SEP campaigners speak to voters in Sri Lankan election

A correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has been conducting a vigorous house-to-house campaign in different areas of Colombo for its slate of 24 candidates in the Sri Lankan elections on December 5. The campaign teams have received a warm response from voters, who are deeply disgusted by the two major parties—the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and opposition United National Party (UNP).

The official campaign has been dominated by chauvinism, lies and violence. The PA has pandered to racist sentiment by accusing the opposition of organising a secret deal with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to "betray the country". The UNP has hit back with accusations of government corruption and inefficiency. The thugs of both parties have physically harassed and intimidated their political opponents. As of last weekend, the police reported a total of 1,250 "poll-related incidents" with two more "politically motivated murders" last Saturday alone.

In such a political climate, SEP campaigners have found many voters welcoming the opportunity to discuss the underlying issues. There has been considerable interest in what is taking place in Afghanistan, in the SEP's program to end Sri Lanka's own long-running civil war and the party's analysis of the political crisis that led to the calling of new elections, just a year after the last.

At Colombo University, a number of students we spoke to expressed their concerns about the implications of the US-led war in Afghanistan. They readily agreed that it was an attempt by the US to dominate that country for its own economic and strategic interests.

A prominent journalist D.N.S. Mayadunne told us: "You are the only ones who speak about the Afghan war. I am a person associated with the media. I oppose this war against Afghanistan, but have only now come to know of the real aims of America through this discussion. I think you have an alternative against these two parties. I am happy about such an idea."

Many people—workers, housewives and students—wanted an end to the 18-year civil war against the LTTE and spoke of the disastrous conditions it had created. Most were sceptical about both parties. In 1994, the PA came to power promising to halt the war, but only escalated it. Now the UNP is pledged to negotiate with the LTTE.

One Sinhala housewife from Nugegoda on the outskirts of Colombo said: "We will not vote for any of these parties this time. They tell utter lies. They say something during election time but do something else when they come to power. We need to end this disastrous war. My neighbours say the same thing."

A mother of two, whose son is at the war front, commented: "Our aspiration is to live without war. Our sons have gone to the front because they don't have any other job. Whoever comes to power, our situation remains the same. I sew to support my family, as my husband's salary is not enough to live on. He is a lorry driver earning only 250 rupees (less than $US3) a day."

A soldier on leave said: "I am serving in the war zone. This war will not bring any good for ordinary people like us. Although our soldiers and Prabhakaran's [LTTE leader] soldiers are killed in this war, neither our government nor Tiger [LTTE] leaders are concerned. We had to join the war because we were unable to find jobs. Most of the soldiers are fighting the war because they can't avoid it. We are fed up with this job."

At Kotahena in the north of Colombo, where Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese live alongside one another, residents have been subjected to a barrage of chauvinist propaganda. A number of people expressed their appreciation for the SEP's opposition to all forms of racism and were keen to discuss the party's attitude to the war.

One person explained the police repression and fear

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faced by Tamils. “How long have we waited to see an end to this war and to live in peace? We live in fear. When bombs explode in the city our problems only get worse. We are afraid to go through checkpoints. When one of us is taken into custody, even without any reason, it is not easy to get them released.”

Another described the difficult situation he faces trying to maintain a family of eight on just 4,500 rupees (about $US50) a month. “My sisters are also working at a factory for a meagre wage to support me. See our house, it is only 20 by 12 feet. There are about 18 houses here like mine. We have one common lavatory and only one pipe for water. To go to the toilet or to collect water we have to wait in a queue.”

The SEP met a number of former members of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in the course of the campaign. The LSSP, which abandoned its Trotskyist principles and in 1964 joined the capitalist government of Mrs Bandaranaike, once had a powerful following in the working class. Those we spoke to recalled their past experiences and expressed their disgust at the LSSP’s embrace of communal politics.

A propaganda van for the fascistic Sihala Urumaya party was blaring out chauvinist pro-war songs when we were talking to one 65-year-old LSSP member. “When I hear these things I feel very saddened. In the past, in 1959, we, along with Wilfred Senanayaka (LSSP area leader), hoisted flags against the Sinhala communalists.” He recalled that the LSSP had campaigned for equal status for the Tamil and Sinhala languages against the communalist “Sinhala Only” policy of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the party with whichthe LSSP currently shares government.

A housewife told us: “We are LSSPers. My husband worked at the Colombo port. We are against communalism. My husband said they did not allow communalists to utter a word in those days. He says everything finished when NM (LSSP leader N M Perera) joined hands with Madam Bandaranaike. Yours is a good program.”

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