

Sri Lanka: LSSP splinters in three as People's Alliance ship begins to sink

Wije Dias
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The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), once a mass socialist workers' party and today a partner in Sri Lanka's ruling People's Alliance (PA), has effectively split in three.

On April 21, LSSP MP Vasudeva Nanayakkara crossed over to the opposition benches in parliament. For breaking with the PA government, Nanayakkara has been suspended from the LSSP, pending a vote on a motion for his expulsion. The disciplinary action against Nanayakkara is being opposed by a section of the LSSP. A veteran LSSP member told the press, "You can not have one rule in the party for Athauda Seneviratna and another for Vasudeva Nanayakkara."

In February, Seneviratna, then deputy minister of Plantations and Public Administration, quit the LSSP and joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, one of Sri Lanka's two main capitalist parties and the principal component of the PA coalition. Yet the LSSP Politbureau took no disciplinary action against Seneviratna, who, on joining the SFLP, was named SFLP candidate for chief minister in Sabaragamuwa Province. When Seneviratna's resignation came up for discussion in the LSSP leadership, party secretary Batty Weerakoon urged that no action be taken against him so as not to harm the PA's showing in the April 6 Provincial Council elections in Sabaragamuwa and four other provinces.

The LSSP's refusal to expel Seneviratna is in keeping with the stance it adopted towards him when he was an LSSP parliamentarian. For more than two years, the LSSP leadership looked the other way while Seneviratna routinely violated party policy by supporting motions to maintain emergency rule and extend it across the island.

The divisions in, and defections from, the LSSP are rooted in the growing popular opposition to the PA regime. Elected in 1994 by appealing to popular opposition to the ruinous war against the Tamil Eelam secessionist movement and the United National Party's (UNP) right-wing socio-economic program, the PA has instead intensified the war and pressed ahead with the dismantling of public services, privatisation, and the cutting of price supports.

The opposition to the PA has found expression in a wave of trade union struggles, including a strike by a half million plantation workers in February 1998. In the recent Provincial Council elections, the PA suffered a massive decline in its

popular vote, receiving about 40 percent less votes than it did in the 1994 presidential election.

Fearing for their positions in parliament and the trade union apparatus, the LSSP leaders are now at loggerheads. While Seneviratna has responded to President Chandrika Kumaratunga's appeal that he help shore up support for the SFLP, Nanayakkara is hoping to gain influence by assisting the ruling class in channelling the political opposition into the sterile channels of parliamentary and trade union protest.

These manoeuvres leave PA Cabinet Minister and LSSP Secretary Weerakoon looking like the forsaken captain of a sinking ship, and the LSSP like Humpty Dumpty after the fall. Even before the current crisis, the LSSP had been reduced to a shell whose political influence derives almost entirely from the fact that the SFLP views it as useful in providing the PA with leftist credentials.

If the LSSP leadership moved quickly to discipline Nanayakkara, it was not simply because it wanted to reassure its PA allies. It clearly fears further defections, especially as there are many leading LSSP cadres whose parliamentary ambitions were frustrated by the PA's poor showing in the provincial elections. While condemning Nanayakkara, Weerakoon has at the same time deemed it politic to put some distance between himself and the government in which he is a leading member. The LSSP secretary recently issued a statement charging that the PA government has failed to ease the economic plight of the masses and criticising the PA's failure to pursue a political solution to the Tamil opposition to Sri Lanka's chauvinist constitutional regime. "In brief," declared Weerakoon, "it may be said that the level of hopes in a PA government was high and as a result the government's inability to deliver on this has placed it in an unenviable position. What is now urgently needed is for the PA government to win back its credibility."

Similar sentiments have been voiced by Fisheries Minister and SLFP stalwart Mahinda Rajapakse and by the newly-minted oppositionist Nanayakkara. Indeed, so alike are recent statements of the three on the crisis of the PA, it is as if they had drafted them at the same table and cribbed from one another.

In an open letter to the President and SFLP party leader

Kumaratunga, Rajapakse wrote, "Your Excellency would agree that it is the more 'left' inclined voter who would first react politically to changing socio-economic conditions. It was this mature layer of 'left oriented' voters who elected MP's from the traditional Left within the PA in all previous elections. The PC [Provincial Council] elections clearly indicate, we have lost the majority of the traditional anti-UNP vote to the JVP [The People's Liberation Front]" (*The Sunday Leader*, April 25, 1999).

For his part, Nanayakkara declared, "The dissatisfied elements around the PA are not returning to the UNP. They are the sections that rallied around the JVP. Therefore the UNP can not dream that the masses are rallying around it. On the other hand, the PA also can not entertain the view that the masses are not distancing themselves from it. Hence, the government must give thought to stop this fall in popularity. In this PA can not ignore its original aspirations."

Since joining the opposition, Nanayakkara has indicated he hopes to enter in an alliance with the JVP, a petty-bourgeois movement that couples Sinhalese chauvinism with populist demagoguery. In this he is following his mentor and erstwhile collaborator Wickrambahu Karunaratna, who some years back left the LSSP for the Nava Sama Samaja Party or NSSP. Although the NSSP professes support for the Tamil struggle against national oppression, it has formed a loose alliance with the anti-Tamil JVP.

Asked by a journalist if he thought it "a good sign" that the JVP polled more than a quarter million votes in the recent provincial council elections, Nanayakkara declared, "Enormously a good sign.... I see it as a new beginning of the leftist democratic politics in the country. I find it as we are returning to a period that the leftist politics flourished in this country in 1950s and 60s."

In fact, if the JVP was able to become a major force in the early 1970s and continues to wield considerable influence today despite a record of political adventures and bloody collaboration with the UNP in the late 1980s in repressing the working class, it is because Nanayakkara and his erstwhile comrades in the leadership of the LSSP betrayed the mass socialist workers movement that arose in Sri Lanka in the 1940s and 1950s. In its early days, fighting on Trotskyist principles and as a section of the Fourth International, the LSSP spearheaded the political and industrial organisation of the working class and played the principal role in the development of a powerful socialist political culture on the island. The Trotskyists alone defended the citizenship rights of the Tamil plantation workers and opposed the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie's increasing use of Sinhalese chauvinism as a means to divert social unrest.

Subsequently, however, the LSSP leadership adapted to the new political environment that resulted from decolonisation and the post-war boom and which enabled the national bourgeoisie to make certain concessions to the masses, while seeking to

strengthen its hand against its imperialist rivals through a national economic strategy. In 1964, the working class under the LSSP's leadership mounted a general strike in defiance of the SFLP government, but rather than elaborating a strategy to build a mass movement for a workers and peasants government, the LSSP leaders accepted the SFLP prime minister's appeal for them to join the capitalist government.

Until this betrayal, large sections of the rural and urban petty-bourgeois masses, Sinhalese and Tamil, had looked to the working class to provide a solution to their social and democratic aspirations. The subordination of the working class, through the LSSP, to a crisis-ridden capitalist order increasingly dependent on anti-Tamil chauvinism, created conditions in which radical opposition movements of the petty bourgeoisie like the JVP and LTTE could gain a mass base in the 1970s.

In 1971, when the JVP came into the leadership of a rebellion of peasant youth, the Trotskyists of the Revolutionary Communist League, predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, defended it from the bloody repression mounted by the then ruling SFLP-LSSP-Communist Party coalition. At the same time, the RCL exposed the JVP's chauvinist and anti-working class politics. The JVP's subsequent evolution into the most virulent exponent of anti-Tamil chauvinism and collaboration with the UNP government in violently suppressing the working class have underscored the significance of the RCL's warnings as to the petty-bourgeois, communalist character of the JVP.

That Nanayakkara, who claims to represent the LSSP "left," could favourably compare an organisation such as the JVP to the LSSP of the 1950s, which fought courageously on the basis of a socialist program against the oppression of the Tamils, is yet a further demonstration that the present-day LSSP is nothing but a cabal of reactionary careerists. Socialists can only welcome its splintering and imminent demise.



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