

LSSP backs Kumaratunga in Sri Lankan election

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24 November 1999

The decision by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the one-time Sri Lankan Trotskyist party, to back the re-election of People's Alliance leader Chandrika Kumaratunga for a second term in the presidential election of December 21 will come as no surprise to those who have followed the history of this organisation.

But at every major turn in political events, the LSSP always seems to manage to take its abandonment of principled politics to a new low point.

On this occasion, it is not only calling on workers to back Kumaratunga but is demanding that the Peoples Alliance and its leading party, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), join with the United National Party (UNP) to rewrite the constitution to incorporate a so-called devolution package as the basis for ending the 16-year old war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and resolving the so-called "ethnic problem".

The LSSP decision to back Kumaratunga was a foregone conclusion after general secretary Batty Weerakoon, a minister in the PA government, responded to the president's decision to call a snap poll by declaring that she was "the most popular leader," apart from whom there was "no other person capable of handling the presidency".

After this eulogy, it was left to the party's central committee to issue an official endorsement on November 9. "The LSSP," it declared, "calls upon the organised working class and progressive democratic forces to rally round the People's Alliance and its presidential candidate Chandrika Bandaranayake Kumaratunga in order to achieve the important task of defeating the UNP."

In calling for a vote for the PA, the LSSP rolled out its rhetoric of the "lesser evil," which has been the hallmark of its election statements ever since it first offered support to the SLFP in the 1956 elections, declaring that: "Unless the UNP is decisively defeated in this election, the reactionary forces that suffered a setback with the defeat of the UNP in 1994, but have been making advances in several sectors, political, social, and administrative, including the police, will be further encouraged."

But while calling for a PA vote to defeat UNP-led reaction, the LSSP is, at the same time, demanding that the PA reach a consensus with the same UNP reactionaries and accept their amendments to the proposed constitutional changes.

The LSSP campaign for PA and UNP to join hands in carrying through the devolution package was launched in June 1998 with the calling of pickets under the party banner in Colombo, Kandy and Ambalangoda.

An LSSP statement issued in October 1998 declared that the "political solution to the ethnic problem" was provided in the report of a two-year-long investigation by a parliamentary select committee. "The report is in the form of draft legislation, which if adopted would be the first step and necessary step in the path of a lasting resolution of the conflict. The LSSP has no doubt that the UNP will be compelled to support its adoption incorporating its own amendments to it."

However, after the picketing campaign failed to attract popular support, the LSSP tried another tack. On February 26 this year, senior political committee member Tissa Vitarana launched the National Association for

Peace as "the first step to achieve an acceptable solution to end the war" and urged that the UNP and PA "work out a consensus" and then "develop a common approach to discussions with representatives of all sections of the Tamil and Muslim people."

Repeating the call for consensus in a speech delivered on June 6—the 10th anniversary of the death of one of the most well-known LSSP leaders, Colvin R de Silva—general secretary Weerakoon declared that the issue of the unitary state would not be a matter of contention "where consensus is sought between the Peoples Alliance and the UNP on the new constitution."

And in its statement in July on the murder of Neelan Thiruchelvam, a leading Tamil proponent of the peace package, and a man highly regarded by the Clinton administration, the LSSP called on "the PA and the UNP as the major players at this stage of the process to recognise the situation and to counter it speedily by carrying through parliament the necessary constitutional amendments for the implementation of the package."

The constitutional reforms so fervently embraced by the LSSP are embodied in the draft constitution tabled by the government in March 1997. Far from providing for a just settlement of the war, they amount to a reaffirmation of centralised state power, and even tighten it.

For example, it is stated that any transfer of power (to a Provincial Council) is revocable at will by the transferring authority (the central government) and that it retains the right to exercise the transferred power at any time without revoking the transfer. In other words, the much-vaunted devolution of power is only by grace of the central authority, able to be withdrawn at any time.

Under another section, the Public Security Amendment Act, which presently governs the imposition of emergency rule, will be incorporated into the new constitution. There is also a provision that allows the central government or its agencies to exercise authority in any of the fields specified in the schedule of powers transferred to the Provincial Councils whenever the president has made a declaration under the emergency regulations.

The proposed constitution grants the Provincial Councils the right to receive loans from international financial institutions within certain limits. Loans exceeding those limits will require central government approval as will the deployment of foreign direct investment.

The financial arrangements are the key to the politics of the proposed constitution. It is basically a settlement which gives limited concessions to sections of the Tamil elite and provides them with access to international finance. The government is calculating that the prospect of acquiring additional resources will induce them to apply pressure on the LTTE to reach a settlement.

The LSSP demand that the SLFP and the UNP should unite in imposing this program, and amend it in line with UNP proposals, would result in an even more authoritarian constitution than presently exists, even if the executive presidency were abolished.

The effect of the entire package would be to open the door for different

sections of the regional elites to establish relations with international finance capital in competition with each other, at the same time dividing the working class on regional lines. In other words, the new constitution is not only aimed at the oppressed Tamil masses but at the working class as a whole.

Little wonder then, that it is very much to the liking of transnational companies and other big business concerns. For more than a year key sections of Sir Lankan business have been working to bring about a consensus, first between the UNP and the PA and then with the LTTE.

On October 22, 1998 leading business organisations, including the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, the Ceylon Chamber of Industries, the Federation of Chambers of Commerce, the Employers Federation, and the Exporters Federation, summoned a conference to develop a consensus solution to the “ethnic question.” Convened by business tycoon Lalith Kothalawala, nephew of the third (UNP) Prime Minister (1954-56) of Sri Lanka, Sir John Kothalawala, it set up a coordinating committee with the declared intent of bringing together the UNP and the PA to work out a deal with the LTTE.

The business groups made no effort to hide their interests. Declaring that they were concerned with the economic performance of Sri Lanka in the context of the economic crisis associated with globalisation, they set out a series of tasks: establishing labour market flexibility, guaranteeing equality of status of the employer and employee before law and reducing the number of holidays. US ambassador Shaun Donnelley attended this conference, along with the diplomatic representatives of a number of other imperialist countries, and gave vocal support to the project.

After the announcement of the presidential election, the business organisations reiterated their demands. With the total war expenses already well above one year's gross domestic product, and annual military spending amounting to 5 percent of GDP and consuming 30 percent of the budget, business is finding the war an impediment to its interests.

Military spending absorbs money that could be employed on essential infrastructure needed to attract foreign investment and the huge import bill for arms stands in the way of a currency devaluation needed to make Sri Lanka more internationally competitive.

But for the war to end on terms that will advance the interests of the Colombo-based capitalist class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—business wants the two main parties to adopt a bipartisan approach, figuring that such unity will prove useful in raising the war to a new level in the event that the LTTE cannot be brought to a settlement.

The imperialist powers are also taking a keen interest in events. The United States regards the island as strategically significant and considers it important to maintain stability under conditions where the political situation in the rest of the sub-continent is becoming increasingly volatile.

The Clinton administration has been seeking to arm twist the LTTE into a settlement with the Colombo government on the lines of the “peace package” proposed by the PA. Last October, it redesignated the LTTE as a “terrorist” organisation and signed an extradition treaty particularly aimed at the LTTE.

Concerns about the rising cost of the war are not the only concerns of the ruling classes. There is also the fear that the mass disaffection with the PA regime could develop into overt political opposition—fears which have increased in the wake of the severe military setbacks suffered by the Colombo forces in the past month.

Viewed against this background, it is clear that the LSSP “peace” campaign has nothing to do with meeting the demands of the masses for an end to the war. Rather, it is carrying out a special campaign on behalf of big business to unite the ruling class parties and has made a special point of involving various front organisations and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to back its demand for the unity of the UNP and the PA.

These efforts are receiving the close attention of the representatives of

the Clinton administration. In a discussion with the PA Minister of Finance and Constitutional Affairs, G L Pieris, the US president's special assistant on humanitarian affairs, Eric Schwartz, made it clear he was well aware of the LSSP campaign.

According to a *Daily News* report of September 29, Schwartz was “encouraged” by reports of marches and demonstrations calling for peace. Pointing to the role of NGOs “able to mobilise the diverse segments of society in support of peace initiatives,” he said this “augurs well for the vitality of democratic values”.

In the election campaign the LSSP is doing much of the spadework for the PA regime, claiming that it has been responsive to the demands of working people. The record belies such assertions. The PA government started its term of office in 1994 with the shooting of striking Ansell workers in the Biyagama Free Trade Zone. It used state repression to break a series of workers' struggles against privatisation. The cost of living under the PA is the highest ever and there have been large cuts in health and education.

As for promised relief to those victimised by previous UNP governments, a large number of strikers sacked in July 1980 remain without work. The LSSP claim that the PA has given relief to the families of large numbers of people who “disappeared” during the previous UNP regime is belied by the fact that most of their cases have not been taken up. This was even pointed out by a United Nations commission which called for a permanent commission to be established to examine these cases. There are deliberate attempts to cover up the mass murders under PA rule in Jaffna, in the Tamil-populated north of the country, and intimidate those who come forward to give evidence.

The South Asian Human development report for 1999 points out that in terms of the Humane Political Governance Index Sri Lanka continues to occupy 56th place out of 58 countries measured and that less than 25 percent of the population approve the performance of the political establishment.

The subservience of Sri Lanka to US imperialism has increased, with the government demonstrating its readiness to defend US interests by shooting at residents of the Iranawila area on the island's west coast protesting against the hand over of land for a US communications base and killing one.

Popular discontent over the PA's role has grown so deep that three weeks before the announcement of the elections, the LSSP and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka were obliged to issue a statement saying there were “gravely perturbed over the course presently taken by the PA government.”

The present election has nothing to do with advancing the interests of the working class and broad masses. It is more of a test to find out which of the two main capitalist parties can muster sufficient support to lead a grand coalition.

As long as big business and the imperialist powers feel that the unity of the ruling elite can be best achieved under the leadership of Chandrika Kumaratunga, the LSSP will follow that line, wheeling out the hackneyed formula of the “lesser evil” for popular consumption.

But more twists may be in store. It would not be out of the question for the LSSP to make another turn and link up with the UNP if the UNP were able to win more votes and the imperialist powers backed it to lead a coalition government.



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