

Interest in the SEP's presidential campaign in Sri Lanka's north

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) campaign for the Sri Lankan presidential election on November 17 has been prominently reported in the Tamil press in Jaffna—the main town in the war-ravaged north of the island. Wije Dias, the party's general secretary and member of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), is the SEP's presidential candidate.

Uthayan, a daily Tamil newspaper, published a front-page article on September 22 on the SEP's initial press conference in Colombo. "Wije Dias explained that the only way to achieve peace is the withdrawal of armed forces from north and east. The SEP's main aim is to overthrow the capitalist system," it stated.

Another Jaffna newspaper, *Valumpuri*, highlighted the fact that the SEP's campaign was not primarily about "vote catching but initiating a political discussion on problems faced by the working class and oppressed people". *Elanadu* reported that the SEP was running in the elections to oppose the war and attacks on democratic rights and to defend the interests of working people.

Media interest in the SEP comes amid a broader popular disgust with the campaigns of the two main bourgeois candidates: Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Ranil Wickremesinghe of the opposition United National Party (UNP).

An editorial in the September 23 edition of *Uthayan* reflected this sentiment. "Only the green [UNP] and blue [SLFP] colours are different, but their communalism is the same."

When asked about the election, a 29-year-old Jaffna fisherman gave voice to this disaffection. He told the WSWS: "What will we gain whoever comes to power (from these two parties)?"

Other people were concerned about Rajapakse's electoral alliance with the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). These parties are opposed to the current ceasefire and a deal between Colombo and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the joint distribution of aid to the victims of the December 26 tsunami.

"What is Rajapakse going to do with parties like JVP or JHU? They are against anything for people affected by the tsunami. They attack the LTTE. I am not a supporter of the LTTE but these parties are against Tamils. They voted to re-impose the state of emergency. We Tamil people have to suffer," one man told the WSWS.

He was equally sceptical of Wickremesinghe, saying: "He is a cunning man. He says one thing, but does another. Wickremesinghe also supported the state of emergency. No one is doing anything for us."

The main preoccupation of Jaffna residents is not the presidential election but the danger of a breakdown of the three-year-old ceasefire and a return to war. Many voice their concerns about the growing activities of the Sri Lankan military in the north and east of the island, following the killing of the Jaffna police chief Charles Wijewardana in July and the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on August 12 in Colombo.

After Kadirgamar's murder, President Chandrika Kumaratunga immediately reimposed a state of emergency, which grants extensive police powers to the military. The emergency powers were subsequently ratified in parliament by a substantial majority.

It is under conditions of intensified security measures that the presidential poll will be held. Heavily armed troops have now been posted at all 18 police stations on

the Jaffna peninsula. Soldiers are not only seen in guard posts at police stations but large detachments accompany traffic police as they check vehicles. The army and navy have increased their patrols day and night and have reestablished checkpoints.

After the Colombo government and the LTTE signed a ceasefire in February 2002, stringent security measures were relaxed. Until relatively recently, people travelling from the nearby islands of Karainagar, Kayts and Nainativu to the Jaffna peninsula were subject to cursory checks. Army and navy personnel would get onto the buses, glance around and get off. Now they are checking identity cards, bags and can pick people out for interrogation.

On the main road from Jaffna to Colombo, travellers have to pass through LTTE-controlled area. The LTTE and military have checkpoints at Omanthai in the south and Muhamalai in the north. Anyone making the trip has to register both with the police and the military. Anyone whose identify card bears an address in LTTE-controlled areas is immediately treated as a suspect and subject to invasive checking and questioning. Intelligence officers are on hand to interrogate any young Tamils. The LTTE has also intensified its checking.

Over the past month, the LTTE has withdrawn its political offices from areas of the Jaffna peninsula controlled by the military. LTTE offices in the eastern provinces have already been shut. While it has not publicly provided any reason, the LTTE, like the military, is clearly preparing for possible conflict. In the East, there are ongoing clashes between the LTTE and a breakaway LTTE faction that is receiving tacit support from the military.

Following a meeting on September 19 in Point Pedro, the Sri Lankan military has reintroduced a system of passes in the coastal areas. In a return to wartime practices, fisherman will now have to carry a photo identity pass in order to go fishing. Navy officials from the Karainagar base held a meeting on September 29 with representatives from 10 fishermen's societies to inform them of the plan and arrange for fishermen to be photographed.

The reimposition of military restrictions in the North and East has heightened widespread discontent. The local population has gained very little from the three-year ceasefire. The guns have been silent, and until

recently restrictions have been relaxed, but there has been no significant improvement in living standards. For fishermen, the reestablishment of a pass system will hinder their work and lower incomes.

Throughout the ceasefire, the military has maintained its extensive High Security Zones (HSZ) that displaced thousands of people from their homes, farms and businesses. Despite three years of protests and court action, nothing has been resolved. Tens of thousands of people are still languishing in refugee camps.

People living in the coastal areas of Jaffna peninsula were severely affected by the December 26 tsunami. Nine months later, however, reconstruction has hardly begun. Like their counterparts in other parts of the island, the tsunami victims on the Jaffna peninsula have been almost completely ignored by government authorities and the LTTE alike.

The LTTE is not standing any candidate in the presidential election, either directly or indirectly through the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which acts as its political surrogate in the Colombo parliament. LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamilchelvan declared recently that the LTTE has "no interest in the presidential election". In all likelihood, the LTTE or TNA will encourage Tamil supporters to vote for one or other of the two major parties in the hope of resuming negotiations after the poll.

Like the UNP and SLFP, the LTTE, which represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, has no perspective for addressing the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people.



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