

SEP debates radical “left” in Sri Lankan presidential election campaign

Our correspondent
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A debate last Wednesday in Colombo organised by the *Lanka Left* website in the lead-up to the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka provided an illuminating insight into the gulf between the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the various “left” parties that present themselves as “socialist”.

Along with the SEP’s presidential candidate Wije Dias, those participating included: Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) leader Wickramabahu Karunaratna, United Socialist Party (USP) organising secretary Mahinda Devage, New Democratic Party (NDP) leader E. Thambiah, and Nadarajah Raviraj, a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian.

The presence of the TNA, a coalition of openly capitalist Tamil parties that functions as a mouthpiece for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), betrayed the orientation of the meeting. With the exception of the SEP, all the parties in the debate bow uncritically to the LTTE’s anti-democratic claim to be “the sole representative” of the Tamil people.

As the discussion made clear, the NSSP, USP and NDP are hostile to the SEP’s perspective of uniting Tamil and Sinhala workers around a socialist program as the only genuine means of ending the war. While the meeting was billed as five parties speaking on “The presidential elections—peace and the left,” it quickly became a debate between Wije Dias and the other four. They all quickly forgot their various petty differences to attack, in particular, the SEP’s insistence on the political independence of the working class from all factions of the ruling elite.

A representative of the *Lanka Left*, Joseph Stalin Fernando, set the tone in his opening comments by declaring that, in the past, the “left”—without specifying who—had supported attacks on the rights of the Tamil minority. He said that the so-called peace process backed by the major powers was in line “with the ambitions of the Tamil people” and “must be defended by a unity of all left forces”. By “ambitions of the Tamil people”, he meant the LTTE, which is seeking to reach a powersharing arrangement to further its own ambitions for a position of power and privilege in capitalist Sri Lanka.

The first speaker, NSSP leader Karunaratna, emphasised that the NSSP presidential candidate, standing under the banner of the New Left Front, was seeking a mandate to fight “the Sinhala Buddhist state forces”. What “we as the left” have to do in this election, he declared, was “to face this communalist militarist force”. “They believe that it will be through racist militarist policies that they will be able to carry out the policies of global capitalism.”

By “communalist militarist force”, Karunaratna was referring to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate Mahinda Rajapakse, who is formally allied with the Sinhala chauvinist parties—Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). There is no doubt that the election of Rajapakse carries the danger of a slide back to war. But like all opportunists, Karunaratna argues against one faction of the ruling elite only to tie the working class behind its rival—in this case, the United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe—as “the lesser

evil”.

Of course, Karunaratna did not bother to give a political accounting for the disasters this perspective has produced for the working class in the past. The NSSP leader himself was part of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), when it formed a coalition government with the SLFP in the 1970s. That government enacted a series of blatantly discriminatory measures against Tamils. The LSSP’s argument for joining it was that this was the only means of fighting the greater evil of the right-wing UNP. Later, in 1994, the NSSP backed the SLFP-led Peoples Alliance and its presidential candidate Chandrika Kumaratunga, using the same argument.

The meeting chairman asked each of the speakers to address a specific question. Karunaratna was asked why he had recently made positive statements about Rajapakse—that is, the candidate of the “communalist militarist force”. Clearly uneasy, Karunaratna tried to dismiss the suggestion, saying only that the NSSP had pressured Rajapakse to implement his “workers charter”. He challenged the chairman to produce “any material” to back the claim.

The USP speaker Devage followed in a similar vein. Stung by criticism in a recent TV debate by the SEP, he set about justifying his party’s support for the “peace process” backed by the UNP. It was true, he said, “that the capitalist class in underdeveloped countries like Sri Lanka can’t solve the national question.” But, he quickly added, resorting to the argument of “the lesser evil”, “we have no problem in being with [bourgeois] social forces, keeping our differences with them too, when they are lining up in the broader society against the communalists.”

In answering his question from the chair, Devage provided a revealing picture of the sordid wheeling and dealing of the “left”. Asked why the “left” had failed to run a common candidate, he complained that the USP had been part of the New Left Front in 1998 but the alliance had broken apart when the NSSP tried to use a seat won by the NLF in the Western Provincial Council for its own purposes. Thus issues of petty privilege, rather than program or principle, are what kept the USP, formed as a breakaway from the NSSP, from fielding a common candidate.

The SEP candidate Wije Dias struck a completely different tone. Unlike the other parties, which operate within the framework of nationalist politics in Sri Lanka, Dias made clear that the SEP based itself on an internationalist program and perspective. He was the only speaker to raise the central issue of world politics—the eruption of US militarism and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Dias insisted that war was an international issue. “The Bush administration is involved in military invasions in order to establish its sole domination over the global economy. We have to discuss what is necessary for world peace. Peace in Sri Lanka is a part of that. So we have to discuss a strategy for the working class to achieve world peace.”

He quoted the SEP election manifesto: “The cornerstone of the SEP’s campaign is internationalism. The SEP is standing not simply to win votes in Sri Lanka but to initiate a discussion throughout the Indian subcontinent on the necessity for workers to adopt a socialist program and perspective.”

He pointed out that the SEP had not written these words to be forgotten, but had held a public meeting in Madras to raise the necessity of the fight for socialist internationalism among young people and workers in India.

Dias contrasted the SEP's actions with Karunaratna's glorification of the Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and its recent protest against joint US-Indian air exercises. Dias explained that the CPI-M's position was entirely duplicitous—supporting the protest while its Chief Minister of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee gave the formal go-ahead for the war games to proceed in his state so as not to upset its relations with the Congress-led government in New Delhi.

Dias pointed out that the NSSP and other “left” parties were hostile to the SEP's insistence on the political independence of the working class because they maintained all sorts of relations with the major bourgeois parties. He cited a *Daily News* interview in which NSSP leader Karunaratna hailed UNP leader Wickremesinghe as “a democrat”.

Rising to the challenge delivered by Karunaratne to the chair, Dias quoted a lengthy extract from a *Daily News* article in which the NSSP leader declared Rajapakse to be “a good friend of mine” who “has helped me in very difficult situations personally.” What underhand dealings have you had with Rajapakse, Dias asked—a question that was never answered.

Dias dealt at some length with the sordid record of the NSSP's support for the UNP and SLFP over the last three decades, pointing out that the results had been catastrophic for the working class. He explained that the USP and NSSP leaders had been part of the SLFP-LSSP coalition in the 1970s. “Their practice of such coalition politics has not stopped. That's why we see their glorification of Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe.”

“This is the role of the ‘left’ today. So, we in the SEP don't like to be called ‘left’. We would prefer to be called what we are—international socialists. They [parties like the NSSP and USP] are the left of the right, that is the left of Rajapakse and Wickramasinghe,” he said.

Dias outlined the SEP's class solution to the war—calling for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers to fight for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the North and East. He explained that such a struggle would lay the basis for a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a socialist transformation in South Asia and internationally.

Dias pointed out that the SEP was concretely fighting for the unity of the working class and had, unlike other parties, called a public meeting in Jaffna, that had been disrupted by an unknown group calling itself the “People's Army”. “Some here have asked what we are doing in the north. Yes we are doing our political work in the north. We believe that the working class in the north will adopt a socialist program and perspective.”

Dias had been asked from the chair to explain why the SEP characterised the LTTE as a bourgeois organisation when there was no capitalist class in Jaffna. He pointed out that the Tamil bourgeoisie was not simply to be found in Jaffna, but operated internationally as part of the Tamil diaspora. Noting the bourgeois character of the LTTE program, Dias said: “The LTTE's theoretician Anton Balasingham commented that their aim was to build a ‘tiger economy’ here. His reference was to the capitalist economies of South East Asia that offer cheap labour conditions for global capital.”

New Democratic Party speaker E. Thambiah argued rather pathetically for an election boycott. The left could not win the presidency and even if it did, he said, it would suffer the same fate as the deposed Socialist Party president Salvador Allende in Chile in the 1970s. So why couldn't we build a mass force through a boycott, he asked. As for the political program, policies and perspective on which such a “mass force” should be based, Thambiah had not a word of advice.

He did, however, manage to make clear his complete subservience to the LTTE, when he said that the SEP should have consulted the “Tamil people in Jaffna” before holding a public meeting in the town. Clearly, he did not mean the 50 or 60 “Tamil people of Jaffna” who turned up for the

meeting and were angry at the thuggish methods of the “People's Army” that prevented it going ahead.

With the contribution from TNA MP Raviraj, the debate hit a new low. Asked by the chair how his party saw the presidential election, he had to explain that he could not answer, as the TNA's political overlords—the LTTE—had yet to decide. A TNA delegation would visit Kilinochchi, he said, to discuss the issue with LTTE leaders and then a decision would be announced accordingly.

Speaking in unmistakably communal terms, Raviraj declared: “We are waiting for a decision taken by the Sinhala people. Shall we go for a solution of the problems through peace talks ending the war, or towards devastation through war?” As far as the TNA and LTTE were concerned, there was no working class—just “the Sinhala people” and “the Tamil people”

When question time began, the dividing line between the SEP and its opponents became even clearer. The first question from the floor was directed to Wije Dias: what is your “practical solution” to the national question? Dias reiterated the SEP's demand for the immediate withdrawal of troops from the North and East and its call for a constituent assembly representative of working people to draw up a new constitution that would grant genuine democratic rights for all. He emphasised the necessity of building an independent political movement of the working class to fight for this perspective.

Clearly stung by the SEP's exposure of the NSSP's politics, Karunaratna launched into a lengthy, bombastic speech, which included the standard slander of every opportunist—if you are not with us, you are with the rightwing.

“Wije Dias calls for the withdrawal of forces. But the Tamil people, including the LTTE, will attack and chase them out. ... Two things coincide in a parallel way... At a certain stage in the national liberation democratic struggle, there emerges a link between the working class and all other forces through their own struggles. Do you [Dias] agree with it or not? If not, you will be in the camp of the JVP.”

Karunaratna acknowledged that the LTTE represented the Tamil bourgeoisie but vehemently opposed any political challenge to the LTTE on the basis of a program for the working class. Again, he tried to equate such a challenge as equivalent to support for Sinhala racists like the JVP—a thoroughly dishonest declaration given the SEP's well-known public record of intransigent opposition to the JVP.

Dias pointed out that the SEP had been in the forefront of championing the democratic rights of Tamils, which could only be achieved through the struggles of the working class against all factions of the bourgeoisie. In that sense, the SEP championed the liberation of the Tamil people. But it did not support the LTTE, which used the most anti-democratic methods to maintain its fraudulent claim to be the “sole representative” of the Tamil people.

NSSP leader Linus Jayathilaka took another tack. He agreed with Dias that war was an international issue but then added that the main question was fighting the dictates of global capitalism. “We have to build a mass movement to build an economy to fight the policies of global capitalism... We have to go forward to build a huge struggling movement united with the international movement to break the plans of the WTO.”

From the floor, SEP member Vilani Peiris pointed out that Jayathilaka was not proposing to abolish capitalism, but to prop it up. “His program is bound up with the World Social Forum (WSF). It is a program of making reforms within the capitalist system. The WSF is an alliance of NGOs bound up with organisations funded by the imperialist powers.” Such a program, based on reviving national economic regulation, was nothing but a trap for those wanting to fight global capitalism.

In a final desperate effort to save face, Karunaratna intervened again. While admitting that parties like the CPI-M in India were Stalinist not socialist, he opposed the SEP's criticism of them, arguing that they should

not be antagonised. Justifying the NSSP's failure to advance socialist policies, he declared: "Socialism can't be built in tiny lands. Socialism will come in the future, engulfing France, the US. But before that we have to face the dictates of global capitalism."

Karunaratna was saved by the bell. The debate organisers abruptly ended the meeting, declaring time was up. The audience was left with Karunaratna's new "tsunami" theory of socialism "engulfing" France and the US and then, presumably, the world without anyone—the NSSP in particular—ever having to fight for it. Nothing could more clearly expose the NSSP's organic hostility to Marxism—i.e. to the daily struggle for the development of scientific socialist consciousness within the working class, a struggle carried out in Sri Lanka and internationally by the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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