

Nominations for October 10 general election reveal decay of official politics in Sri Lanka

K. Ratnayake
5 September 2000

The shameless bartering over seats and squalid electoral deals between parties that have characterised the nominations for Sri Lanka's general election on October 10 reveal the rottenness of the entire structure of official politics. Utterly incapable of satisfying the basic needs of working people or resolving the country's ongoing civil war, parties, groups and individuals are first and foremost preoccupied with securing their own privileges and positions.

When nominations closed at noon yesterday, more than 5,000 candidates from more than 30 officially recognised parties and several dozen independent groups had been fielded for the country's 225 parliamentary seats. So rapidly did alliances shift and change in the preceding days that yesterday's "enemies" became today's friends and visa versa. Ordinary people have become nothing more than objects whose vote is to be grabbed by deception or force.

The ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) announced on the day before nominations closed that Ratnasiri Rajapaksha, a Western provincial councillor, had defected from the opposition United National Party (UNP). In the past the PA branded Ratnasiri—a close collaborator of former UNP president R. Premadasa and one time UNP Colombo mayor—as "corrupt" and "ignorant". Now it embraces him with open arms.

Another UNP MP, Sarath Kongahage, went over to the PA last Thursday and was promptly promised a seat in the parliament from the PA's national list—that is those seats allocated to parties in proportion to their national vote. He has turned his fire on his former party colleagues accusing them of what amounts to treason for their softness on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is fighting for a separate Tamil state in the north and east.

At a UNP party convention held last Sunday the opposition paraded its own electoral trophy—the PA's whip in the western provincial council, Edward Silva, who had just switched allegiances. The UNP was also able to bag five former parliamentarians from the PA's ally, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), who are engaged in a bitter fight

over control of the organisation's property.

President Kumaratunga called the election early after her failure to gain the necessary two-thirds majority for a package of constitutional reforms aimed at laying the basis for negotiations with the LTTE for an end to the war. The so-called devolution package came under fire from the UNP along with extreme right-wing and fascistic groups who are opposed to any concessions to the country's Tamil minority or a settlement with the LTTE. Since then both the PA and UNP have sought to appease these Sinhala chauvinist elements while at the same time trying to retain support among Tamil voters.

But the racist parties are themselves bitterly divided. In their attempts to piece together a coalition, they also locked horns over the distribution of seats. Key Buddhist prelates, who were central to the campaign against the constitutional changes, have been trying to form an electoral alliance of four parties—the Sihala Urumaya Party (SUP) or Sinhala Heritage Party, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), Sinhalaye Mahasammatha Bhumi Putra Party (SBPP) or Party of Sons of the Earth and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

But when a chief priest, Madihe Pannaseeha, and the MEP proposed that the JVP join the coalition, the SUP opposed the suggestions saying that the JVP was a Marxist party. The JVP, a petty bourgeois formation steeped in Sinhala chauvinism, has nothing to do with Marxism, as the SUP leaders are aware. Their concerns are that the JVP might dominate any coalition, since it has a somewhat broader base than the SUP.

The high priests of Sri Lanka's two main Buddhist sects invited SUP and SBPP leaders to their temples on August 25 to try to sort out a compromise. But the meeting quickly broke down in mutual recriminations. The SBPP representatives accused the SUP of being an agency of foreign powers because its secretary is a Catholic. The SUP promptly accused the SBPP of being agents for the UNP.

Both the Buddhist monks and the MEP have since abandoned their attempts to form such a coalition. The MEP

has since made its own separate electoral arrangement with the ruling PA. For its part the JVP is exploiting its chauvinist campaign against the devolution package for all it is worth. JVP propaganda secretary Wimal Weeravansa recently told a journalist that he thought the party would be the deciding factor in the next parliament, using its numbers to determine which of the major parties will govern.

The opportunists of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP)—a grouping of left-talking trade union bureaucrats and aspiring parliamentarians—has until recently been in a political alliance with the JVP, promoting it among workers as “progressive” and even “socialist”. The JVP's open turn to extreme rightwing and fascistic groups has left the NSSP flatfooted. NSSP leader Vikramabahu Karunaratne lamely explained that his party was unable to form an electoral front because the elections were called too suddenly.

The NSSP is part of the New Left Front with a Muslim communalist party called the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF). But there are obvious tensions in the coalition. In one electoral district—Kaltara—the NSSP and the MULF will campaign together. But the NSSP will stand in Colombo against its ally, and in another four districts it will support another group against the MULF. The MULF has decided to contest Jaffna—a decision that the NSSP opposes out of deference to the LTTE.

The cynical wrangling over seats and opportunist manoeuvring have compounded the already broad dissatisfaction and disgust felt by masses of ordinary people towards the established parties and their empty electoral promises. All of them bear responsibility for the social disaster created by the protracted war, the destruction of basic democratic rights and the growth of ethnic hatred and communalism.

Concerns have already been aired within ruling circles over the implications of this widespread alienation. An article entitled “Political somersaults and the voter” in last weekend's *Sunday Times* commented: “So, the scramble for nominations is on to try and become members of what the editorialist of this newspaper referred to last week as the ‘New Aristocracy’. This aristocracy of the new millennium is an elite class of people with power, privileges in the form of vehicle permits, telephones, meals, and overseas trips all paid for or subsidised by the state and of course, the unspoken potential to make quite a few millions on the sly, with a lifelong pension thrown in for good measure!”

The only party which has an unblemished record of opposition to the war, to all forms of racism and nationalism and to the anti-working class policies of both the PA and previous UNP regimes, is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The SEP has filed its nominations for a

slate of 23 candidates for the Colombo district headed by the party's General Secretary Wije Dias.

The SEP announced its campaign at a media conference in Colombo last Tuesday. General Secretary Dias indicted the government and opposition parties for the country's disastrous war and the attacks of successive governments on living standards, jobs and essential public services such as education and health care. He explained that the Peoples Alliance had come to power in 1994 promising to put a “human face” on the market economy but instead had increased the burden on the working class in order to pay for the expansion of the military offensive against the Tamil population in the north and east.

He called for an end to all discrimination on the basis of race and religion and the unification of Tamil and Sinhala workers for the socialist reconstruction of society on the basis of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam. “You can see discrimination continues even when you pass the military checkpoints. If you are a Tamil you are looked at differently. Discrimination still exists on language, religion, and culture and most glaringly on the citizenship rights of Tamil speaking plantation workers. That has been now extended through this war and the war must be ended. Sri Lankan forces have to be withdrawn from the north and east.”

The press conference was attended by journalists from major Tamil and English language dailies as well as the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). The two Tamil newspapers—*Veerakesari* and *Thinakkural*—as well as the SLBC published reports based on Dias' remarks.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact