

Sri Lankan SEP replies to an appeal from ruling UNF

Wije Dias
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In the exchange below, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) General Secretary Wije Dias replies to an appeal emailed to the World Socialist Web Site by Milinda Moragoda, a leading candidate for the right-wing United National Front (UNF) in the April 2 Sri Lankan elections. Moragoda, a prominent banker, was Minister for Economic Reform, Science and Technology in the UNF government and part of its delegation to talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Dias heads the SEP's slate of candidates standing in the Colombo district and is a member of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site.

Dear Friends,

Today we face an unwanted election. One that has come about more because of the pursuit for power than the needs of the people. Two years ago I came in to politics to try to help change the culture of the political system, but if anything the situation appears to be worse rather than better.

In those two years when the Prime Minister brought us a ceasefire with a real chance of a lasting peace and the first signs of economic recovery that was about to reap the benefits.

Then the old fashioned politics took over and the pursuit of power occurred once more.

I believe that the people of Sri Lanka want a change to that system. That you want the politician to be the servant of the people and that you want to see moderation come into politics.

We have a long hard fight ahead of us. Only you can make it happen. You can vote for moderation or you can let the extremists win wherever they are.

In this watershed election I hope you will vote for moderation and support the Prime Minister in the work that he had only just begun.

Milinda Moragoda,

UNF Candidate for Colombo District, Sri Lanka

General Election 2004

Dear Mr Moragoda,

This is to acknowledge the receipt of your e-mail to the WWS.

In sending us this communication you seem to be labouring under the illusion that the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka is cut from the same cloth as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which is collaborating with the UNF in the election, and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) that is in collaboration with the Peoples Alliance (PA) of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The SEP has developed through an implacable struggle against both these parties and the opportunist politics that they practise. Accordingly, your salutation is entirely misplaced. We are not friends of you, or your party.

Having said that, we do welcome your email, for it gives us the opportunity to make clear the responsibility of both you and your party, the United National Front (UNF), as well as the Peoples Alliance (PA), for the tragic situation that confronts the Sri Lankan masses.

For 56 years, since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has been ruled by the two main bourgeois parties—the United National Party (UNP), the

leading party in the UNF, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which leads the PA, joined by other parties, most notably the LSSP at various times. They are directly responsible for the war and its consequences.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite consciously promoted Sinhala racism from the very beginning. It sought to divide the working class on ethnic lines in order to carry out the program that benefited only the wealthy few. This was made necessary by the fact that the working class had appeared on the scene—in plantations and in trade and industries controlled by the British colonial investors—well before the emergence of the local bourgeoisie. These national capitalists' mortal fear of the working class led them to indulge in ethnically divisive communal politics, calling for support from the archaic Buddhist establishment.

The discrimination against Tamils, which began with the abolition of citizenship rights of the plantation workers of Indian origin, was extended to the local Tamil population with the establishment of "Sinhala only" as the official language in 1956. It was not accidental that this reactionary Sinhala supremacist policy was adopted by both main capitalist parties after the Hartal struggle (a general strike of workers joined by a rural uprising) of 1953, where Sinhala and Tamil workers jointly brought the UNP regime to the verge of collapse.

Carrying forward this discrimination against minority communities, Buddhism was made the state religion through the first Republican constitution in 1972. It was this Sinhala-Buddhist racist policy, shared by both capitalist parties, that J.R. Jayawardene, as the leader of the UNP—the party to which you and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe belong—developed into a civil war against Tamils in 1983.

The anti-Tamil civil war, which was seen as a means to suppress the struggles of the workers and the rural masses against the implementation of the "open market" economic policies dictated by the IMF and the World Bank, had a logic of its own. The 20-year war not only strengthened the Sinhala chauvinist elements, including the Buddhist establishment, but also created a layer in the state apparatus and the military whose social status and wealth were increasingly bound up with its continuation.

Two extreme Sinhala chauvinist political forces have profited from these developments. One is the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has now formed an alliance with the SLFP led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, and the other is the Sihala Urumaya, which has launched 260 Buddhist monks as candidates at this election.

No doubt, these two communist parties gathered strength from the acts that President Kumaratunga initiated to undermine the ceasefire agreement which the UNF government signed with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the peace talks that followed. The JVP, which wanted an alliance with the SLFP, supported the anti-democratic actions of Kumaratunga, calling on her to dissolve the parliament by arbitrarily using her executive powers. Kumaratunga has heeded their demand and has registered the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), with the JVP, to contest the coming election.

It is obvious that Kumaratunga has utilised the rabid Sinhala chauvinist forces to shore up her sagging political stature. But the UNF government did not confront the political threat raised by these forces because your party is just as entwined with the Sinhala racists, who are embedded in its support base.

It is public knowledge that in 2000 your party joined with the JVP to scuttle the constitutional reform package offered by Kumaratunga as part of a program to end the war. During the election that resulted from the crisis, it was the UNP that beat the war drums. However it was defeated. One year later, when the Bush administration launched its war against Afghanistan, the first target in the so-called global war against terrorism, the UNP decided to toe the line being dictated from Washington. Accordingly, it opted to try to end the war and play its part in serving the strategic interests of US imperialism in the region. Big business and financial interests, with which you are closely associated, were also demanding “peace”.

It was under these conditions that Kumaratunga’s Peoples Alliance government was brought down, through a parliamentary coup organised by big business with the tacit support of the major powers. Several key ministers crossed over and joined the UNP, forcing Kumaratunga to dissolve the parliament within a year and call the general election in December 2001 that brought the UNF, formed under the leadership of the UNP, to power.

The UNP’s decision to end the war did not arise either out of any concern for the democratic rights of the Tamils. Nor was it intended that the masses should reap the benefits of peace, as you imply. It was merely a tactical step to remove an obstacle that stood in the way of the profit needs of the international investors who were eyeing the exploitation of cheap labour and natural resources in the island and the South Asian region.

In your letter you speak of an economic recovery and a peace, brought about by the government of Ranil Wickremesinghe, “that was about to reap the benefits”.

The following few figures show where the so-called benefits of peace have gone. While the defence budget continued to increase during 2001-2, due to the procurement of new high-tech weapons and new recruitment to the military, spending on social services was severely curtailed.

The budgetary allocation for free education was cut from 2.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to 2.3 percent in 2002. This has resulted in the closing down of more than 400 schools in rural areas. The allocated money for the free health service also came down from 1.7 percent to 1.5 percent of GDP during the same year. It now costs more than a day’s wage of a worker to see a doctor and get a prescription.

The poor farmers are made to pay three times the previous amount for fertiliser because of the removal of the government subsidy. These are just some of the attacks waged against the working population by the UNF government under the cover of peace and “benefits about to be reaped”. What a sham!

On the other hand, the UNF government has fattened the wealthy few it really represents, as the profits of a few local big business conglomerates joined with international investors reveal.

One of the largest groups of companies in Sri Lanka, Hayleys Ltd, recorded a 605.3 million-rupee after-tax profit for the first three quarters of last year. Out of that, the wealthy shareholders are to receive 367 million rupees between them.

Another industrial cum banking group, Seylan Bank Group, netted a 1,026 billion-rupee post-tax profit for the year 2003. According to the director general of Ajitha Pasqual, the Seylan’s parent company, the share of Seylan Bank was 699 million rupees.

The DFCC bank increased its profits by 16 percent during the first nine months of last year compared to the same period the previous year.

The Hatton National Bank posted a pre-tax profit of 1,092 million

rupees and post-tax profit of 1,008 million rupees last year.

In order not to make this reply too long, we will refrain from listing many other companies that have amassed similar profits. This is how the wealthy few have been “reaping the benefits of the peace” over the past two years under the rule of your party while working people are languishing in dire poverty.

And what are the social consequences? Sri Lanka has acquired an infamous name—the suicide capital of the world—after reaching the highest rate of suicides in the last year.

The peace process, which has dragged on for nearly two years, did not even result in the elementary step of allowing the displaced Tamil people to return to their former lands and homes. The UNF government refused to withdraw the military from the high security zones that have fenced off more than one third of the land mass of the Jaffna peninsula and evicted the legitimate land owners.

Moreover, the schemes that your government drew up for an interim administration to be established in the north and east were thoroughly anti-democratic and communally divisive. The unelected body proposed by the UNF was to comprise Sinhala, Muslim and LTTE nominees, the latter having a majority. This is not a plan to solve the ethnic problem but a scheme to increase communal tensions, leading to intensified fratricidal conflicts which could then be used for further deployment of the Sri Lankan military.

As a leading member of the UNF cabinet, dealing with the “peace process” and “economic reforms,” you have played a key role in all the government’s decisions, second only to the prime minister. Now you maintain that you came into politics two years ago “to try to help change the political culture of the political system” and claim that a vote for you and your party is a “vote for moderation”.

Another sham! It is public knowledge that you have acted as a broker on behalf of the UNF government to institutionalise close political and military relations with the administration in Washington, through several meetings, particularly with the US deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage. You have also worked, again acting on orders from Washington, to coordinate the policies of the UNF and president Kumaratunga to pave the way for the implementation of the “Regaining Sri Lanka” program that the UNF formulated in line with the dictates of the IMF.

The whole economic program of the UNF, likewise that of the newly founded UPFA of Chandrika Kumaratunga, is aimed at serving the interests of finance capital by intensifying the attacks on jobs, welfare services and livelihood of all working people. As social polarisation is bound to increase, under whichever government implements this program, both capitalist parties will move to impose dictatorial measures against the working class and poor masses. The Bush administration, which the UNF boasted was giving it full support, has issued the signal for this by saying it is ready to work with any government elected after April 2.

The era of “moderate politics” is gone forever, locally and internationally.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only party that has opposed the war against the Tamils from the very beginning and campaigned for the unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the north and east. This is the prerequisite for the lasting peace you talk about but which the UNF and all other capitalist parties oppose vehemently.

While opposing all forcible attempts to retain the Sinhala-Buddhist unitary state, trampling upon the democratic rights of the oppressed minorities, we also stand against the divisive communal programs of every ethnically based group, including the LTTE.

The resolution of the belated democratic problems is intrinsically bound up with the establishment of genuine social equality. This requires the

working class, with the support of the oppressed masses, to take political power.

That, Mr Moragoda, is the only way out of the disaster which you, and the ruling elites for whom you speak, have created. Once again, thank you for your email for it has provided us with the opportunity to make this clear to all workers, youth, rural poor and intellectuals, of both the Sinhala and Tamil communities, who are seeking the way forward.

Yours sincerely,

Wije Dias,

General Secretary of the SEP (Sri Lanka).



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact