

# A revealing line-up of radical organisations in Sri Lanka's political crisis

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The current political crisis in Sri Lanka provides a particularly graphic example of the vital function played by various radical groups and organisations—often describing themselves to be “left,” or socialist, or even Trotskyist—in propping up bourgeois rule.

The Peoples Alliance (PA) government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga is hanging by a thread. When it lost its majority, Kumaratunga suspended parliament on July 11 for two months in order to avoid a no-confidence motion and then unleashed the police against opposition protests, killing two people. She has only recently postponed a vague referendum on constitutional change that marks a step toward extra-parliamentary forms of rule.

The rightwing opposition United National Party (UNP) is discredited as a result of its own record in power prior to 1994. UNP leaders have been denouncing the government for its anti-democratic methods and preparing to bring down the government when parliament reconvenes on September 7. These born-again democrats would rather forget, however, their own history of political thuggery and election rigging. Indeed, former UNP president Premadasa set the precedent for Kumaratunga when in 1991 he prorogued parliament in order avoid an impeachment motion.

The political volatility is the symptom of deeper political problems—the failure of either the PA or UNP to end the country’s long-running civil war, to halt the worsening economic slide or to address in any way the widening gulf between rich and poor. What is required is that the working class break from these corrupt parties of the country’s tiny wealthy elites and fight for its own socialist solutions to the crisis.

But it is precisely at this point that the various radical organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and various breakaways and splinter groups—step in to promote the UNP and PA as defenders of democracy and the rights of the oppressed, and to insist that workers and the poor have no alternative but to continue to give their allegiance to these worn-out and discredited formations.

There appears to be a de-facto division of labour with groups on opposite sides of the fence, each slinging mud at the other camp while painting their own in bright democratic colours. The NSSP and its leader Vickramabahu Karunaratne have sided with Kumaratunga supporting her call for a referendum and the government’s repressive measures against its opponents. An NSSP splinter group—the Alliance for Democracy led by former NSSP leader Vasudeva Nanayakkara—and the United Socialist

Party (USP) have thrown their lot in with the conservative UNP.

When Kumaratunga suspended parliament, NSSP leader Karunaratne was one of the first to jump to her defence and hurriedly patched together an organisation called the Left-Peace Movement for that purpose. Its statement warned that the country was under threat from chauvinist forces outside and within the government. “In order to face this challenge, the president has used the power of executive presidency to prorogue the parliament and set a date for a referendum.” The statement claimed that the president’s actions had “opened the way forward to abolish the dictatorial constitution and to establish a democratic peaceful condition”.

The political logic is extraordinary. Since she first came to office, with the backing of all the “left” and radical parties, Kumaratunga has continued and intensified the war against the Tamil minority. She has demonstrated again and again her subservience to Sinhala chauvinists groups, and maintains a battery of anti-democratic security laws to deal with any opposition. Now, in order to maintain her tenuous grip on power, she has used the executive powers contained in “the dictatorial constitution” to arbitrarily suspend parliament. All of this, the NSSP hails as a move toward peace and democracy.

So obvious is the autocratic character of Kumaratunga’s measures that the NSSP had to acknowledge: “It is true that Chandrika used Bonapartist dictatorial powers.” But it quickly declared: “Is it not for crushing a racialist, militaristic national government conspiracy?” In other words, support for the dictatorial Kumaratunga is justified by denouncing the rightwing alternative. At the same time, the NSSP is calculating that it stands to gain by offering its services to Kumaratunga. “[In her] Bonapartist plunge she will be compelled to depend on the left forces,” NSSP leader Karunaratne baldly told a public meeting last month.

Not concerned in the slightest for the dangers confronting the working class, the NSSP’s “Left-Peace Movement” proceeds to put the best possible face on the president’s anti-democratic actions, offering her advice as to how to proceed. Its statement called for the convening of a constituent assembly following the referendum to discuss changes to the constitution.

The bogus character of this body is clear from its proposed composition—the present parliamentarians “from all parties of the North and the South,” the chief ministers of the provinces, trade union leaders and “reputed experts” nominated by the president. It

has nothing to do with the demand of Marxists for the convening of a constituent assembly—comprising democratically elected representatives of workers and the oppressed—to replace the present communal constitution that enshrines Buddhism as the state religion and to establish basic democratic rights.

The most telling aspect of Kumaratunga's proposed referendum was that it called for a vote on constitutional change but left completely unspecified what the amendments would be. The NSSP hailed the president's proposal as a move towards peace and democracy. In effect, however, she wanted an overwhelming vote in the referendum as a blank cheque to make whatever constitutional changes were necessary to keep her government in power. All of this was to be legitimised with a handpicked constituent assembly.

When Kumaratunga eventually dropped the plan, under pressure from big business, the NSSP bewailed the fact. A recent issue of the party's newspaper, *Haraya*, complained that the government was giving in to "reaction" and had not taken "substantial measures to suppress the oppositional force".

The NSSP's support for Kumaratunga is simply the latest in a long line of opportunist manoeuvres for which the party has never given a political accounting. In the 1994 elections, the NSSP supported the PA, claiming it would end the war and bring democracy and peace to the island. Then as the government intensified the war and its attacks on the conditions of working people, the NSSP accused the PA of seeking a "militarist solution" but at the same time linked up with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a Sinhala chauvinist organisation—proclaiming it as the main "left wing force". It has since broken with the JVP over the latter's open support for the war and returned to Kumaratunga.

Former NSSP leader, Vasudeva Nanayakkara, who leads the grouping allied to the UNP, is no different. He split with Karunaratne in 1994 in order to enter the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), one of the components of the ruling Peoples Alliance. As opposition to the government grew, Nanayakkara left the government and became one of the chief advisers to the conservative UNP-led opposition.

In the current crisis, he entered the anti-government Mass Movement for Democracy organised by the UNP, and also the Peoples Centre for the Democracy and Freedom of the Country, which has become a rallying point for Sinhala extremist organisation such as Sihala Urumaya, the Bhumiputra (Sons of the Soil) Party and chauvinist Buddhist monks such as Maduluwawe Sobitha.

While Nanayakkara railed against the obvious anti-democratic practices of Kumaratunga, he clearly had a tougher time explaining why he was supporting rightwing and openly chauvinist parties. In a newspaper interview he insisted that it did not matter what the UNP's political program was. "One must not take into account whether UNP has a different agenda in opposing the referendum. The only necessary condition is that they fight the threat of dictatorship," he said.

Going one-step further in a TV speech about the referendum, he declared: "Like wild animals that drink water from the same waterhole in times of drought we should forget all past animosities

and unite to fight dictatorship of the President." He forgot to explain in his little rural parable, however, what happened to the deer after it dropped its past animosities and drank with the tiger.

As the history of the last half century in Sri Lanka demonstrates, the UNP is every bit as viciously anti-working class as the present government. The party is directly responsible for the "dictatorial constitution" under which Kumaratunga suspended parliament, for the anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 that precipitated the war, and for the reign of terror in the south between 1988-1990, during which 60,000 people were killed or "disappeared".

None of this concerned the United Socialist Party (USP), another NSSP splinter group led by S. Jayasuriya, which also joined the UNP's "People Power" campaign for democracy. Having proclaimed Kumaratunga's decision to drop the referendum a great victory, the USP went on to lament the fact that the UNP was in discussions with the PA over the formation of a government of national unity. The USP was at a loss to explain, however, why, after playing such a major role in fighting "a dictatorship," the UNP should now been involved in "a great conspiracy" with the PA.

Powerful sections of big business are now demanding that the PA and UNP form a unity government in order to end the present political crisis. Far from there being any fundamental differences between these two bourgeois parties, they are now engaged in talks over a joint administration to implement the agenda being demanded by the ruling class, including a sweeping IMF-restructuring program that will destroy tens of thousands of jobs and further erode living standards.

Numerically, the NSSP and other radical organisations are small and their opportunist twists and turns have largely discredited them in the eyes of the masses. So it is a measure of the depth of the current political crisis that these organisations have featured prominently. On the one hand, the NSSP leader has been widely covered in the state-run electronic media and in the headlines of the state-owned newspapers. On the other, the UNP-led opposition has given Vasudeva Nanayakkara pride of place on its platforms, second only to UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe himself.

The importance attached to these radical organisations reflects the concern in ruling circles that the political feuding between the PA and UNP could result in the emergence of opposition from the working class and the urban and rural poor. The role of these groups is to block the emergence of an independent movement of the working class that would threaten bourgeois rule, and above all to prevent the program of the Socialist Equality Party from gaining ground among more thoughtful workers, students and intellectuals.



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