Physical intimidation and discourse of deceive: A study of political violence at the University of Ruhuna

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Abstract

Political violence is a repetitive phenomenon in Sri Lankan universities. The Students' Councils are not independent bodies, but tend to share the political ideologies of the mainstream political parties of the Left or Right. The majority of the students do not actively participate in party politics but, they are being dominated by a powerful smaller group of students who mobilize majority and silencing dissent groups in effective ways for achieving their political goals. It remains problematic how this capacity originates and continues in spite of majority involvement. One of the major lacunae of the literature is that it has not researched the role of agents in political violence and their interaction with structures. This marks the point of departure of the present study. The Objective of the present study is to elaborate the missing link of political violence i.e. the role of agent and its interaction with the structural factor. This study revealed that the small group who control the majority was highly organized and they pretended to be the majority in discussions and debates in students' gatherings, by dispersing themselves in different places. Ultimately they resorted to violence and underground tactics if they observe an emergence of dissenting leadership. Further, there was a relationship of micro and macro-level radical politics. Social background of minority group revealed that they come from different social strata of the society. However, most of them bear similar characteristics of a petty bourgeoisie. Further, this study revealed that lack of democratic provisions in rules and regulations in representative system of students' union reinforces this dominance of minority over majority. To study the issue a sample of students from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Management and Finance were interviewed. These data and information have been analysed qualitatively.

Key words: Political violence, Indoctrination, Mobilization, Leadership, Structure and Agency

Introduction

Academic work on political violence had limited their scope to an examination of structural properties of conflicts, particularly of student political violence. Authors have concentrated on why aspect of these conflicts. In other words, these studies had limited their scope to a study of structural factors (such as livelihood, political governance, institutions and opportunities etc) of political violence of students. Of course, it is very rare to find a study which focuses on the agents and their relationship with the structures. The studies that focus on the structural factors of the conflict had examined the development conflict friendly mentality in relation to particular factors of conflict(Keerawella, 1981). Gunasinghe (1975) had observed that those who are engaged in violence is a class and they control the petty production and exchange. "On the one hand, they are oppressed by semi- feudals and on the other hand, the middle bourgeoisie exploits them. The poor parents and workers also confront them. In the realm of agrarian relations, they supported the land reform laws, but opposed the paddy land act. Their ambition is to rise to middle bourgeoisie" (1975). It is evident that those studies had emphasized the importance of the mind. Set of participants in violent conflict. Yet, there is a severe drawback as they had taken for granted the role of agents and the interaction between structure and agency.

In addition to the above situation, one can observe that the dialogical practice of politics which was the ideal in Sri Lankan university system, had entered to a phase of decline since 1960s (Abeywarne 2004). At present, different political ideologies are not allowed to be debated. In most of the cases, student councils are affiliated with a radical political of left or right though they never openly admit their affiliation with a party. They dominate most of the Sri Lankan universities. In rare cases of elections to student councils, dissident group loses only by a narrow margin and even on some occasions they had won. This condition of knowledge coupled with reality requires an examination of the role of agency and its interaction with structure in maintaining dominance i.e. hegemonic or force?

Objective of the present study is to elaborate the missing link of political violence i. e. the role of agent and its interaction with the structural factor.

To collect data and information for the present study several methods of social research had been employed. They include questionnaire, discussions, observation and reflection of life experiences of authors as students and teachers of the university. In the case of questionnaire, one hundred and fifty students were interviewed proportionately of the student population and years of the faculty of Humanities and social Sciences and Faculty of Management and Finance of the University of Ruhuna*. Those who responded to questionnaire belong to 2nd and 3rd years.

This article consists of two parts. Part I of the article explains the conceptual framework of the present study and in the second part this article is an empirical test of this conceptual framework with the available empirical data.

Part I

Conceptual Background

The research investigations in social sciences do not make sense when they are being limited to investigation of structures alone. "There is no sense in which structure 'determines' action or vice versa" (Giddens, Anthony. 1984: p 219). According to Bourdieu, most of the academic works in social sciences are characterised by a false opposition between objectivism and subjectivism. In his own words "absurd opposition between individual and society (1990, 31).

The studies that concentrate on objective structures ignores the fact that there is a social process by which actors perceive, think about and construct these structures and then proceed to act on that basis. Contrary to the objectivists, subjectivists, focus on the way agents or actors think about, account for, or represent the social world. In this process, they ignore the fact thus objective structures do structures the above process of thinking, of perceptions and representation. It is important to include both structure, and agent in an analysis of political violence in Sri Lankan universities as agents, on the basis of their position in social space perceive and construct the social world while the perception and construction take place in the social world is both animated and constrained by structures. (Ritzer 1989, 539) Actor possess the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Within the limits of information, uncertainty and the other contains (e.g. physical, normative or political-economical) that exists social actors are knowledgeable and capable. They attempt to solve problems, learn how to intervene in the flow of social events around them, and continuously monitor their own action, observing how others react to their behaviour and taking note of various contingent circumstances (Long and Long, 1992, 22-3).

Thus, actor orientation departs from the recognition that realities are socially shaped and interpreted, depending on individual or group actor's different position, life worlds, perceptions and interests. In

philosophical terms, the actor orientation can be seen as a constructionists perspective focusing on the making and remaking of society through the ongoing actions and perceptions of a diverse and interlocked world of actors (Frerks and Klem, 2004, 4) In this context, actors are engaged with and produce their own (inter) personal and collective social worlds (Long, 2001,2).This actor orientation helps to make the diverse social perspectives of actors visible and comprehensible and to unravel the basis socio-culture and political nature of social practices (Freks and Klem, 2004,3).

According to theories of agency and structure integration, there is a constant interrogation between agency and structures. Structures do provide a space where agents can engage in dominant discursive practices. Therefore, the notion of discourse is central to our understanding and analysis of reality as this can explain how reality is socially contracted and deconstructs through particular discourse, but also how discourses are shaped by perception of reality.

Some, who occupy better off positions (individuals and collectives) in the structure, are producing powerful discourses that are capable of deceiving the powerless and the underprivileged. In this discursive practice, information and evidence are being marshalled so as to demonstrate that an individual interest is in fact not in his interests. Real interest in this sense is, in effect, imputed to the individual from his objective situation (Balbus 1976; 152).

Part II

Agency Structure Interaction

In the following section of the Article social background of the students and their vision of a better future and perception of the student council and the mechanism of dominance will be discussed.

Social Background of the Student

Present study revealed that almost 70 per cent of the students of the two faculties belonged to the rural sector of the country. The next 18 per cent belonged to semi urban sector. There were only a small 9 per cent of students who identify themselves as residence of urban areas. (See 1.1) These figures clearly showed that these students are born and grown up in rural villages of the country.

Table 1.4. Dispersion of the sample according to their residence

Residential area	No. of students	Percentage
Urban	17	9
Semi urban	27	18
Rural	105	70
Estate	6	3

Source: Survey data-2004

Further, even though, there are groups of students who come from urban and semi urban areas, most of them were not attending popular urban schools of the country and they had been receiving their education in Sinhala Medium while attending MahaVidyalas or Madya Maha Vidyalayas of the public sector. Accordingly, the majority of students are born and grown up in the rural villages of the country (see Table 1.4). Further, they had been receiving their primary and secondary education in rural MahaVidyalas or Madya Maha Vidyalayas of Government.

Parental background of occupation depict picture which is very close to petty bourgeoisie identified by Gunasinghe (1975). As shown in Table 1.2, most of the fathers of these students are engaged in some sort of income earning activity, while mothers are confined to household activities. Salaried occupation is the category which most number of parents belong to. Next is the industrial labourer. Whatever the occupation

these parents are engaged in, one of the common characteristic of them is that they regard education as the best way available for their children to climb the utmost position of the social ladder. (Keerawella)

Parents' Occupation

Category of occupation	Farther	Mother
Estate owner	02	-
Businessmen	12	3
Salaried occupation*	32	12
Industrial Labourer	20	13
Casual Labourer	09	5
Craftmen,	07	02
Farmer	60	27
Fishermen	05	-
Others**	03	88
Total	150	150

Source: Survey data-2004

Students' Perception of a Better Future

Students seem to be thinking they and their kith and kin would be better off when they find a secure high ranking position of professional career. To a question asked what sector student would like to join after their graduation, 58 per cent of them had replied they would like to choose public sector because they feel it is secure. Further, they explained government do have a role to be played in absorbing the most energetic and dynamic workforce into the economy. There were 29 percent of students who are ready to accept challenging careers in the private sector because it favours the skilled. The rest 13 percent of students tend to perceive their future with sceptically because they are not sure of the economic order would absorb them to the position of importance and they are sceptical of the political regimes of the country.

Perception of the Student Council

This study revealed that students' level of satisfaction about the involvement of the students' council in the welfare of the students remained very low. According to the survey data, seventy three percent of the sample were not in good faith with the students' council of their respective faculties (See Table 1.3).

Table1.3 Level of students' satisfaction about the performance of the student council

Degree of satisfication	No of responses	Percentage
Extremely satisfied	06	4
Satisfed	35	23
Not Satisfed	86	57
Extremely disgusted	24	16
Total	150	100

Source: Survey data-2004

Further, students are prone to take a self distancing attitude from the activities of the student council. (See Table 1.4) Accordingly, there were 15 per cent of students who are closely associated with the student council. A special character of these student group was that all of the students who are sceptical about the better future composed into this group of students and they were the active and ardent supporters of whatever activity carried out by the student council. Around 75 per cent of students were involved in activities of the student council rarely but on special occasions of importance

such as agitation such as demands for hostels, increase in the value of Mahapola Scholarship and selection of Batch representative to the student council etc. The other remainder 10 percent of students do not take part in whatever form of activity of the council and they are the political dissidents with the council and they are being usually label as Boga, Bogi, Alaya etc because they are actively engaged in a different discourse to the role of student's council.

Involvement of students

Nature of involvement	No of responses	Percentage
Continuously	22	15
Rarely	113	75
No involvement	15	10
Total	150	100

Source: Survey data -2004

According to the foregone discussion, several characteristics of students of the University of Ruhuna could be observed. They resembled to a middle bourgeoisie class that is always upward looking. They do not actively take part in most of the activities of the council and they displayed an apathetic attitude towards the student council. However, they do take part in matters of deciding the power holders of council from time to time and thus supporting the status quo of a radical left oriented group of student which is not representing their true interests. This is what attempted to answer in the following section of the article.

Representative structure

According to the rules governing university system in Sri Lanka, there shall be a student council composed of elected representatives of registered internal students for each faculty***. These student representatives form the general student council of the university. Further, there is a inter-university student federation informally formed and closely associated with party politics. This is formed by the representatives of universities. Present system of representation do not provide for group contest within faculties even though practice is a form of group contest.

In the two faculties subjected to the present study, elections were very rare. In fact, there was no election held in the Faculty of Management and Finance since its formal recognition as a separate Faculty in 2002. Throughout the recorded history of the two Faculties, only one group of student was able to sway the power.

Social Structure

It could be observed that society in the university is highly stratified. There are two main vertically structured social categories, i.e. seniors and juniors (in sinhala Aiya and Malli). Normally, students above the first year level are regarded as senior students of the university. However, the second year students are the most powerful group of student because it is they who shoulder the responsibility of socialization of the new comers to the university. This does not imply that other students do not participate in this process of socialization in to the new culture, yet to imply that they are the most powerful because they can ask others to refrain from engaging in this process according to their wishes. Further, most of the other senior students lose the interest in this process of socialization because they are following special degree courses and some others are trying to secure jobs etc. According to the perception of students, first year is "year of hardship" and the second year a "year of carnival".

Interaction of Structures and Agents

The foregoing discussion of students' social background makes it clear; these students do not necessarily prone to violence. Further, students are not satisfied with the performances of the council. So it is pertinent to ask how come, a small group remains in power for a long time.

Plausible answer to this question is the relationship between agent and structure. The representative structure coupled with the social structure provides a space for the agents an opportunity to make certain changes in the habitus of the actors. This empowers the organized groups and provides an opportunity to orient the ways students perceive, understand and evaluate the social world even for a short period of time.

As, other studies revealed and students perceive their future, most of the students perception is characterized by a static mentality. However, their prospect of securing positions of importance is very meagre in the context of an open economy. Further, education system also had not undergone changes according to the economic philosophy of the state. In this context, the higher education institute becomes the breading ground of carder for radical political parties. Students of the university, having very high expectations and understanding their realization very low, undergo a process of value deprivation. This is a situation that could be harnessed for radical political movements for their political objectives. In a society, where the habitus of its people is formed after state in providing everything, and when forced to adopt new habitus they start to suffer because they are unable to cope with the new situation.

This is situation which is exploitable by political entrepreneurs whether they belong to the political left or right. Student Council being an agent of a political party acts in this direction consciously or unconsciously. Thus, student council being an agent of political party resort to two mechanisms of power politics. Firstly, it is violence. Secondly, discourse of deceive. One of the common feature observable of radical groups is they are innocent where they do not dominate and violent where they are dominant. In case of situation where they dominate they use violence against whoever trying to dissent. In the context of University of Ruhuna, this practice of employing violence against political opponents ranges from labelling them as Apataya, Boga, Bogi, (All are derogatative term) etc to physical intimidation causing deathly injuries. In some cases, they appeal to the authorities of the university to intervene to stop immoral practices such as drug addiction. Most recent example is an appeal to Vice Chancellor to intervene to stop immoral bahaviour in the university hostels by the president of the student council.

Discourse of deceive is being practiced with the arrival of new students to the respective faculties. Looking after the new student is bestowed upon the second year student or the immediate seniors. Boga, Bogi, Apataya, and other constructed dangerous fellows who are engaged in a dangerous political project are introduced to them during this time. Further, they are being indoctrinated that the seniors are the only one who support them. They are the ones who come to rescue them in time of critical situation. No other, academic staff or administration will look after them. They are advised to be united in whatever circumstances as a batch and no one should engage in detrimental things to the interests of the batch including contesting elections. Only the ones who are nominated by the batch should be given a chance to represent the council, and they are being reminded of the consequences of dissenting with the interests of the batch. Further, student are made to believe that dissenting and going against the wishes and interest of the student council is detrimental to their career prospect because they are the only group of student who are fighting for equal opportunities for graduates in the spoiled political system.

Further, one tactic is being employed to dominate the batch and students in general by this smaller group of activist of the council. They are highly organized. They themselves dispersed in the debate in the batch

meetings and in other occasions of student debate and argue the same point which is in line with the opinion of the council not allowing others to speak and thus presenting their tone as the tone of the common will.

There was a vigilant group of students in the second year and other years to check whether political opponents preach their doctrine. At present, dissident student council of the science faculty and their supporters are not allowed to speak to the new students of the above two faculties. Of course, there is a feared junction "Y" one of the ways to university complex where dissident may approach the new comers at Wellamadama.

In this process of functioning of the student council, students of the 3rd and 4th years start a gradual distancing from the council and its activities, yet they fear to discuss these openly. However, the status quo of the council can be maintained because students of the first year and second year level are supporting the council because they believe that the council is representing their interest though it fact it is not their real interest and they do have a some devoted and committed student though a minority and The cumulative effect of the two strategies is frightening students of being isolated if they are working against the fancies of the council.

Conclusions

The dominance over majority students by a minority group of students who identify and closely affiliated with a radical political party could be viewed as a result of structure of representation and social system of the university and the agent's role in using violence and discourse of deceive. In either case, neither is innocent and employs tactics of violence. If the university is to overcome the frequent violent occurring, it has to neutralise legal framework of representation which is dominant friendly and seriously think of new strategies to empower majority of students. Further, it should be noted that university alone could not fulfil this task ahead of educationist. This is an issue that policy scientists must seriously think of if we are to engage in a political project of emancipation.

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