaced by a new committee chaired by the Vice Chancellor (VC) of that respective university. These student committees were never formed and Action Committees (ACs) emerged as a result (The Revised University Act of 1988 No. 26). As a result of these Acts, universities came increasingly under government control and directs.

In terms of employment, since 1994 governments have introduced special employment programmes for graduates. They have been recruited as teachers, development officers and trainees in the graduate scheme in order to ease the problem of unemployment.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident that the universities have become a forum for student/youth unrest. It is mainly due to the lack of mechanisms to address student issues and grievances. An important factor is that university students are not integrated to the services that are available to youth in general. Therefore, it is necessary to review the existing policies and practices of all ministries that are responsible for youth and identify how to integrate university students to these services and programmes (Marga Institute 2010).

The role and functions of the student counseling system needs to be reviewed in its entirety. Relations between the university staff – both academic and administrative – and the general student bodies need to be reviewed along with the changing profile of students. The most critical of these is that university authorities, students and the government have to develop a type of mutual understanding through dialogue and discussions (Weeramunda 2008).

It is evident that the politicization of university students and their deviation from the national democratic politics has become a major challenge to the policy makers and implementers involved in the higher education sector in the country. In the absence of an articulate and coherent policy addressing the problem of political violence in the country, the student movement continues to be a voice of discontent and agitation. Furthermore, their alienation from the mainstream socio-economic and political system has led them to take up an agitational and confrontational stand. It is not possible to alleviate student problems without addressing these major structural issues that have a direct bearing on the higher education system and its constituent student populace.

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