

Danger of war at centre of Sri Lankan election campaign

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Even before the date of the Sri Lankan presidential election has been announced, the issue of war has been put at the centre of the campaign. Mahinda Rajapakse, the candidate for the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and current prime minister, signed a pact with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) last week, which unmistakably sets the course for a resumption of the island's bloody 20-year conflict.

The key clauses of the electoral agreement amount to a tearing up of the so-called peace process that began in 2002 when the United National Party (UNP)-led government signed a ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). From the outset, the JVP and other Sinhala extremist outfits denounced the talks, which finally stalled in 2003, as treasonous and sought to stir up communal antagonisms on that basis.

Under the first clause, Rajapakse agreed to abrogate the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS)—a deal signed in June to establish a temporary joint mechanism between Colombo and the LTTE to distribute aid to victims of the December 26 tsunami. When current president Chandrika Kumaratunga, also an SLFP leader, decided to proceed with P-TOMS, the JVP condemned the agreement as “a betrayal” and walked out of the coalition government.

The subsequent clauses read like a list of the JVP's demands over the last three years:

- * Clause two rejects outright the establishment of any interim self-governing authority in the North and East. After talks broke down in 2003, the LTTE made the establishment of such an authority the precondition for the resumption of negotiations.

- * Clause three reinforces the second by upholding the “unitary state structure”, thereby ruling out any regional devolution of power and thus the entire basis for peace talks to date.

- * Clause four calls for a revision of the existing ceasefire agreement. Since the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on August 12, the JVP has been at the forefront of a campaign to demand the rewriting of the truce to give greater powers to the Sri Lankan military and restrict the LTTE.

- * Clause five commits Rajapakse to ending the role of the Norwegian facilitators in negotiations. The JVP and other Sinhala chauvinist organisations have repeatedly accused Norwegian officials of “bias” towards the LTTE and organised protests demanding their removal from Sri Lankan soil.

Having signed the deal with the JVP, Rajapakse immediately declared himself “for peace” and denied he was a warmonger. In

an interview with the *Island* newspaper on Monday, he demagogically declared: “Who in his proper senses wants war? My fervent hope is that this beautiful country will be without violence for millennia to come... As a father, as a brother and a peace loving citizen of this country, I am telling you, I will never let this country be plunged into war.”

Rajapakse also announced that he was willing to meet directly with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and to “go the last mile for peace”. On the face of it, these promises are absurd. Having torn up the previous basis for talks and rejected all of the LTTE's demands, what exactly would Rajapakse have to discuss with Prabhakaran? For all his empty protestations of being a man of peace, Rajapakse has embraced a party that is agitating for war. Addressing a gathering on the day the agreement was signed, JVP leader Somavansa Amarasinghe ominously declared that his party “stands for peace but does not fear the resumption of the war”.

Rajapakse's decision to cut a deal with the JVP contains a large measure of political opportunism. The JVP has agreed to support his campaign and not stand a candidate of its own. Rajapakse is hoping to that the agreement will shore up the SLFP's dwindling base of support. By doing so, however, he has ensured that the election campaign and its aftermath will be dominated by communal extremism. He is also planning to sign a similar pact with the Sinhala chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

Rajapakse's agreement with the JVP has unleashed a storm inside the SLFP. Kumaratunga has declared the deal breaches the SLFP constitution and violates the party's policies. The president criticised in particular on the prime minister's unilateral decision to abrogate the P-TOMS agreement and to rule out any form of regional devolution. In a letter to Rajapakse leaked to the media, she declared: “Explain to the nation and myself as to what would be achieved to establish peace through your agreement.”

Kumaratunga's objections are certainly hypocritical. After the SLFP lost the 2001 general election, the president did not hesitate in joining with the JVP in denouncing the UNP coalition government for “undermining national security” by signing a ceasefire and holding talks with the LTTE. In February 2004, she signed an electoral pact with the JVP and arbitrarily dismissed the government, even though the UNP and its allies had a clear majority in parliament. After the SLFP won the general election, Kumaratunga did an abrupt about face and promised that she would restart peace talks with the LTTE. Now she is condemning Rajapakse for what she did herself—signing a deal with the JVP.

Kumaratunga's twists and turns might appear to be the antics of a lunatic. Yet there is a logic to her actions that is rooted in the inability of any section of the ruling class to end the civil war. Like the UNP, the SLFP is rooted in the anti-Tamil chauvinism that the ruling class has been exploited ever since independence in 1948 to divide working people on communal lines and to create a social base for its rule.

As prime minister from 1956 to 1959, Kumaratunga's father, Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike, was responsible for the "Sinhala only" policy that directly discriminated against Tamil speakers. Kumaratunga's mother Siramavo Bandaranaike presided over the government that imposed a communal constitution in 1972, which made Buddhism the state religion and enacted other discriminatory measures against Tamils. The same racist policies continued by the UNP under J.R. Jayawardene led to the 1983 pogroms and civil war.

The development of globally organised production in the last two decades has, however, undermined the nationally regulated economic policies on which the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie previously rested. Dominant sections of the corporate elite in Colombo now regard the war as an intolerable financial drain and a barrier to its plans to attract investment and integrate the island into global production processes. The so-called peace process backed by the major powers is the means to achieve these ambitions.

The UNP, which waged the war from 1983 until 1994, and its candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe are now posturing as the champions of peace. But like the war, this "peace" is not being pursued to alleviate the suffering of working people but to further the interests of the business elite. The supporters of the "peace process" are seeking an anti-democratic, communal-based powersharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites that would enable them to step up open market reforms, attract investment and intensify their mutual exploitation of the working class.

For over a decade, however, the ruling elites have been unable to implement their plan. Their economic ambitions continue to collide with the reactionary communal politics on which all of them, including the LTTE, are based. Every step towards a deal with the LTTE results in denunciations by opposition figures who brand it as "a betrayal of the Sinhala nation". Kumaratunga's political acrobatics and the latest deal between Rajapakse and the JVP are reflections of this fundamental dilemma and confirm the political bankruptcy of the whole social order.

There is no doubt that the majority of ordinary Sri Lankans want peace, basic democratic rights and decent living standards. Two decades of war have resulted in more than 60,000 deaths and the displacement of over half a million people. If there is a new outbreak of war, it will be the children of workers and the rural poor who will be the cannon fodder. And if the "peace process" is successful, they will be also the ones forced to work for a pittance in the new sweatshops established on the island.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing in the presidential election to provide a socialist alternative. The working class cannot afford to be led by the nose behind either Wickremesinghe or Rajapakse. The only way for workers to fight for their class interests is if they establish their political independence from all

bourgeois parties and their hangers-on such as the JVP, the JHU and the traditional working class parties such as the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party.

The SEP advances the following socialist program to end the war:

- * Demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all security forces from the north and east of the island. The forcible maintenance of the unitary state has resulted not only in entrenched discrimination against the Tamil minority but in the domination of militarism and attacks on basic democratic rights throughout the island.

- * Oppose every form of oppression and champion the rights of all, regardless of their ethnicity, language or religion. Any resolution to the 20-year civil war requires the repudiation of the Sri Lankan constitution, which entrenches communalism and the autocratic executive presidency. The SEP advocates the establishment of a genuinely representative Constituent Assembly to enable ordinary working people, rather than cliques of capitalist politicians, to decide on all outstanding issues of democratic rights.

- * Fight for socialist policies. The defence of democratic rights is bound up with the struggle for social equality. Society must be reorganised from top to bottom so that the wealth created by the working class is used to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not to boosting corporate profits. The SEP fights for the establishment of the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for socialism. It advances the slogan of the United Socialist States of South Asia as the means of unifying and mobilising workers and the oppressed throughout the region as part of the essential global struggle to abolish capitalism.

The SEP is running the presidential election to build the new mass party that the working class requires to carry out that historical task. We urge all our supporters and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to study the SEP's program and to join us in campaigning as widely as possible for these policies.



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