

Conditions that Contributed to the Origin and Development of the Political Violence Movement (P.V.M) in Sri Lanka: The Case of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)

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INTRODUCTION

The political evolution of Sri Lanka since independence has been marked by general strikes as in 1947, 1953, 1981, ethnic riots, as in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1979, and 1983, and insurrections. Of these incidents of violence, insurrections, have posed a formidable challenge to the political system in Sri Lanka since the beginning of the 1970s'. These insurrections have varied in its origin and forms. There have been insurrections motivated by a need to make revolutionary changes in the socio-economic and political structure and in the related institutions. The insurrection of April 1971 and the violence waged from 1987 to 1989 by the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) or the People's Liberation Front represented the above mentioned violence. Some of it has been either associated with or resulted from the separatist ethno-nationalist movement. The separatist guerrilla war waged by the LTTE in the northern and eastern provinces since the mid 1970s has been an example of this category. The crux of this political violence is the struggle between the forces that endeavor to preserve the status quo and those which urge revolutionary or separatist change. On the whole it may be said that the political violence which has characterized Sri Lanka's political processes since the early 1970's is a manifestation of a crisis that is inherent in the country's political and socio-economic structures.

The main objective of this paper is to examine the causes that contributed to the origin and development of the left-wing political violence movements in Sri Lanka, theoretically and empirically. In order to examine the causes that led to the origin and development of a left-wing organization such as the JVP the paper is divided into three sections. The first part deals with the origin and development of the left-wing organizations and insurrections. The second part briefly examines the main elements of Huntington's theory of modernization. The third deals with socio-economic and political changes which are deemed as causes which contributed to the origin of a political violence movement while the final part draws conclusions based on the analysis.

Left-Wing Organizations

The mid 1960s were marked by a proliferation of underground left-wing organizations in the politics of Sri Lanka. The main organizations were the *Gini Pupura* (Iskra) group, the *Peradiga Sulaga* (East Wind) group, the *Sumith Devinuwara* group, the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), and the *Revolutionary Communist League* (RCL). The first three organizations were splinter groups of the pro China Communist Party led by N. Shanmugadasan, while the last was a break-away group from the Trotskyite Revolutionary Lanka Sama Samaja *Paksaya* (RLSSP). The proliferation of such groups led to keen competition amongst them for supremacy in the sphere of left-

wing insurrections in Sri Lanka. In spite of the competition for hegemony, however, these groups shared three common factors: the first was the common objective of achieving socialism, the second was their opposition to parliamentary government and to the established left-wing parties, and finally their perception that a revolutionary struggle was the only means of achieving state power. The socio-economic crisis and political background in the 1960s led to the origin and development of left-wing organizations in the country. Of these groups the JVP emerged as the most significant and politically active group that was capable of attracting a wider membership. Although the other groups were equally attractive politically, they were less insurrectionary oriented.

As mentioned-above the JVP, popularly known as the Che Guevara movement was initially a breakaway group from the pro Chinese Communist Party (CPC) in the mid 1960s. It was basically, based among the rural Sinhalese-Buddhist youth. The ideology of the JVP is eclectic, with a mixture of Marxism, Maoism and Sinhalese ethno-nationalism. However, the JVP is more an action oriented organization than a theoretical oriented one unlike to the traditional left-wing parties. Besides, the JVP has remained largely a clandestine and quiescent organization.

The main objective of the 1971 insurrection was to capture state power through the strategy of a one-day armed struggle. It is a blue print of a strategy of an armed insurrection staged in Zanzibar in 1964. The insurrection of 1971 began with widespread armed attacks on nearly 100 police stations on the 5th of April. These attacks resulted in the capture or abandonment of 49 rural police stations, which comprised one-fourth of the police divisions in Sri Lanka. However, guerrilla action which took place in the countryside of the North Central, Sabaragamuwa and Southern provinces, did not affect the urban areas. After three weeks, the insurrection was thwarted and the government reinforced its position. Official statistics of the number of deaths was 1200, while non-government sources estimated it to be nearly 10,000.

After 1971 the JVP went underground and re-surfaced only after the elections of 1977. During this period the JVP went through a number of ideological and political changes. The most important of these changes was their entry into the process of electoral politics. At the General Election in 1977 the JVP contested four seats, and subsequently it fielded candidate at the Anamaduwa by election of 1978 and the Colombo Municipal Council Election of 1979.¹ Furthermore the JVP contested the District Development Council (DDC) elections in 1981 and the Presidential election in 1982. However, after the ethnic riots in 1983 it was proscribed by the government once again. Since then it went underground renewing its commitment to armed insurrection.

The Indo-Sri Lanka Accord in 1987 and the presence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) contributed to the second insurgency of the JVP. The objectives of the JVP's insurrection were as follows: the immediate expulsion of the IPKF from the island; abrogation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987; abolition of the provincial council system; holding of fresh elections and the dismantling of para-military forces

¹ The four electoral seats are as follows: West Anuradhapura, Horowpathana, Devinuwara and Kaburupitiya.

allegedly backed by the state. In order to achieve its objectives, the JVP unleashed a campaign of violence against the police and other armed personnel, state-officials, politicians from both the governing party and from the opposition and their supporters, and civilians. The insurgency was crushed by the government forces by using counter violence which resulted in over 10,000 deaths and the imprisonment of 14,000 members of the JVP. The movement as a result had gone underground until the general election in 1994.

Modernization and Political Violence

Since the early 1960s the growing incidents of political violence and subsequent interest of the phenomenon has resulted in the formulation of numerous theories in this field. Of these theories on political violence the modernization theory of S.P. Huntington has taken the politico-economic perspective.² Huntington seeks to examine the process of political violence in terms of social and economic changes and political underdevelopment or decay. In his classic study "*Political Order in Changing Societies*" published in 1968 he observes the following predominant trends in most Asian, African and Latin American countries since the Second World War: conflict based on ethnicity and class; recurring incidents of riots and mob violence; the spread of corruption among those in authority and power; the violation of the basic rights of citizenship; the curtailment of the powers of the legislature and courts; and the fragmentation or disintegration of mass based political parties. The possible impact of these trends on the political sphere include, *coups de'etat*, revolutionary violence, insurrection, guerrilla warfare, tribal or communal tension and dictatorship.³

According to Huntington, these conditions of political violence and instability are largely attributed to the "rapid social change and the rapid mobilization of new groups into politics coupled with the slow development of political institutions".⁴ Social mobilization in its broadest sense is a result of some of the basic changes in social development. Literacy, education increased communication, mass media exposure and urbanization, which are the main causes of social mobilization result in changes in the values, attitudes and expectations of a traditional society to those of a modern society.⁵ Such changes give rise to new aspirations and hopes and widen the sphere of political activity. The non-fulfillment of these hopes and aspirations widens and strengthens political participation and consciousness. Since, social change undermines the traditional political authority, it becomes necessary for political development to accompany social

² Modernization is defined as the process of transition from the traditional to modern principles of social organization.

³ S.P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1968, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 33.

change. However, when political organization and institutionalization is low, the potential for political disorder and instability is high.⁶ Accordingly, "in the absence of strong and adaptable political institutions, such increases in participation means instability and violence".⁷

Thus social mobilization is a vital aspect of modernization which, when combined with economic development, has implications for political development. Huntington perceives that economic development is a channel which satisfies the aspirations generated by social mobilization and reduces the frustration in society. The operation of these variables increases the rate of frustration beyond the level of demand which the rate of economic development can fulfill. Although the scope of political participation is widened, it leads only to further frustration because the political system is overloaded with demand. Greater social mobilization, economic development and political participation thus undermines the traditional institutions and attitudes of society by creating heightened aspirations and hopes which the system is unable to fulfil in the short-term. Therefore, what creates political instability is the lack of political institutionalization which can accommodate such an expansion. In this context, political violence is the extreme case of the expansion of political participation.

Huntington's interpretation of this, is that when modernization occurs more and more people become politically active, because increased social mobility leads to raised expectations which at an early stage of economic growth cannot be met. Economic growth also leads at first, to heightened inequality which also prompts greater political participation. Unless political institutions are capable of handling this expanded participation, it will assume destabilizing forms such as demonstrations, strikes, riots or even armed struggle.

Huntington claims that by the 1960s every third world nation was subject to the process of modernization and the causes of political violence in these states lay within this process.⁸ He argues that the relationship between the degree of democratization and the likelihood of political violence is a linear one. In order to understand the causes behind the origin and development of the JVP and political violence in Sri Lanka the next part of this paper pays attention to the variables of social mobilization, economic development and political development and participation which paves the way for political violence movements in Sri Lanka in a more comprehensive manner.

Social Mobilization

According to Karl W. Deutsche, social mobilization is a name given to an overall process of change, within a substantial part of the population in countries which

⁶ *Ibid* p.5.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 47.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.3.

are moving from traditional to modern ways of life.⁹ Social mobilization as it occurred in Sri Lanka will be discussed from the following aspects: growth of population and urbanization, educational expansion, expansion of non-agricultural occupations, literacy and the mass media.

The rapid growth of population in Sri Lanka was the most significant development following the Second World War. This was attributed to the high fertility rate and the declining death rate brought about mainly by the expansion of health and welfare facilities since mid 1940s. The death rate per 1000 people dropped from 20 in 1949 to 14 in 1956. From then on, the death rate gradually declined to 8 per 1000 in 1971. On the other hand, the life expectancy at birth rose from 43 years in 1948 to 66 years in 1971. Consequently, the population growth within Sri Lanka increased rapidly from 1901. The average annual rate of population growth for the period 1901 to 1946 was 1.3 per cent compared with the period 1946 to 1971 when it was 2.3 per cent.¹⁰ However, successful family planning measures led to a sustained decline in birth rates, and large scale emigration has confined the growth rate to 1.5 percent a year. Sri Lanka's life expectancy at birth was 67.6 in 1981 with a female life expectancy of 72.1 years and a male life expectancy of 67.9 years. The infant mortality and neonatal mortality rates have steadily declined. The infant mortality rate which was 34.4 deaths per 1000 births in 1980 has declined to 19.4 by 1988.

A noteworthy feature of this demographic expansion is the distribution of population. Statistics on population growth reveal that a large proportion of the population was concentrated in the rural sector whereas the population growth in the urban sector was relatively slow. The 1981 census showed the population in the urban sector to be 21.5 per cent of the total population. Such limited growth in the urban population is to be attributed mainly to a natural increase within that sector rather than to migration from rural areas. Another significant phenomenon was the high percentage of youth in Sri Lanka's demography after the Second World War. In 1946, the numbers between the ages 15 to 24 stood at 1.3 million but by 1971 it had doubled to 2.6 million. Hubert Muller views such a rapid escalation in the youth population as providing potential cadres for youth movements and revolts.¹¹ Besides, a high proportion of youth in the demography of a country means that a large segment of the population requires access to education and employment.

The rapid expansion of education is another means of social mobilization. The introduction of free education from primary school to university in 1945, and the use of the vernacular or "*swabasha*" languages were partly responsible for the expansion of

⁹ Karl W. Deutsche, "Social Mobilization and Political Development", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 55, 1961, p. 493.

¹⁰ Gavin W. Jones and S. Selvaratnam, *Population Growth and Economic Development*, Colombo, Hansa Publishers, 1971.

¹¹ Hubert Muller, "Youth as a Force in the Modern World", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 10, 1968, pp 237-260.

enrollments in schools. The periods between 1945 and 1970 saw an escalation of primary and secondary school enrollments from about 867,000 to 2,717,000.¹² The expansion of primary and secondary education was followed by a rise in the number of university entrants, when university education was open to students who needed instruction in the Sinhala and Tamil languages since 1959. In addition, the number of universities increased from one in 1942 to four in 1970. In 1979 the number of universities increased up to eight. Consequently, the number of students seeking admission increased from 1,612 in 1948 to about 14,000 in 1970.¹³

Education along with literacy kept expanding steadily after 1945 in Sri Lanka. In 1901, 8.5 per cent of the female population aged 5 years and over were literate as compared to the male population of which 42 per cent were literate.¹⁴ The figures for 1971, on the other hand, depict the growth of literacy to 70.7 per cent females about 10 years and over 85.2 per cent of males.¹⁵ The generation which was reaching adulthood around 1970 had achieved significantly higher levels of educational attainment than the previous generation.¹⁶ Furthermore, advancing social mobilization is obvious in the spread and coverage of the mass media. The number of licensed radio sets in Sri Lanka expanded from 10,000 in 1941 to 90,000 in 1945 and 405,000 in 1965.¹⁷ By 1971 the number had surpassed 467,000.

Although industrialization is usually an important variable in the process of economic modernization, it has little or no bearing on the modernization process in Sri Lanka. Prior to independence there was no industrial sector beyond the activities relating to the plantation economy only. A few important factories had been established in the private sector before 1939, a cotton mill, a tile works, two match factories, two distilleries and a few engineering establishments. Up until 1959, however, there was no

¹² Robert N. Kearney, "Democracy and Stresses of Modernization in Sri Lanka", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 1. No. 3, 1978, p. 89.

¹³ G. Uswatta Arachchi, "University Admission in Ceylon: Their Economic and Social Background and Employment Expectations", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 8, 1974, p. 290.

¹⁴ Department of Census and Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Ceylon, 1967-69, 1970*, p. 35.

¹⁵ *Statistical Pocket Book of Sri Lanka*, 1973, p. 15.

¹⁶ Robert N. Kearney, "Politics and Modernization", in Tissa Fernando and R.N. Kearney, (eds) *Modern Sri Lanka: A Society in Transition*, 1979, p. 72.

¹⁷ N.D. Jayaweera, "Mass Media I, The Radio", in *Education in Ceylon: A Centenary Volume*. Part 3, 1969, p. 1217.

concerted drive towards industrialization.¹⁸

According to Ted Robert Gurr, that expansion in education and literacy heightened expectations.¹⁹ A similar tendency seems to be evident among the students who received a secondary or higher education and aspired to "white collar" jobs which paid better salaries and were urban-based. A survey conducted in this sphere revealed that youth who had completed their secondary and higher education sought administrative, clerical or teaching jobs.²⁰ A survey among university students revealed that 87 per cent desired public sector employment, 10 per cent private sector employment and 3 per cent self employment.²¹

Education had previously proved to be a stepping stone to white collar employment. Therefore, the young people who completed their education after job opportunities had been narrowed still had the high expectations which had been fulfilled earlier. A survey in 1968 found that 76 per cent of all those between the ages of 15 and 24 years who had completed the G.C.E. (O/L) and had not previously been employed sought white collar jobs.²² Moreover, a high demand for clerical employment among young people with secondary education was found in three separate surveys conducted between 1968 to 1971.²³

As a result of high social mobilization, aspirations among youth increased rapidly. Therefore, a high level of economic development is necessary to meet these high aspirations and expectations. According to Huntington, economic development which increases the capacity of a society to satisfy those aspirations therefore, should tend to reduce social frustrations and the consequent political instability.²⁴ In order to understand this correlation it is necessary to examine the economic development of Sri Lanka.

¹⁸ N.H.S. Karunatilake, *Economic Development in Ceylon*, New York, Praeger Publishers, 1971, pp. 176-177.

¹⁹ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men rebel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 96.

²⁰ G.Uswatte Aratchchi, "From Highway to Blind Alley: A Note on Youth and Higher Education", *Marga*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1973, p. 148.

²¹ International Labour Organization, *Matching Employment Opportunities and Expectations: A Programme of Action for Ceylon*, 1971, p. 148.

²² *Ibid*, p. 33.

²³ R.K. Srivastava, and S. Selvaratnam, "Youth Employment in Ceylon: Problems and Prospects", *Marga*, Vol. 1. No. 4, 1972, pp. 43-44.

²⁴ S.P. Huntington, *op.cit*, p. 49.

Economic Development

From an economic perspective, Sri Lanka is one of the least developed countries in the Third World. The basis of the economy since the colonial period has been import-export oriented, based first on coffee then on tea, rubber and coconut. Between 1948-49, 63 per cent from tea, 17 per cent from rubber and 10 per cent from coconut contributed 90 per cent of the merchandise export earnings. Between 1971 -72, the proportions were almost the same.²⁵ Both the prices of exports and imports are determined by external conditions and are subject to wide and unpredictable fluctuations. As a result, during the Second World War and the Korean War, Sri Lanka accumulated large sterling balances. Between 1960-70, however, the prices of tea and rubber which accounted for approximately 80 per cent of the export earnings, declined by 30 per cent and 40 per cent respectively.²⁶ While the income from exports declined, after 1960 import prices rose considerably. Consequently, after 1960 there was a growing balance of trade deficit. The deficit rose steadily from Rs. 95 million in 1965 to Rs. 328 million in 1966 and to Rs. 627 million in 1969.²⁷

Economic development may be less important than the degree to which economic benefits are distributed equally. However, the worsening economic situation in the 1960s indicated the disparities of income distribution and the widespread poverty levels. A survey in 1963 indicated that 84.14 per cent of the workers received salaries between Rs 25 and 200 a month and of this 45.9 per cent of the workers received incomes between Rs 25 and Rs 75 a month.²⁸ According to the socio-economic survey of 1969-70, about four-fifths of the population earned less than Rs 200 and over half received an income of less than Rs 100 per month. At the end of the 1970s, the per capita income is still in the region of US \$230 and Sri Lanka remained among the poorest thirty-six low income countries in the world.²⁹ Given these circumstances Snodgrass concludes that opportunities for improvement were less favorable in the early 1970s than they had been 25 years before at independence.³⁰ According to Huntington, the reforms of land tenure resulted in a very tangible, immediate socio-economic

²⁵ H.M. Gunasekara, "The Economy of Sri Lanka 1948-73", *The Journal of History and Social Studies*, Vol. 4, 1977, p. 787.

²⁶ D.R. Snodgrass, "Sri Lanka Economic Development During 25 Years of Independence", *The Journal of History and Social Studies*, Vol.4. 1975, pp. 119-125.

²⁷ Central Bank, *Annual Report*, 1970.

²⁸ Central Bank of Ceylon, *Survey of Ceylon's Consumer Finance 1963, 1964*, p. 61.

²⁹ World Bank, *World Development Report*, 1981, p. 134.

³⁰ D.L. Snodgrass, *op.cit*, pp. 119-125.

satisfaction thereby encouraging political order in agricultural areas.³¹ Therefore, economic development levels become less important and the nature of land tenure grows more relevant to the degree that a country is more or less agricultural. The deteriorating and sometimes stagnant economy deprived the new generations of the means of fulfilling their aspirations in keeping with their educational backgrounds. Although accurate data on unemployment statistics are not available for Sri Lanka, a number of surveys have revealed the magnitude of the problem. From 1959-1960 the official estimated total of unemployed people stood at 340,000 of whom 80 per cent were in rural areas and 20 per cent in urban areas, and were 250,000 males and 90,000 females.³² A socio-economic survey conducted between 1969-70 highlighted that there were some 550,000 unemployed comprising 13 per cent of Sri Lanka's labour force in the age group of 15 and 59 or approximately 43 per cent of the total population.³³ By 1969 there were some 14,000 university graduates and 112,000 young persons with the G.C.E. (O/L) qualifications who had pursued studies in the social sciences and the humanities and were frustrated by the lack of employment opportunities.³⁴

For the educated job seekers finding a job was only one of the problems. The type of the job he would get often caused further frustration. From the colonial period onward there had been a trend towards obtaining white collar employment on the basis of one's family or personal contacts. This system of obtaining employment facilitated the youth belonging to families of influence to secure stable jobs, while the youth in the rural sector who invariably belong to peasant families were at a grave disadvantage. The government in 1970 found it necessary to address itself to this problem and as a result introduced the system of appointing a Political Authority for each district.³⁵ The system further stipulated that a person seeking a job had to obtain a letter of recommendation from the political authority. This represented a form of political patronage and proved to be a barrier hampering those supporting any opposition political party from securing employment. This system also opened the way to corrupt practices such as bribery.

Under-employment was another facet of the economic problem in Sri Lanka. Unlike unemployment, under-employment eludes definitions and assessment. An

³¹ S.P. Huntington, *op.cit.*, pp. 380-383.

³² "A survey of Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment in Ceylon", *International Labour Review*, Vol. 87, 1963, p. 2510.

³³ Central Bank of Ceylon, *Socio-economic Survey of 1969-70.*, 1970.

³⁴ I.L.O. *op.cit.*, p.20.

³⁵ The political authority system was introduced by the United Front government between 1970 to 77. The Political Authority was a Member of Parliament (M.P.) belonging to the ruling party and was accountable to the Prime Minister (P.M.).

underemployed person can be described generally as a person being forced to accept employment below his or her educational level. Definite statistics on under-employment are not available, but are identified on the basis of low earnings. Huntington argues that the higher the level of education of the unemployed, alienated or otherwise dissatisfied person, the more extreme the destabilising behaviour which results.³⁶

Thus, the inadequacy of economic innovation to meet the challenges posed by the country's problems, generated and fostered a sense of frustration mainly among the educated rural youth. The deteriorating and sometimes stagnant economy deprived the new generations of the means of fulfilling their aspirations in keeping with their educational backgrounds. In broad terms social mobilization leads to social frustration when the economy remains static and under-developed. In this light the economic development in Sri Lanka could not meet the aspiration generated by social mobilization. As a result, what emerged was frustration and politicisation among the youth. Given this circumstance, there should be sufficient political development to assimilate the politicized youth. Therefore, from here on this study will examine aspects of political modernization and its nexus with political violence movements (P.V.M) in Sri Lanka.

Political Modernization

For Huntington, political modernization involves the rationalization of authority, the differentiation of structure and the expansion of political participation.³⁷ Four and a half centuries of western colonialism had disrupted traditional political institution in Sri Lanka. The creation of coherent and durable political institutions was among the most vital and difficult of the challenges confronting Sri Lanka as in the case with other developing countries in the world. In contrast to the political systems in Europe which evolved from traditional feudal structures, the political system of Sri Lanka and its modern features were either imposed by colonial powers or by indigenous progressive elites. The first steps towards political modernization in Sri Lanka had been taken within the institutional structures of this system. The post-independent governmental structure was based on the Soulbury Constitution of 1947 which introduced the Westminster model of parliamentary government.

One of the principal effects of modernization is increased participation in politics by social groups throughout society. Sri Lanka also happened to be the first British colony in Asia to receive the universal franchise in 1931. However, it was not until after independence that political awareness and active interest in politics spread widely and rapidly through the rural sector. This political passivity meant that independence certainly did not mark a breakthrough in the political structure, nor did it mark a new beginning facilitating the rise of high aspirations.

After independence, the new government was dominated by a small upper-class elite, whose political vehicle was the United National Party (U.N.P.) established in 1947

³⁶ S.P. Huntington, *op.cit*, p. 49.

³⁷ S.P. Huntington, *op.cit*, p. 48.

on the ruins of the Ceylon National Congress (C.N.C). Its members were, as D.K. Rangnekar remarked, similar to the former colonial rulers in everything but the color of their skins.³⁸ According to Huntington, national leaders who fail to mobilize popular support prior to independence do not rule for long after independence.³⁹ He identifies the political process during the post-independence period as the ruralisation of elections.

Some of the characteristics of these processes as identified by Huntington are many faceted. Accordingly the modernizing elite whose base is derived mainly from the urban middle classes, are driven out of office. Furthermore, the outcome of the election remains unpredictable and cannot be projected by political observers. The political party which gains victory is able to do so because new rural voters were mobilized and the leader of the party undoubtedly was from the modernizing elite but had severed all ties with this elite in favour of a popular charismatic leadership. However, in spite of the leader's elite background other key members of the party are drawn from rural elites. The political issues which proved to be crucial to the rural voters were mainly based on ethnicity and religion and the support derived from the religious leaders in the rural sector were crucial to the victory of the party. Consequently, the victory of the opposition is perceived as a dramatic change in the political process and the party's policies are geared to the rural sector where a majority of its voters are concentrated. These policies however, are found to be unfavorable by the urban based elite who might resort to a military coup d'etat. In many instances the political party which suffered defeat makes an attempt to re-organize and mobilize the new forces of political power and there have been instances where such parties have been re-elected.⁴⁰

The organizing of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) by S.W.R. De Bandaranaike after his resignation from the U.N.P. government in 1951 and the electoral victory of the *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna*, the center-left coalition led by the SLFP, over the ruling U.N.P. in 1956 marked the processes of ruralisation of elections in Sri Lanka. Michal A. Ames sums up the M.E.P. victory of 1956 more explicitly:

"For the first time since colonial rule was imposed on Sri Lanka (Ceylon) over 400 years ago Sinhalese villagers felt able to declare as some did when Bandaranaike's coalition succeeded to office, that it was "*Ape Anduwa*" (our government) as opposed to rule by foreigners and alienated, westernized and Christianized elites."⁴¹

³⁸ D.K. Rangnekar, "The Nationalist Revolution in Ceylon", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 33, 1965, p. 363.

³⁹ S.P. Huntington, *op.cit.*, p.441.

⁴⁰ S.P. Huntington, *op.cit.*, p. 460.

⁴¹ M.A. Ames, "Westernization or Modernization, The Core of the Sinhalese Buddhism", *Social Compass*, Vol. 20, 1973, p. 144.

Consequently, the rural masses had been mobilized into electoral politics. On the other hand, their entry into politics also changed the dominant style, semantics, policies and the leadership within that system.⁴²

With the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 years the involvement of youth in the electoral politics expanded. Thus the young people were motivated to participate more actively in electoral politics especially in the election of 1965 and 1970. As Huntington observes, the social and economic changes encouraged by the policy innovation found its way into the political system and required the expansion of the system.⁴³ As a result the potential of the political system in Sri Lanka to accommodate the increased political participation and growing demands through the political development will be examined.

Political development has been viewed in terms of the capacity of the political system to implement collective goals, resolve the issues by which it is confronted and adapt to challenges involved in the emergence of a modern polity. Huntington, defines political development in terms of the institutionalization of political organization and procedures- that is, the processes by which they acquire stability. According to him the level of institutionalization of a political system could be measured by the coherence, complex adaptability and autonomy of its organization and procedures. Coherent means relative absence of disunity. Complexity means permeation of the political system into the society. Adaptability means the ability to meet challenges and survive. Autonomy or legitimacy as perceived by the society. For the nation seeking political order through democratic processes and broad popular participation, the evolution of an institutionalized political party system is of crucial importance. The following statement by Huntington, indicates the importance of political parties in Sri Lanka in terms of their relevance to political stability:

Where new states emerge from colonialism with little or no inheritance of political institutions the stability of the polity depends directly on the strength of the party.⁴⁴

Therefore, political development in Sri Lanka will be examined by focussing upon the political parties in the country with special attention being given to the left-wing parties. However, not all criteria and ramifications of this institutionalization can be examined in detail in the paper. Therefore, a summary analysis is presented.

The introduction of universal franchise in 1931, independence from the British Raj in 1948, and the adaption of a "Westminster-type" parliamentary system of government led to the establishment of political parties which have played decisive roles in Sri Lanka since independence. The growth and the impact of the party system is

⁴² S.P. Huntington, *op.cit*, p.452.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 145.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.

evident in the decline of the election of independent candidates in parliamentary elections from 1947 to 1970. In the election of 1947, 21 independent candidates were elected while in 1970 only 2 such candidates were elected.⁴⁵

Within the party system the left-wing movement which started in 1935 with the origin of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) played a significant role in the politics of Sri Lanka. However, developments within the left-wing movement during the decade prior to 1970 played a major role in the creation of the JVP and other such underground organizations.

The lack of coherence within the political parties is clearly indicated from the fragmentation and disunity among the left-wing parties in Sri Lanka. The dissension within the left-wing parties was mainly caused by ideological and policy differences. The first such ideological dispute which occurred in 1939 was on the question of Trotskyism versus Stalinism within the LSSP. As a result, a new party emerged, the United Socialist Party, which in 1943 became the Communist Party (CP) of Sri Lanka. At the end of the Second World War, the LSSP faced yet another crisis when one faction of this party emerged as the Bolshevik Leninist Party (BLP). In 1950, the LSSP and the BLP united to form a single party, but this decision, caused yet another split. The new splinter group came to be known as the *Viplavakari* (Revolutionary) LSSP. This process of dissension and disunity resulting in the emergence of new group and parties was repeated during the period that followed. Of the new groups, the emergence of the pro Maoist Communist Party within the CP is significant in connection of the origin and development of JVP and several other underground organizations. As Calvin Woodward observes much of the disunity might have been prevented if the left-wing movement had developed a centralized organization relatively soon after its formation.⁴⁶ W.A.W Warnapala identifies a strong correlation between the disunity within the left movement and the origin of the JVP.⁴⁷

If the political system is complex and reaches the grassroots level, it will be better able to channel demands to the government and communicate to the people the information the government wants them to receive. However, the left-wing parties did not provide opportunities for younger members to participate in responsible positions. Although, youth were given chores at times of elections after the elections the organizational structure of the major political parties remained inaccessible to the large

⁴⁵ Calvin A. Woodward, "Sri Lanka's Electoral Experience", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 47, 1974, p. 456.

⁴⁶ C.A. Woodward, "The Trotskyite Movement in Ceylon", *World Politics* Vol. 14, 1961-62, p. 315.

⁴⁷ W.A. Wiswa Warnapala, *The Sri Lankan Political Scene*, New Delhi, Navrang, 1993, pp. 5-8.

number of enthusiastic and dedicated youth.⁴⁸

Moreover, the major political parties were dominated by older politicians from the elite backgrounds, leaving little or no opportunity for the rural youth to have an impact on their policies. The decision-making positions in the political parties as well as in parliament remained in-accessible to the younger groups and this generation gap was reflected in the main spheres of Sri Lankan politics. The average age of Members of Parliament was 35 years or older while only 5 percent of them were below 35 years. In Sri Lanka, politics is the main avenue of upward mobility. Yet few political parties, if any in Sri Lanka are capable of absorbing the large number of politically ambitious individuals who emerged with the broadening of political participation.

The lack of adaptability within the left-parties clearly indicates the generation gap and the wider socio-economic disparities between the orthodox left leadership and the politicized youth in Sri Lanka. The leadership of the left-wing parties were from the wealthy upper stratum of Sri Lankan society who had been educated at foreign universities. Of the Marxist M.P.'s elected in 1970, 7 had been enrolled at overseas universities and another 5 had attended the University of Sri Lanka or the Law College. At least 12 had been educated at leading Colombo schools, such as St. Thomas', Royal and Ananda colleges.⁴⁹ Without an exception they were all over 50 years of age, and were engaged in the elite professions as doctors or lawyers. By 1971, the left-wing movement had been active for 35 years, yet to a great extent its leadership was still confined to the generation of founders. Huntington explains this situation as follows:

"So long as an organization still has its first set of leaders, so long as a procedure is still performed by those who first performed it, its adaptability is still in doubt".⁵⁰

The failure of political parties to retain youth constituencies within the existing political party structure symbolized the lack of autonomy of the political system in general in the country. Huntington observes the effect of a lack of autonomy towards the political system as follows:

"In every society affected by social change new groups arise to participate in politics. Where the political system lack autonomy, these groups gain entry into politics without becoming identified with the established political organizations or acquiescing in the established political procedures".⁵¹

⁴⁸ W.H. Wriggins, *Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1960, p. 30.

⁴⁹ James Jupp, *Sri Lanka: Third World Democracy*, London, Frank Cass, 1978, pp.295-296.

⁵⁰ S.P. Huntington, *op.cit*, p. 14.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 21.

The political parties with an elitist orientation not only failed to come to grips with the economic problems encountered by newly emerged rural youth, but also failed to assimilate the youth into the existing political structures. Thus the processes of social mobilization, lack of economic development and lack of political development led to the rise and development of the JVP and similar politically violent movements in Sri Lanka.

Besides, the political violence unleashed by the JVP was precipitated by a combination of two factors. First the propensity and commitment for an armed attack within the organization made it volatile and susceptible to political violence. Second, the failure of successive governments to work out a viable solution to the socio-economic problems and their determination to resort to counter violence triggered political violence.

Conclusion

Political violence has occurred on an unprecedented scale in Sri Lanka since the early 1970s. This violence was pre-planned and organized. The main thrust of this paper is to examine the socio-economic and political factors that have led to the origin and development of politically violent movements in Sri Lanka. For this purpose Huntington's theory of modernization is utilized. To him the expansion of social mobilization coupled with the economic development and the lack of political development provide the conditions for the rise of political violence.

In the case of Sri Lanka the expansion of social mobilization is evident in the rapid growth of population, urbanization, education, literacy, and media. As a result the expectation level rose particularly among the rural youth. The economic conditions which were imperative in meeting these aspirations, however, were lacking because of the stagnations of the economy. Consequently, the new generation of rural youth found their aspirations far short of fulfillment and so were subject to a process of disillusionment and politicization by the mid-1960s. Political modernization was manifest in universal franchise and the ruralization of electoral politics. The measures taken by the MEP or the successive governments, however, failed to fulfil the aspirations of the rural youth and absorb them into the existing political system. The lack of political development is characterized in the nature of political parties particularly in the left-wing parties in Sri Lanka. These are the conditions which proved to be conducive to the formation and fostering of an underground organization which resorted to political violence in Sri Lanka.