

Split in Sri Lanka's Sinhala extremists signals emergence of a fascist organisation

G. Senaratne, Deepal Jayasekera
4 December 2000

In the aftermath of the Sri Lankan general elections in October, a bitter faction fight opened up in the extreme rightwing grouping, Sinhala Urumaya (SU) or Sinhala Heritage, over who was going to take the single parliamentary seat that the party had won in the poll. The dispute, which led to the resignation of party president S.L. Gunasekera and seven other SU central committee members, heralds the transformation of the party into an openly fascist organisation.

During the elections, the party, which was only formed in April, ran a racist campaign, claiming to stand for the rights of the majority Sinhalese and insisting that the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) be intensified. It claimed that both the ruling Peoples Alliance and the opposition United National Party were “betraying the Sinhalese nation”.

Although the SU failed to win a seat on a district basis, under the Sri Lankan polling system, it obtained one seat from the national list because of its island-wide vote—127,863 or 1.47 percent.

On October 12, the SU central committee voted, reportedly unanimously, to nominate party president Gunasekera for the seat. But the decision soon provoked opposition from the party's national organiser Champika Ranawaka, backed by his National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT)—one of the SU's founding organisations—and a layer of the Buddhist clergy. They demanded Ranawaka be given the seat.

Not content to let the matter rest, Ranawaka and a gang of his thugs visited members of the SU central committee to try to intimidate them into changing their vote. Professor A.V.D. de S. Indraratna, who had proposed Gunasekera's name for the seat, was manhandled and his wife harassed. The NMAT, which has close connections with the army and police, is notorious for its physical attacks and provocations against Tamils.

When the SU central committee reconvened on October 16, Ranawaka and his supporters launched a blistering personal attack on Gunasekera, blaming him for the party's poor performance in the elections. The SU's only significant votes came from sections of the middle class in Colombo and nearby urban districts. The party failed to make any inroads into the support in the southern rural areas for the Sinhala extremist

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which affects a more radical, anti-capitalist rhetoric.

Ranawaka accused Gunasekera of being an agnostic, of consuming liquor, and of speaking and preparing statements in English. Among Sinhala extremists, such allegations—the renunciation of Buddhism, its precepts of abstinence, and the native Sinhalese language—amount to charges of treason.

Gunasekera announced his resignation and stormed out of the meeting along with seven supporters. So as not to appear too blatant, what was left of the leadership decided to allocate the parliamentary seat “democratically” on a rotational basis: first to party secretary Thilak Karunaratne and then in turn to another two central committee members. Of course, Ranawaka, who orchestrated the inner party putsch, was one of the two.

The same evening Gunasekera held a media conference and denounced Ranawaka and his faction for open thuggery. In an interview given to the *Sunday Times*, Gunasekera described his opponents as fundamentalist and intolerant like “Talibans”—the ruling Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan. His supporter Indraratna declared that the situation had been created by the “terrorist movement in the party”.

At a press conference on October 17, Ranawaka dismissed allegations of thuggery, declaring that the intimidation was simply “genuine agitation by party members,” and claimed he had the support of the Maha Sangha (the Buddhist hierarchy). Another SU leader Athuraliye Rathana, a Buddhist monk, told the press that “a leader of a Sinhala party must be a Sinhala Buddhist”. Gunasekera, he said, was a former Catholic who now called himself an atheist. Party secretary Karunaratne justified the decision to replace Gunasekera as the party's parliamentarian by saying that the SU had to heed the Maha Sangha, and also businessmen who had heavily contributed to the party's election fund.

Gunasekera is certainly no political innocent. As part of the Sinhala extremist milieu, he knew the record of thuggery and violence of the NMAT and the other fascist groups that came together to form the SU. A well-known lawyer, Gunasekera and those who supported him—professionals, university dons and retired military officers—are a part of the Sri Lankan political establishment that is thoroughly imbued with Sinhala chauvinism. They were seeking a more “moderate” image,

keeping the party open to non-Buddhists and to the minority communities.

The Ranawaka faction, backed by the Buddhist clergy, represents a more overtly fascistic layer, comprising gangster elements drawn from students, younger small-scale businessmen in Colombo and Buddhist monks, and a handful of army men.

Ranawaka commented during the election that the movement would treat Tamils in the way that Hitler treated the Jewish masses. The comment is not a mistaken slip of the tongue. One of the underlying themes of Sinhala chauvinism is the superiority of the “Aryan” Sinhalese over the southern Indian Dravidians or Tamils. In the 1930s, leading figures in the Sinhala Buddhist movement were open admirers of the Aryan supremacist philosophy of the German Nazis and their policies.

Ranawaka was a JVP student leader in the late 1980s when the JVP carried out murderous attacks on the working class and its organisations. He has repeatedly called for the formation of what amounts to fascist shock troops. “All the nationalist movements so far have moved only their heads. We are building a movement (with people) who are ready to flex their muscles.”

His writings provide the justification for the ethnic cleansing of Tamils. His book entitled “Koti Vinivideema” or “Penetration of the Tigers [LTTE]” stated that Colombo and its suburbs have been “invaded” by Tamils. A NMAT pamphlet, “National plan against terrorism,” called for the mobilisation of the country’s entire resources for the war against the LTTE and demanded tougher repressive measures against Tamils. It called for a list to be drawn up of all Tamils who have migrated to Colombo since 1987 and for them to be issued with separate identity cards.

The SU was formed from three well-known Sinhala extremist organizations—the NMAT, the Jathika Sangha Sabha (JSS) or National Buddhist Monks Council, and the Sinhala Veera Vidahana (SVV) or Sinhala Heroes Forum. It was the first time that an organisation of the Buddhist clergy had openly participated in the establishment of a political party.

The NMAT was founded in early 1998 and has a record of provocative attacks on Tamil-speaking plantation workers in the central hill districts of Sri Lanka. In 1998, the NMAT along with the SVV tried to disrupt the May Day rally of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), a plantation workers union. In December of the same year, NMAT thugs attacked a public meeting at the Colombo Public Library Auditorium organised by the “Peace Alliance,” an organisation pushing for a negotiated end to the war.

The JSS is led by a prominent monk, Maduluwawe Sobhitha, who although not formally a member of Sinhala Urumaya has a powerful say within its leadership. The JSS has nine members or candidate members on the SU’s central committee. Prior to the election, the JSS and the top Buddhist prelates in Kandy tried to broaden the reach of the SU by forming an alliance of

all chauvinist parties including the JVP and Sinhala Mahasammatha Bhumi Putra Pakshaya (SMBP) or Sinhala’s Sons of the Soil Party, but the attempt fell apart.

The SVV is an extremist organization of Sinhala businessmen, which has worked closely and actively with NMAT in provocative actions against Tamils, particularly plantation workers.

All these organisations are based on vile Sinhala chauvinism. During the election, the SU preached that the Sinhala nation was “threatened,” “helpless” and “divided” under the major parties. The party pledged to build a Sinhala state that would consult with the Maha Sangha or Buddhist establishment on all national, religious and social issues.

The SU party called for “a national economic system based upon agriculture utilising the tanks [man-made lakes] irrigation system making food security the foremost objective”. The language is not only aimed at appealing to farmers but harks back to the rule of the Sinhala kings, centuries ago, and their agricultural economy based on tanks and irrigation.

The SU election manifesto also made a direct chauvinist appeal to Sinhala businessmen, declaring the party would take “immediate measures to enable Sinhala people, the heirs of this country, also to have the ownership in import and wholesale trade.” At present a considerable share of the country’s import and wholesale trade is in the hands of Tamil and Muslim businessmen.

Despite its appeals to economic nationalism, the SU was also cautious not to alienate foreign investors. “We do not see multinational companies and foreign investors as devils,” party secretary Karunaratne told *Aratuwa*, a Sinhala business newspaper. “Within this globalisation, [we] are working confidently with the private sector, and accept the necessity of foreign investment. Although we have accepted that the public sector and private sector should function at the same level in the economy, we are not of the opinion that the public sector must control industry and business...”

The SU also targeted plantation workers and foreshadowed open attacks on their wages and conditions. “Today the tea industry has declined because of wages, lands, houses and other facilities that have been denied to local Sinhala people living in plantation areas, and subjected to threats by trade unions of Indian plantation workers ignoring the world trade prices and productivity.”

The split in the SU and the dominance of the Ranawaka faction signals a further turn to the right.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact