

UNP sniffs a possible win in the Sri Lanka presidential election

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Less than six years after being ousted from power by a popular wave of indignation, the right-wing United National Party (UNP) in Sri Lanka has a chance of winning the presidential election taking place today. That the UNP has even the possibility of returning to government is an indictment of the People's Alliance government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, which, with the backing of the so-called socialist parties—the Stalinist Communist Party and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—and the trade unions, has intensified the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and implemented IMF's privatisation and austerity demands.

In his manifesto, the UNP presidential candidate, Ranil Wickremesinghe, tries to portray himself as a man of peace capable of ending the civil war that has ravaged the country for nearly two decades. He also attempts to appeal to masses of people hit by the decline of living standards under Kumaratunga by making vague promises to lessen poverty and unemployment. He obviously is hoping that the anger of voters at the PA government's record will make them forget that the previous UNP governments that ruled for 16 years were just as responsible for the war and deteriorating social conditions.

At the top of Wickremesinghe's list of election promises is his proposal to enter talks with the LTTE to end the war. He is calling for the creation of an interim administrative council in the North and the East and a change in the composition of the armed forces to “reflect the ethnic mix of the country”—that is, the recruitment of Tamil-speaking soldiers. Last month, the *Tamil Net* website claimed that Wickremesinghe had said he would hand over administration of the North and East Provincial Councils to the LTTE for an interim period of two years.

Wickremesinghe's proposals reflect a shift in attitude within sections of big business towards the war. Since August 1998, representatives of Sri Lanka's major employers' federations have been openly campaigning for the UNP and PA to agree on a common approach to arrive at a settlement with the LTTE. The issue has become more pressing after the LTTE inflicted serious defeats on the Sri Lankan army last month.

Last year the UNP refused to respond to the appeals of big business. At that time, the government-controlled *Daily News* noted rather sarcastically in an editorial comment: “What has happened to the GOP (Grand Old Party) of Sri Lanka? It has failed to listen to the voice of its own patrons that all major parties in the island should get together to overcome this impasse.”

But the UNP and Wickremesinghe have since changed their tune as big business has become more insistent. The latest issue of the *Lanka Monthly Digest (LMD)*, a leading business journal commented, “desperate situations call for desperate solutions” and wailed that the “ruling politicians and their rivals bickered endlessly and showed little or no statesmanship in arriving at a consensus on how best to end the war.”

Lalith Kotelawela, the convenor of a peace committee set up by the business federations, expressed the desperation in ruling circles: “There have been reports that I am crawling on my belly to meet [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran. I will not crawl on my belly but go down on my knees to ask God to fill Prabhakaran's heart with love.”

Big business is deeply concerned about the impact of the war on profits and investment. The stock market, which stood at 927 points when the PA government came to power, is now at just over 560 points. The share value of Kotelawela's own Seylan Bank, has

declined from 140 to 14.10 rupees over the six years. The country's foreign reserves have sunk to five months' supply of imports, while 25 percent of the government budget is spent on the military and 31 percent on servicing the state debt.

Wickremesinghe's plan to end the war is little different from Kumaratunga's—a joint approach by the UNP and the PA to talks with the LTTE on a form of devolution for the Northern and Eastern provinces. Such a power-sharing arrangement would divide the working class on ethnic lines and pave the way for the intensified exploitation of workers by local and foreign capital.

While parading as a peace candidate, Wickremesinghe is intent on strengthening the state apparatus. In his manifesto entitled “My pact with the people,” he called for the preservation of a strong executive presidency and streamlining of the police and modernisation of the military. To resurrect the reputation of the police, he has proposed their “depoliticisation” and a special new interior ministry to control their operations. The refashioning of the security forces is not only a preparation for the war against the LTTE but is to deal growing unrest among workers and the poor hard hit by declining living standards.

The open market policies, which began under the UNP at the behest of the IMF and World Bank and continued Kumaratunga, have led to a widening gulf between rich and poor. While claiming that he will improve living standards, Wickremesinghe's proposals will only worsen the position of the working class and oppressed masses. The UNP is planning to create a compulsory youth corps as a means of conscripting young people as a pool of cheap labour, and a system of education vouchers, which will undermine public education.

Wickremesinghe served for 16 years in the previous UNP governments, firstly as a minister under his uncle J. R. Jayawardena, then under Ranasinghe Premadasa, and finally as prime minister under D. B. Wijetunga. These authoritarian regimes were responsible for the brutal suppression of the 1980 general strike and the sacking of over 100,000 strikers, the military occupation in the Jaffna peninsula and the burning of the Jaffna library in 1980, the 1983 pogrom against the Tamil population and the ongoing war in the North and

East.

In 1987, the UNP government signed a deal with the Indian government to bring the Indian army into the north to suppress the Tamil struggle freeing the Sri Lankan security forces to unleash a wave of terror against the restive rural population in the south. More than 50,000 rural youth in the Sinhala-speaking areas were killed between 1987 and 1990. Throughout this period Wickremesinghe remained a minister and occupied a special bungalow in the same compound in the Batalanda area in Kelaniya as the security force's torture chambers were situated.

Both the UNP and the PA coalition have shown themselves to be the loyal political servants of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie who will stop at nothing to defend its interests. If sections of big business appear to be favouring Wickremesinghe rather than Kumaratunga it is because they are losing faith in Kumaratunga's ability to implement their proposals in the face of the army's military reversals on the battlefield and widespread hostility to her government.



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