Deconstructing the ethno-nationalist hegemony in indigenous discourses of Democracy in Sri Lanka

Research problem

How the fundamental democratic notions such as Rights, equality, freedom, representation and citizenship have been articulated in to and re-defined by the regional electoral populist politics in post-colonial Sri Lanka?

Problem defined

Ethno-nationalist imaginations have widely been spread especially in the local level democratic contestations in post-colonial Sri Lanka and this could not be taken as a historical necessity other than a discursively, and hence politically, constructed phenomenon. The indigenization of democracy was, to a large extent, produced by non-elite popular nationalists who led subaltern people in the local areas, whose loyalty were primarily to their kith and kin or their primordial ethnic community other than macro political issues. The meanings of democratic concepts and practices are not only integrated in to but also transformed by this ethno-nationalist hegemony. My problematic of study is how the democratic ideological categories like Rights, freedom, representation, equality, citizenship and justice are articulated in to local-level popular discourses so that their meanings were radically changed and re-defined?

Significance and academic relevance

The importance of the democratic studies on Sri Lankan polity is reasonable because of the fact that Sri Lanka was among the ‘constitutional pioneers’ of British crown colonies since 1833 (de Silva: 1981:359) and the experience of representative practices in Sri Lanka has been ‘extraordinary’ (Palmer: Ibid, Phadnis: 190-191, Kearney:31).

But, ironically, in post-colonial Sri Lanka the success of indigenous hegemonic discourse of democracy has been guaranteed by its inclusion-exclusion mechanisms by which ethnic, religious and other minorities were excluded, marginalized and suppressed; hence ethnic politics has been practiced through democratic institutional milieu and political chauvinism has justified by democratic reasoning.
To address this problem, I would apply one of the most debatable theoretical trends among the current developments in political theory, namely discourse theoretical analysis. This study may help to read critically the existing literature on Sri Lankan democracy and to create a scholastic bridge between democratic studies in Sri Lanka and the current debate of radical democracy in the west. This would be a contribution to the ongoing democratic dialogue in the country as well. By uncovering the discursively constructed nature of hegemonic discourse of democracy, it gives support to the concrete political activism directed towards radicalization of democracy.

**Literature Review**

One of the most popular trends in understanding problems of democracy in peripheral areas of capitalism is contextualizing them in their own colonial history and examining their inherent differences from European experience of democracy. K.M. de Silva argues that the causes of "undermining the democratic institutions" in latter period in Sri Lanka lied on the ‘over-plantation of an institutional framework’ without a proper historical background (Silva.1998: 164). Khilnani, together with Kaviraj, perceives this crisis "stems directly from the opposition it faced at its birth" (Khilnani, 1997: 26). Although Vanaik makes a structural analysis of different levels of Indian social formation, he do not oppose to the popular perception of "historically pre-mature arrival of democracy" (to South Asia). He says that universal suffrage was externally introduced to South Asia wherein the industrialization and urbanization was at an early stage and when the agrarian bourgeoisie was comparatively strong than industrial bourgeoisie in the ruling power bloc. Hegemony of ethno-nationalism, in this sense, is a historical necessity.

Some other scholars identify essential roots of ‘de-democratization of democracy’ of South Asia in the indigenous communitarian traditions. Howard Wriggings says that the newly introduced democratic institutions in Sri Lanka had "little in common with the island's indigenous traditions" (Wriggins, 1960: 79). G.C. Mendis and Weiner also have shared this view and concluded that social divisions in Ceylon were communal (Weiner, 1960:100). They further argued that especially in electoral politics, organized local particularistic loyalties were more dominant than national interests. For Thiruchelvam, the relationship between tradition and modern institutions are more dialectical. He identifies, in South Asia, a conflict between the institutional logic of democratic forms
and the logic of popular mobilization (Thiruchelvam, 2000: 79). Huntington has conceptualized this dominance of local politics over the national as an archetype of the ‘ruralising democracy’ (Huntington, 1968:100) or hegemonizing modernity by rural communitarian values.

Above perceptions of the standard opposition between western democracy and indigenous community traditions have highly been problematized by some other scholars who claim that indigenous elite have had their own democratic spirit. Rajeev Bhargava is highly critical of what he call "cultural inadaptability thesis" (Bhargava, 2004:28) which claims that indigenous traditions are un-democratizable or un-adaptable to democracy. Michael Roberts gives similar verdicts from Sri Lanka and explained how politically conscious indigenous elite were emerged in mid-nineteenth century as a consequence of the implantation of western education system, spread of English literature and press (Roberts 1998: 269). He has finely analyzed how ethno-nationalism it self was modernized and democratized.

There has been another scholastic trend who argues that undermining of basic democratic value principles in South Asia was a product of spread of electoral populism to the local level. Kaviraj argues that the "many of the initial moves against bourgeois democratic legal norms were begun and legitimized in the immediately preceding period of the left-turn (1997; 56). Leftist populism with which distribution of economic patronage to commoners was over-emphasized than safeguarding democracy helped to undermine institutional framework of democracy for the sake of social justice.

Another significant trend in democratic studies in South Asia understands problems of democracy through political economic reasoning. According to Gramscian inspired Marxists like Vanaik, Kaviraj and Ahmad, indigenization or transformation of democracy in this region was not a decline or a deviation from democracy’s determinate path of development but was a necessary result of capital development or under-development in the periphery. Newton Gunasinghe, the Sri Lankan counterpart in this trend, has argued that certain archive socio-political relations were reactivated within the formation of peripheral capitalist structure in colonial Ceylon (Gunasinghe, 1990:197).

For some post-colonial theoreticians failure of democracy in this region is nothing other than an ideological construction of democratic modernism itself. Nandy who opposes
post-colonial school in many respects agrees with them when he claims that failure of democracy itself is a product of colonialism. He argues that elite intelligentsia in the colonies have uncritically accepted the western notions of state, modern science and development that were foreign to their historical traditions. For him, most non-democratic dimensions in South Asia such as religious fundamentalism, totalitarianism, intolerance towards ethnic others, political violence etc. are none other than consequences of the political management of colonial states based on western concepts (Nandy, 2003:5). Nira Wicramasinghe has criticized the widely shared perception of colonial political management by which ethno-religious diversities and contradictions were manipulated for its advantages. She argued that those communal identities themselves were produced by the hegemonic discourse of colonialism. (Wickramasinghe, 1995:100).

Although essentialist perceptions in early democratic studies have widely been criticized by recent scholastic trends including post-colonial theory, they sometimes tend to essentialize Asiatic and indigenous origins or values; hence the danger of a reverse form of essentialism has emerged. Nostalgic over-emphasis of traditional value principles against modernity and democratic governance should still be criticized. Theory of Post-Marxism and Radical-Democracy developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which have not yet been tried to apply to South Asian research studies may help us to resolve this problem.

**Objectives of the study**

The broad objective of this study is to make a non-essentialist, non-reductionalist and non-foundationalist analysis of Sri Lankan democracy. Although significant number of studies has already been done on this specific field of research, as above literature survey suggests, many of them are mainly based on essentialist presumptions including class reductionism. For instant, the capitalist under-development, the traditional socio-political fragments including communal traditions and identities, re-activated pre-capitalist modes of production, failed bourgeois democratic revolution or historical necessities of peripheral capitalism have been identified as fundamental historical causes for the ‘ethno-nationalist hegemony’. The discursively constructed nature of democracy has not
sufficiently been analyzed and hence the primacy of the political in democratizing process in Sri Lanka has widely been ignored. I intend, by my research, to fill this gap.

What I hope to contribute to the current debate of democracy, by this study, are (1) bringing the method of discourse analysis to the political science research studies on Sri Lankan democracy (2) bringing the democratic studies on Sri Lankan polity to the wider conceptual terrain of radical democracy (3) examine whether radicalization of democracy in the periphery paves the way for broadening and deepening the politics emancipation(s).

Hypotheses

My hypotheses are that the (1) meanings of democratic notions have been radically changed in the process of electoral politics among indigenous communities and (2) ethnic-exclutionalism is integrated in to popular democratic imaginations in local-level politics.

Theoretical framework: The epistemological stance of this study is Constructionism that is very critical of objectivism as well as subjectivism. Meaning, for me, is not discovered but constructed by contingent human practices, but not by any idealistic force such as transcendental ego. The theoretical framework of my research is mostly fashioned by the tradition of postmodernism in which constructionist theorizations play a major role. Postmodernism opposes totalizing and essentialist orientations of modernist thought and ‘commits itself to ambiguity, relativity, fragmentation, particularity and discontinuity’ (Crotty: 185).

The research may be mostly influenced by theories of discourse analysis developed in the wider conceptual background of postmodernism. Discourse theorists are concerned with construction of social meanings in contingent political terrains and they oppose essentialist theories that examine the universal principles, which govern the empirical events: hence they oppose causal explanations inherited in all forms of empiricism, idealism and realism. I would especially consider discourse theoretical analysis applied to concrete political situations by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as a legitimate method to over come many problems put forward by existing literature of democracy in Sri Lanka. The main theoretical problematic in this study is how the democratic
ideological categories were partially fixed to the hegemonic discourse of democracy in Sri Lanka, especially in the local level politics, so that their meanings were radically changed?

Method and methodology – The research will be carried out by discourse analytical methodology. Instead of examining the sustainability of pre-given universal characteristics of democracy such as ethnic tolerance, minority rights, equality of representation among Sri Lankan electorate, I mainly examine how the local people perceive the meaning of those notions, how they have re-defined representative democracy in their existing traditions of behavior? How they justify ethnic-exclusionism by using refined democratic notions?

In discourse analytical method, attention is mostly focused upon two areas of investigation, namely (1) the formation and dissolution of political identities and (2) hegemonic practices, which produce social myths and collective imaginaries (Torfing: 136). I closely examine, in my research, how the political identities such as the voter, the citizen, the party member, government officer and the politician have been discursively constructed and how those identities gained different meanings in different contexts.

Although discourse analysis is critical of empiricism it does not prevent a researcher from conducting empirical researches. I will use empirical methods as well as interpretative methods including critical reading of texts, document analysis, deconstructing narratives and comparative analysis.

Research design

The site that I have chosen for empirical research is Thissamaharamaya divisional secretary in Hambantota district wherein all three major parties in south namely United National Party (UNP), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and People’s Liberation Front (known as JVP) have held power. It was not only a birthplace of rural radicalism of Singhalese-Buddhist youth emerged in 1970’s but also the first seat won by the JVP in a local level election recently. UNP and SLFP strongmen are continuously trying to spread their dominancy over the people, in this area, through the politics of patronage. Being a Singhalese-Buddhist area in southern periphery, Thissamaharamaya represents the ethnic
majoritarianist common sense in the countryside. This is an interesting region wherein reinterpretations of democracy played a major role in local level politics.

Empirical research would be carried out by,

1. Field research by open-ended conversational interviews and observations: In this part of research, through unstructured in-depth interviews, I would examine whether democracy has been fashioned in a communitarian manner in local level electoral politics. The main attention would be focused upon local people’s general perceptions of democratic notions such as rights, freedom, equality, representation, social justice and citizenship. I would closely examine how they have articulated democracy with ethnic exclusionism, Sinhalese-Buddhist ideology and rural radicalism represented by the JVP.

2. Structured data gathering by questioner survey that cover various ethnic, occupational and age groups: In this part of research I would check the hypothesis, drawn by the first part, through a quantitative data gathering and analysis. Questionnaires will be tested with members of different social strata, age groups and professional levels who represent politicians, party activists and voters.

References


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