

Sri Lankan presidential poll: lengthy candidate list reflects growing disaffection

Wije Dias

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The nomination of 13 candidates for the fourth Sri Lankan presidential elections to be held on December 21 does not indicate some strength of democracy. Rather, it is the result of increasingly desperate manoeuvres by the main parties in the face of growing disillusionment among the broad masses with the existing parliamentary order.

Of the 13 candidates, nine are from registered political parties with the remaining four running as independents.

The most notable of the independents is Vasudeva Nanayakkara, whose career is a case history of radical phrase mongering and opportunist twists and turns.

Nanayakkara came into politics as the leader of the youth movement of the one-time Trotskyist party, the Lanka Samaja Party (LSSP) in the early 1960s and became a member of parliament when the LSSP aligned itself with the capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and won the 1970 elections as a coalition.

Nanayakkara made mild criticisms of its national capitalist program from the backbenches of parliament in a vain attempt to maintain the fast eroding youth base of the LSSP. When the coalition government, in which the LSSP held three ministerial posts, launched its bloody repression of the youth uprising led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1971, it imprisoned Nanayakkara and held him for more than two years. But Nanayakkara never broke from its ranks. Only when the LSSP was itself thrown out of the government and was routed at the 1977 general election, did he quit.

But Nanayakkara's sordid political history did not prevent him being welcomed into the ranks of the so-called Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP)—later to become the Sri Lankan section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International—and he was made its leader in 1978.

When the NSSP's attempt in 1994 to form a popular front coalition with the SLFP failed, Nanayakkara left his party. He then stood at the gates of the LSSP, which had formed a partnership with the SLFP in the Peoples Alliance (PA), pleading to have his name included in the PA candidate list for the election. Thanks to the deep-rooted opportunism of both Nanayakkara and the PA leaders, his pleas were answered and he got back into parliament.

As the PA government became more and more openly the tool of international finance capital, shedding its “left” nationalist pretensions, Nanayakkara's attempts to cover over its actions with radical rhetoric became increasingly futile. Faced with a rising tide

of discontent with the PA regime, Nanayakkara tried yet another manoeuvre—sitting on the opposition benches in parliament without, however, resigning from the PA.

When the presidential election was announced last month, he tried his best to become the “common left” candidate, with the support of the JVP and NSSP, but failed. Able only to win the support of some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to sponsor his candidacy, he enters the election as an independent candidate, representing the hurriedly set up Left Democratic Movement.

Another independent candidate for the election, whose history illustrates the intrigues and manoeuvres to be found on the right wing of official politics, is Hudson Samarasinghe.

He contested the last presidential election held in November 1994 as an independent. A close associate of the assassinated United National Party (UNP) President Premadasa, Samarasinghe was sponsored and funded by a faction within the UNP which opposed official UNP candidate Gamini Dissanayake, who earlier had initiated an impeachment motion against President Premadasa.

It is widely believed that the present leader of the UNP and its presidential candidate Ranil Wickramasinghe was behind the Samarasinghe candidacy. Such reports were given added weight by a series of incidents in the lead up to the last election. When Dissanayake was killed in a bomb blast at a Colombo rally and an alternative candidate from the UNP had to replace him, Samarasinghe suddenly withdrew his own candidacy.

Whatever the exact nature of his manoeuvres, they certainly have not left him out of pocket. A wealthy man, Samarasinghe spent four years abroad living in luxury after the PA came to power.

Returning to Sri Lanka a few months ago, he cultivated close relations with the PA hierarchy. It is quite probable that the UNP faction that earlier this month defected from the party and pledged support to PA leader Chandrika Kumaratunga in the presidential election, enlisted Samarasinghe to broker the crossover.

Samarasinghe is clearly aligned with them politically. Speaking to the media after handing in his nomination papers, he adopted the same slogan as the UNP defectors, the establishment of a national government.

Not to be outdone by the PA manoeuvring, the UNP is also believed to have sponsored its own “independent candidate”, Tennyson Edirisooriya, who is considered to have some standing among voters in the South. Edirisooriya began his political life in the LSSP and joined the SLFP in the 1970s in order to get a junior

minister's post. His candidacy is seen as a counterweight to the losses the UNP expects as a result of the crossover of southern MP and former minister Nanda Mathew to the PA. Edirisooriya advanced a "spoiling" tactic, telling the press he would not even vote for himself but would cancel his ballot and appealed to his supporters to do the same.

The fourth independent candidate W.B.M. Ranjith is a former UNP parliamentarian. It is believed that his nomination is covertly sponsored by the UNP itself to get additional advantage for its propaganda in the state electronic media and also in the appointment of polling agents and other activities associated with the election.

Among those nominating from the registered political parties is Harischandra Wijetunga from the Sinhalaye Mahasammatha Bhumi Puthra Paksaya (Accepted Sinhala Sons of the Land Party).

This party only came into existence after the UNP government intensified racial oppression of the Tamil population in the 1980s and has functioned as a drumbeater for the war conducted by the Sri Lankan Army in the North and East since 1983.

The Commissioner of Elections duly recognized it, although it met none of the conditions set down in the Electoral Act for official status. It has contested general, presidential, provincial and local council elections but has not being able to win a single position. Wijetunga, who failed to win endorsement from other racist-Buddhist organizations, says his aim is to establish a Sinhala Raj.

The Liberal Party has put forward Rajiva Wijesinghe. But only a few days before nominations closed, it issued a public statement saying it was backing the PA candidate. Indeed, the de facto leader of this party, Asitha Perera, sits in the present parliament as a nominated national list member named by the Muslim Congress—a member of the PA—with which the Liberal Party had an agreement.

The Bahujana Nidahas Peramuna (Mass Freedom Party—MFP) has also put forward a candidate, Alwis Weerakkody. The former leader of the MFP is none other than the present head of the PA, Chandrika Kumaratunga. She formed the MFP in 1992 after the party she had established earlier with her late husband Wijaya Kumaratunga, expelled her and entered the service of UNP President Premadasa in 1988. The MFP refused to return to the SLFP with Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1993.

Abdul Rasak Abdul Rasool is standing as the candidate of Sri Lanka Muslim Party. He says that he is for national integration between different communities. But this is what the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which is a partner of the PA, also says. However, the SLMC is worried that a major section of its following would not vote for the PA presidential candidate this time. It has already declared that even though it supports Chandrika Kumaratunga at this presidential election it would stand candidates separately from the PA at the coming general election. It seems that the purpose of the Muslim Party candidate is to prevent the votes of the Muslims who have distanced themselves from the PA going to the UNP.

Kamal Karunadasa has nominated as the candidate of the Peoples Liberation Solidarity Front (PLSF). This is a breakaway group from the JVP (Peoples Liberation Front). The issue at stake in the split was who should carry forward the mantle of the former

JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera, murdered in 1989 by the UNP regime. Those who opposed the claims of Wijeweera's brother-in-law won the day and reorganized the party as the present JVP. The others formed the PLSF.

The JVP has offered a second rank leader as its presidential candidate. Its line is not to disrupt, at this stage, the relationship it has cultivated with the PA regime, particularly in the running of the provincial councils. One JVP local government councilor in the North-Western Province has already resigned from the party and joined the PA, opposing even the standing of a second ranker as president, claiming this would assist the UNP.

The Democratic United National Front (DUNF) has put forward a candidate, Ariyawansa Dissanayake. This party was formed in 1990 by the late Lalith Athulathmudali, who was a minister in the UNP cabinet, and it has gone through many splits ever since. The main split away group headed by Athulathmudali's widow joined the PA in 1994.

The two main figures in the election are the PA candidate Chandrika Kumaratunga and the UNP candidate Ranil Wickramasinghe.

Echoing the demands of big business for an end to the 16-year war in the North and East, they have both promised to open discussions with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) if they are elected and to strike a consensus with the opposition on ending the conflict.

This is the formula first advanced in 1997 by Liam Fox, a member of the former Conservative government in Britain. At that time, the PA regime believed it could win the war and impose its own devolution package, providing for limited self-rule in Tamil areas, and isolate the LTTE by winning the support of other Tamil organizations.

However, the PA miscalculated badly. In September 1998 the big business community initiated its own demands for a solution to the war. In line with these demands, and with an eye to voters who are fed up with the devastation of their living conditions brought by the war, both the UNP, which started the war in 1983, and the PA, which continued it after 1994, have begun to blow the peace pipe.

But whether they are believed is another question. One significant feature is the absence of any Tamil candidate, although there are over half dozen Tamil parties besides the LTTE. Only one of them, the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party, notorious for its internal killings, and enjoying little support from Tamils in either the North or the South, has declared its support for the PA.

The rest have kept silent, indicating that among the Tamil population there is little confidence in any of the promises of either the UNP or the PA to bring about a solution to the war and end the racial oppression that has been an endemic feature of the Sri Lankan state.



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