

The New Democratic Party and the Parliamentary Path

Answers by Comrade S.K. Senthivel, General Secretary of the NDP to questions from a discussion group in Paris in October 2002

Q: *What is your position regarding the parliament?*

A: The New Democratic Party does not believe in any policy or theory that claims that it is possible to bring about social transformation or to solve in a wholesome way the problems of the people of the country. It believes, on the contrary, that it is only a revolutionary mass struggle beyond the scope of the parliament that can bring about social transformation, and that it is the implementation of the correct programmes with a long-term perspective that are possible thereby that can solve the problems of the people of the country in a wholesome way.

Q: *Why are you then participating in the parliamentary elections?*

A: Our party, which has social transformation and the path of revolutionary mass struggle as its basis, has developed two kinds of programme of work: one a long-term programme and the other a current programme. It contests the election from the point of view of the current programme, which recognises that it is possible to use parliament as a device.

Q: *Is this not what the likes of Pieter Keuneman and S.A. Wickremasinghe too said?*

A: They never said so, and they did not do so either.

Q: *Can you elaborate on this?*

A: A Marxist political and ideological debate had been initiated at an international level in and around the 1960's. The central issue of this conflict concerned the possibility of achieving social transformation and communist society through parliament and without armed struggle. This idea was put forward by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. All revolutionary forces of the world, including the Communist Party of China, rejected this theory. Because of the conflict, communist parties throughout the world underwent splits. In Sri Lanka, the split was between sections led by Keuneman and Wickremasinghe on the one hand and comrade Sanmugathan on the other.

After the general election in 1970, the Keuneman-Wickremasinghe leadership accepted ministerial posts in the government led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, with a view to achieving social transformation and socialism. During their seven-year period of partnership in power, they were party to anti-people actions and anti-people legislations. They were party to the introduction of the infamous 'standardisation' (of examination marks to discriminate against Tamil students) and oppressive legislation against the Tamil people and to their implementation. In all, they became the enemies of the Tamil and Sinhala masses.

Q: *Is this not what other mainstream (Tamil) democratic parties are doing?*

A: In relative terms, it will not be an overstatement to say that all the movements that set out to establish Tamil Eelam have played and are still playing a more prominent role than the parliamentary left parties in hurting and causing difficulties for the Tamil and Muslim masses. In addition, these mainstream democratic parties had gone to the extent of compelling the Tamil People (living in areas controlled by the armed forces of the government) to subserviently abide by their word and to blunt the militancy of the masses. They have, thus, alienated themselves from a life of militant struggle. The masses who are oppressed on the basis of race, religion, colour and caste can win liberation only through revolutionary mass struggles (armed struggles). The Tamil parties, with no understanding

of this or any interest in taking the initiative, seek to become partners of the chauvinistic governments that oppress the Tamil masses and collaborators in the acts of repression. They have been infected with this political disease.

Q: *Following the split in the Communist Party, did the party led by comrade Sanmugathasan function along the lines of long- and short-term programmes as indicated by you?*

A: Yes. Both methods of work were there. In the period close to 1965, the party studied the problem of caste and untouchability, which was a major issue among the Tamil people of the North and launched mass struggles (movements for the right of entry to temples and to cafes), against the caste system and untouchability. Also, in view of the need to use parliament as a tool, it fielded comrade Sanmugathasan as a candidate in the general election of 1965.

Q: *But comrade Sanmugathasan did not win in that election.*

A: To a revolutionary party, using the elections as a platform is more important than the outcome of the election. What is also important is how it uses the parliament if it is elected.

Q: *How does the New Democratic Party plan to use this election?*

A: The aim of our party is not to lend support to or to serve either chauvinistic party, but to build up the political and moral fibre of the people and lead the way to political awakening. Our intention is to use the parliamentary representation as an arena of struggle to carry this forward.

Q: *What is your position on the national question?*

A: Our intention is to enable the setting up of an autonomous structure comprising the North and East, in the true spirit of the principle of self-determination and within the region to set up an internal autonomy of the Muslims so that they can administer their affairs without any outside control or condition.

Q: *National oppression has become the main issue of the political life of Sri Lanka, and on an unprecedented scale. Is there a way to ameliorate it?*

A: Yes. There should be an immediate ceasefire and the initiation of sincere talks, with no ulterior motives, and bearing in mind the welfare of the people.

Q: *But, should not there be talks with the LTTE about a ceasefire?*

A: Not only ceasefire, but even talks need to be with them, because they are integrated with the life of struggle of the Tamil People.

Q: *The chauvinists and their allies argue that the problems of the Tamil people can be solved only under a united Sri Lanka, whereas the Tamil nationalists argue that only through a separate state of Tamil Eelam that all the problems of the Tamil people will be solved. What is your position?*

A: The united Sri Lanka that chauvinists and their allies have in mind is a unitary Sinhala-Buddhist state (that does not recognise Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic society) and the Tamil people accepting whatever that state may offer them out of its own will. This has been the politics of the past half a century. The demand for Tamil Eelam was an outcome of this. Thus, there is no meaning in talking about a unitary Sri Lankan state. On the other hand, one has to think deeply as to how correct is the claim that all the problems of the Tamil people will be solved through the setting up of a state of Tamil Eelam.

The demand for an independent Tamil Eelam, put forward by the TULF as the Vattukkottai Resolution in 1976 and as the election pledge in 1977, was adopted without

any review and carried forward as armed struggle by the youth movements. In fact, the demand for an independent Tamil Eelam did not encompass the aspirations of the entire Tamil population (which includes the Muslims, Hill country Tamils and those oppressed on caste basis). We can see this clearly.

If domination of one nationality by another can solve problems, the problems of the Sinhala people should have been solved today. Besides, there are several states where one nationality dominates over another. However, the problems of the people have not been solved.

Thus, there is the need today for the creation of a third political force. Based on a common programme and broad-based unity on several fronts, this force should carry forward (without in any way standing in the way of the armed struggle of the LTTE) a determined armed mass struggle against the forces of chauvinistic oppression.

Q: *What is your position on the Hill Country Tamils?*

A: We stand for the creation of internal autonomous units for the Hill Country Tamils, who have been living continuously in the hill country for the past one and a half centuries, so that they are able to safeguard and develop features that are unique to their nationality and their identity. These autonomous units will embrace regions in the Central, Uva and Sabragamuwa provinces where they live in large concentrations.

Q: *You seem to be firm in your stand on an issue, namely the caste problem, that the Tamil nationalist parties seem to be rather unconcerned. Can you elaborate on it?*

A: We do not exaggerate this issue. We only state the actual conditions that exist. When we bring out the truth, some are annoyed with us and charge that Senthivel and the NDP are doing unnecessary and wasteful things.

The oppressed castes comprise a third of the Tamil population of the North. The Tamil leadership cannot understand how they were dominated and oppressed by the caste system and untouchability (the system of bondage and serfdom), because they (who mouth the slogan “What is wrong in the desire of those that ruled once to rule again”) and their ancestors were those who dominated over and oppressed these masses. They cannot therefore take much notice of this problem.

The North is not entirely rid of the caste system and untouchability. They find expression even now. Owing to landlessness and economic, educational and professional backwardness, they remain a backward and depressed community. We demand that this should be changed and facilities and opportunities provided for them to advance socially. This is what we emphasise.

Q: *What do you expect out of your dialogue such as the present one with the Tamil people in exile?*

A: We wish to explain to the Tamil people in exile our position in connection with the elections and hope that those here would get in touch with their kith and kin back in Sri Lanka and persuade them to vote for the clock (our symbol). They should make this contribution. This is what we fraternally ask of the Tamil people in exile. Also, unlike the other, parliamentary political parties, we will not terminate our meetings and dialogue with the end of the elections. We will persevere in discussions of this nature irrespective of the outcome of the elections.