

SEP candidate in TV debate over the Sri Lankan civil war

Our correspondent
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On March 9, Socialist Equality Party candidate Priyadarshana Maddewatte took part in a live debate on the popular private television station Swarnavahini, as part of the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) campaign in the forthcoming Sri Lankan general election. The program *Kinihira* (Anvil), which discusses issues with politicians from various parties, is broadcast weekly and has a wide audience. The debate was watched by an estimated 90 percent of television viewers.

The topic of the three-hour program was how to resolve the country's civil war after the April 2 election. In addition to Maddewatte, the participants were: Bandula Gunawardana and Rajitha Senaratna, both United National Front (UNF) government ministers, Jayaraj Fernandopulle, a former Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) minister and MP; and Bimal Rathnayaka, a former Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) MP.

In his opening remarks, Maddewatte introduced the SEP. He explained that its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), was formed in 1968 on the basis of the struggle by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against the great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1964. The SEP previously published the newspaper *Kamkaru Mawatha* and now contributed to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), along with its international co-thinkers in the ICFI. He displayed a copy of the Sinhala language publication of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Maddewatte briefly outlined the international significance of the campaigns being waged by the SEP's sister parties—the American Socialist Equality Party in the US presidential elections in November and the German Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) for the European parliament. He said that the SEP's involvement in the Sri Lankan elections was very much bound up with this international campaign and the ICFI's perspective for the unity of workers around the world.

The SEP candidate said that the roots of the civil war in Sri Lanka were bound up with the communal character of the state established in 1948 under the Soulbury constitution. He quoted from Colvin R de Silva, a leader of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), who, at the time, analysed the sham nature of the so-called independence granted by the former British colonial rulers.

Maddewatte outlined the history of communal politics in Sri Lanka, saying: “In 1948 the bourgeoisie initiated its class rule by disenfranchising 1.2 million plantation workers. In 1956, the Bandaranaike government of the SLFP-led Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) made Sinhala the official language. Colvin R de Silva, whom I quoted above, fought for an independent program of the working class. But later, as an LSSP leader, he joined the coalition with the SLFP and wrote the 1972 constitution, which institutionalised communalism further by making Buddhism the state religion.”

The SEP speaker traced the political developments that led to the war and explained the role of the UNP, SLFP and JVP in continuing it. “Since the beginning of the racist war, the RCL, the SEP's forerunner, has fought for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers for the defence of the democratic rights of the oppressed Tamil people. It has campaigned for the withdrawal of government forces from the North and the East and insisted that not a single man or a single cent be given for the war. Defending the democratic rights of the Tamils and ending the war is possibly only as part of the fight for an international socialist program to establish a Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam. The international working class is the only social force that can end the war,” he declared.

The JVP representative's Bimal Ratnayaka offered no serious explanation of the origins of the conflict, simply declaring that the war emerged through the widening of “national discord”. Expressing the JVP's Sinhala chauvinism, he accused the UNF government of handing over the North and East to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE). He said that the SLFP-JVP coalition—the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)—opposed any division of the country.

UNF representative Bandula Gunawardana justified the “peace process” with the LTTE by stating that it paved the way for international economic aid and insisting it represented the only way forward. He presented a plethora of statistics about the economic failure of the previous SLFP-led government but was, of course, silent on the terrible social consequences of the UNF's own economic restructuring program for the vast majority of Sri Lankans.

SLFP MP Fernandopulle attempted to address the concerns of big business by stating that the SLFP's alliance with the JVP

did not mean a return to war. He said that a UPFA government would continue peace talks with the LTTE if it came to power. UNF MP Senaratna, however, pointed out that the UPFA did not have a unified position on the peace talks. President Kumaratunga had declared that she would honor the present ceasefire agreement, and her advisor Laksman Kardirgamar had called for unconditional talks with the LTTE. The JVP, however, did not agree with either.

During question time, the program's moderator Shan Wijetunga asked Maddewatte: "Would not the SEP's demand for an unconditional withdrawal of the armed forces from the North and East result in the LTTE's grab for power being a piece of cake?"

In answering, Maddewatte explained: "We oppose maintaining the unitary state by force. This state was created by the British imperialists. The state security forces are being used to suppress the rights of minority nationalities and communities by force. How can any party that offers a single cent or a single man for the racist war stand for the democratic rights of the oppressed Tamil people?"

"The LTTE may take power if the armed forces are withdrawn. But democratic rights will never be realised through the separatist policy of the LTTE. We hold no brief for the LTTE and its demand for a separate capitalist state of Tamil Eelam.

"The democratic rights of the oppressed Tamil people can only be assured by establishing a socialist society through the united strength of Sinhala and Tamil workers joining with the international working class. Such a unity among Tamils and Sinhalese is impossible without fighting to withdraw the Sri Lankan army that is oppressing the Tamils in the North and East."

Maddewatte also took the opportunity to explain that the JVP-SLFP's denunciations of the peace talks would again lead to war. He quoted from the book *The Politics and Class Nature of the JVP* by the late RCL general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya to explain that the JVP's radicalism and socialist rhetoric had been mixed with Sinhala chauvinism from the outset.

He went on to explain that while the SEP opposed the president's dictatorial actions in arbitrarily dismissing the government, it gave no support whatsoever to the UNF. The UNF's opposition to Kumaratunga's actions was a particularly muted one, he said, warning that the ruling elite as a whole was turning towards extra-parliamentary methods of rule.

The JVP representative Ratnayaka reacted sharply to Maddewatte's comments but, unable to deal with the political issues raised, simply branded the SEP as "a pawn of the UNF". In reply Maddewatte pointed to the JVP's long history of links with the UNP, the leading party in the UNF alliance. In the 1980s, the JVP's youth leader Champika Ranawaka had publicly acknowledged its connection to the former UNP President R. Premadasa. At the time, the JVP was carrying out vicious attacks, killing its political opponents and workers,

including three RCL members.

Maddewatte then explained the similarities between the JVP's present economic policies and those of the UNF. He cited the comments of JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe who had made an appeal for foreign investment in Sri Lanka and promised to turn the country into a cheap labour platform like India, China and Malaysia. Again, Ratnayaka avoided the issue and returned to his communalist theme—protecting the unitary capitalist state. "[Our] Alliance is fighting for a government not to build socialism. Before socialism, the country's unitary character must be defended."

Apart from the contributions of the SEP's representative, the debate between the spokesmen of the other parties was reminiscent of a family quarrel. Though the exchange became heated at times, their differences were over how best to maintain and defend the Sri Lankan state and capitalist rule. The only party that opposed them all, elaborating an independent program for the working class and oppressed masses throughout the island was the SEP.

The television program was screened from 10 p.m. to 1.30 a.m. Significantly, a number of viewers phoned the SEP's office, starting around midnight and then over the next few days, to express their appreciation for what Maddewatte had to say. Several young people explained that this was the first time they had heard about the SEP's perspective and its internationalist record over the last three decades. They expressed considerable enthusiasm about the existence of such a "genuine and candid movement" and agreed to begin reading and discussing the publications of the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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