

LSSP acts as chief apologist for Sri Lankan president's autocratic moves

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In the current political crisis in Sri Lanka, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which in the 1940s and 1950s fought for the perspective of Trotskyism, has stepped forward as one of the main champions of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, her suspension of parliament and her other anti-democratic measures. In doing so, the LSSP leaders have justified their stance in openly chauvinist terms, insisting that such actions were necessary because of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In 1964, the LSSP openly abandoned the principles of socialist internationalism by entering a bourgeois government headed by Kumaratunga's mother, Sirima Bandaranaike and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Today, the LSSP is nothing more than a parliamentary rump that cynically exploits its socialist past and what remains of its support among workers to prop up the SLFP-led People's Alliance (PA) government. The latest political events demonstrate that there is no line that the LSSP leaders will not cross.

On July 10, confronted with the loss of her government's parliamentary majority and an imminent no-confidence motion from the opposition United National Party (UNP), Kumaratunga announced that she was suspending parliament for two months and calling a referendum to get approval for unspecified constitutional changes. She prorogued parliament just days after using her executive powers to significantly bolster the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and Public Security Ordinance (PSO).

Far from in any way opposing these authoritarian measures, LSSP leader Batty Weerakoon, who is also Justice Minister, has become one of Kumaratunga's chief political apologists. Kumaratunga, who obviously regards Weerakoon as a trusted lieutenant, has appointed him to a five-member team of leading ministers established to promote the government's stand.

The minister appeared on state-owned television channel Rupavahini on July 13, shortly after Kumaratunga's announcement. In an extraordinary feat of logic, Weerakoon argued that the suspension of parliament was actually the prelude to a democratic leap forward. The referendum, he claimed, would result in the creation of a "genuine democratic constitution" and "a parliamentary system removing the dictatorial aspects of the executive presidency".

In making these statements, Weerakoon ignored the obvious fact that Kumaratunga's decision to prorogue parliament was a direct

exercise of "the dictatorial aspects of the executive presidency". Moreover, the referendum as proposed does not concretely outline any constitutional changes but simply asks whether people agree in general that a new constitution is needed. Rather than being a prelude to a democratic leap, Kumaratunga's move is a step towards a far more autocratic form of rule.

On a more sinister note, Weerakoon also argued that changes to the country's electoral laws were needed, "as the present electoral system does not reflect the opinion of the masses correctly". Senior PA leaders have argued that the current proportional representation system gives far too much weight to smaller parties, including the country's Tamil and Muslim minorities, and has to be changed.

On July 13, Weerakoon presided over a public meeting of PA-affiliated trade unions in Colombo called to campaign in support of Kumaratunga's actions. He attacked the conservative UNP, from the right, accusing it of taking bribes from the LTTE. "[Opposition Leader] Ranil [Wickremesinghe] has now realised that he cannot shake the President with his trump cards. He is trying alternative ways to do so. They are trying to buy over the MPs. They receive LTTE funds for this purpose."

In Sri Lanka, where successive PA and UNP governments have prosecuted the brutal war against the LTTE for 18 years, Weerakoon's words serve only one purpose—to whip up chauvinist sentiment by accusing the UNP of betraying the war effort. Weerakoon's remarks are completely in line with his strident attacks on opposition parties just a week before for failing to support the continuation of the country's state of emergency.

The extensive emergency powers, which have been in force for most of the war and require monthly renewal by parliament, have been routinely rubberstamped by most parties. But in June, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sihala Urumaya (SU)—both Sinhala extremist organisations—voted against the emergency motion, arguing that such measures were necessary in the north and east to prosecute the war against the LTTE but were being used in the south to harass government opponents. The UNP threatened to do the same when the matter came up for a vote on July 6.

An editorial in the LSSP organ, *Samasamajaya*, on June 14 castigated the SU and JVP—parties that advocate the intensification of the war—for threatening the military effort. "Without the Emergency even the ban on the LTTE would be rendered ineffective... The JVP's vote in parliament was opposed to the

Emergency, essential both to carry on the war and continue the ban on the LTTE... If the line of the SU is to carry on the war relentlessly and militarily defeat the LTTE... how could the SU justify its vote in parliament against the Emergency?"

Following the threat that other parties would vote against the emergency motion, Weerakoon appeared on national television and laid down what would be the government's line in its campaign against the opposition— voting against the state of emergency would have "definitely resulted in lifting the ban on the LTTE". In chauvinist terms, the opposition parties would be guilty of helping the enemy.

In the past, the LSSP opposed the influence of the imperialist powers on Sri Lanka. But in a joint statement on June 25 with the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL)—another participant in the PA government—the LSSP argued the opposite: that it was necessary to maintain the ban on the LTTE to keep on side with the major powers. "In a situation where the LTTE has been proscribed or otherwise restricted in countries like the USA and the UK and so on, it is not open for the Sri Lankan government to lift the proscription of the LTTE," they stated.

After Kumaratunga sidestepped parliament on July 3 and used her executive powers to strengthen existing repressive laws, impose them throughout the island and ban the LTTE, the LSSP congratulated the president for having defeated "the conspiracy of the UNP".

On the same day, the LSSP and CPSL issued a joint statement responding to calls by sections of big business for a government of national unity between the PA and UNP. Previously the LSSP has called for a common stand by all parties against the LTTE. As recently as June 25 the party urged "a common bipartisan approach by the PA and the UNP" in order to "generate further pressure on the LTTE to soften its position" and to come to talks with the government.

But the LSSP reacted to the proposal for a national government with distinct nervousness, saying that it would only be possible if "the government and the opposition decide to act together in a national emergency like a war." It continued: "If the war situation in this country is the occasion for the establishment of a national government, the people are entitled to know as to whether the UNP agrees to the PA's, especially its SLFP portion's, positions in regard to the war and the means of reaching a peaceful solution."

The LSSP, of course, understands the political logic of those in the ruling class pushing for a government of national unity. Without a coalition between the two major parties, the political paralysis will continue. On the one hand, any move to talks with the LTTE will provoke protests from Sinhala chauvinist organisations such as the JVP and US; on the other, the stepping up of the war will lead to opposition from Tamil parties. At the same time, big business is demanding the government implement the IMF's restructuring program as a means of boosting investment and halting the country's economic slide.

After decades as a loyal partner to the SLFP, the LSSP has no qualms about carrying out the dictates of the bourgeoisie. But to enter directly into a coalition with the UNP undermines the opportunist rationale that the LSSP used to justify its entry into the

Bandaranaike government in 1964—that the SLFP represents the "lesser evil" as compared to the UNP, the traditional party of the Sri Lankan ruling class.

In their statement of July 3, the LSSP and CPSL spelt out their objection to any coalition with the UNP, saying it would "radically change its (the PA government's) centre-left character. So both parties reject the very idea of any government in which the UNP, with its blood soaked hands, would be a part."

While the LSSP and CPSL leaders are clearly concerned that an alliance with the UNP will expose too openly their own opportunist politics, their opposition also underscores a more fundamental issue for the ruling class. If the LSSP and CPSL join a grand coalition of bourgeois parties, then who will act as a lightning rod to prevent the inevitable popular discontent that will emerge to such a government taking a revolutionary direction?

Just how far the LSSP has degenerated can be seen by contrasting its present actions with the stand it took four decades ago. In 1958, the party called an island-wide strike of workers to oppose the decision by the prime minister of the day, Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, Kumaratunga's father, to amend the public security act to enable the imposition of a state of emergency. The LSSP leaders rejected Bandaranaike's justification that the amendments were aimed against Sinhala extremists, which he had played a major role in whipping up, and warned that the emergency powers were fundamentally aimed at buttressing the capitalist state against the working class.

Today, the LSSP functions under conditions of intense political crisis as a loyal defender of the capitalist state, supporting the imposition of anti-democratic measures that will inevitably be used against the working class. The decline of its support in the working class is graphically shown by the fact that its only MP, Batty Weerakoon, gained his seat not by the votes of workers but through the goodwill of Kumaratunga, who selected him as one of the PA's appointees from the national list in the last election. He has responded in kind by demonstrating his craven support for Kumaratunga, the SLFP and its policies.

Having openly abandoned its socialist principles in 1964 and politically prostituted itself to every requirement of the thoroughly venal Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, the LSSP leaders are now offering their services as apologists for the autocratic forms of government that are emerging from the present political turmoil.



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