

Sri Lankan presidential election: the NSSP and the dead-end of national opportunism

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10 November 2005

Most Sri Lankan political parties have directly lined up behind one of the two major parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—in the November 17 presidential election.

The New Left Front (NLF), a proxy for the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), is one of the few exceptions. Its national organiser Chamal Jayaneththi is standing as the NLF presidential candidate and the party is promoting itself as a “left” alternative. Its manifesto published last month proclaims that “the left is rising [the] world over” and hails the “victories in Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil” as showing “a third way out” between the options of the UNP and SLFP.

In fact, the NLF’s “third way” turns out to be no alternative at all. Rather its effusive praise for the achievements of the “global populist movement” and openly bourgeois governments such as President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela is an attempt to provide a threadbare “internationalist” cloak for its thoroughly opportunist and nationalist politics.

Like other elements of the “global populist movement,” the NLF envisages not socialism but a reformed capitalism, based on the reimposition of national economic regulation. “We have to abandon the so-called open economy of global capitalism,” its manifesto declares, and calls for the reimposition of national controls on trade and the movement of currency and capital “to protect our market and our local forces of production.”

The NLF offers no explanation of how it plans to carry out this economic miracle in conditions where capital and production shift location constantly in search of the best profits and currencies. All the manifesto provides are the comments of Philippine academic Walden Bello, one of the ideologues of the “anti-globalisation” movement, who declared: “It is possible to put forward a third way out... people grasping production and consumption and putting that into comprehensive national non-alienated development.”

Alienated or not, there is no national road of economic development within the framework of Sri Lanka, the Philippines or any country, no matter how large or small. The globalisation of production over the last two decades, based on revolutionary developments in computer and communication technology, is an entirely progressive development. Within capitalism, however, it has only heightened the fundamental contradiction between global economy and the outmoded nation-state system as well as the social chasm between rich and poor. The solution is not to be found in the reactionary attempt to artificially constrain the productive forces to the nation state, but to replace global capitalism with a world planned socialist economy.

Bello and the NLF emphatically rule out the fight for such a program. Significantly, in a 2002 interview in the *New Left Review*, Bello declared: “I wouldn’t call myself a Leninist any longer, because I think the crisis that hit the Communist societies was related to the elitist character of Leninist vanguard organisations.” He is just one of many who falsely regarded the Stalinist regime in the former Soviet Union as “a communist

society” and blamed its collapse on the failure of Marxism or Leninism. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union, under the impact of globalised production on its highly shut-in national economy, was one of the clearest examples of why it is impossible to turn back the economic clock.

In a particularly revealing passage, the NLF manifesto harks back to the period from 1970 to 1975 when the bourgeois SLFP was in power with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka. The NSSP leaders were, at the time, members of the LSSP, formerly a Trotskyist Party, which definitively broke with the principles of socialist internationalism when it joined the first SLFP coalition of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964.

The second Bandaranaike coalition government in the 1970s was an unmitigated disaster for the working class. Yet looking back on this period, the NLF claims to have learnt the necessary lessons. Referring to Bello’s dream of “comprehensive national non-alienated development”, the manifesto states:

“This takes us back to the discussions on development that took place in 70/75. We see then that the left leaders made two mistakes. On the one hand, they thought that with a coalition under chauvinist capitalists they could carry out national democratic tasks. On the other hand they attempted to implement isolated socialist projects in this backward surrounding. Hence while corrupt and bureaucratic elements thrived, people lost their democratic power to intervene. Chauvinist discrimination raised its ugly head. At the same time local industrialists and producers were harassed and intimidated. Finally, capitalists threw out the left leaders and pushed the government towards the open economy even before JR [Jayewardene of the right-wing United National Party (UNP)] came to power.”

The “lefts” in coalition

This passage is riddled with self-serving lies and half-truths, designed to cover up the fact that the current NSSP leaders, as part of the LSSP, were directly responsible for the latter’s policies. Those who formed the NSSP only broke with the LSSP after it had been thrown out of government—and not by the capitalists, but by SLFP leader Bandaranaike, who concluded that the party had outlived its usefulness in providing “socialist” camouflage for her regime.

Moreover the LSSP leaders, who held key ministerial posts, were not simply deluded about the democratic prospects of a coalition with the SLFP. Rather they were directly responsible for implementing chauvinist policies, above all the imposition in 1972 of a communal constitution, which made Buddhism the state religion and imposed Sinhala as the state language. The constitution, drawn up by LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva, was the sharpest expression of a series of measures that discriminated

against the island's Tamil minority in education, business, jobs and land.

The backdrop to these measures was an economic crisis precipitated by a sharp jump in oil prices, inflation and the slide into global recession, accompanied by rising social tensions. In 1971, the coalition government ruthlessly suppressed an uprising of disaffected Sinhala rural youth led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) slaughtering more than 15,000 young people and arbitrarily detaining another 20,000. The turn by the government to vicious communal policies was aimed at shoring up its base of support in the Sinhala south of the country.

The "isolated socialist projects" were bound up with this orientation. The nationalisation of the tea estates and other enterprises was not a socialist measure, but one designed to stabilise the island's capitalist economy. In the case of the tea estates, it was highly discriminatory. The new management was overwhelmingly Sinhala, even though the majority of the workforce was Tamil speaking. In the midst of deepening recession and unemployment in the estate areas, scores of people died of hunger in what was a deliberate policy designed to force Tamil workers to leave for India.

Many of the policies advocated by the NSSP in its manifesto were put into practice by the LSSP leaders. In order to insulate the Sri Lankan economy from global recession, Finance Minister N.M. Perera, a prominent LSSP leader, imposed a raft of capital, import, price and currency controls. He called on workers to tighten their belts to prop up the economy even as prices skyrocketed. Many basic goods, such as milk powder for infants, were not available and other essentials such as rice, lentils, sugar and flour were rationed. People had to wait in long queues to buy goods.

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka was part of an international crisis that propelled the bourgeoisie to reorganise production on a global basis, to exploit vast new reservoirs of cheap labour, particularly in Asia. The Bandaranaike government was one of the first in the world to initiate the open market policies that were being demanded by the major powers, ditching its "left" allies in 1975. But the government was unable to blunt the mounting wave of popular hostility. In the rural areas, farmers, who had been unable to sell their goods under Perera's regulatory regime, turned decisively to the conservative United National Party in the 1977 election. The SLFP was reduced to just 8 seats in a parliament of 168 and the LSSP and CP lost all their seats.

The new UNP prime minister J.R. Jayewardene used his massive majority to rewrite the constitution to establish an autocratic, executive presidency and entrench the party in power for the next 17 years. His government accelerated the economic restructuring measures and, in response to rising opposition, whipped up Sinhala chauvinism to divide workers. While it was the UNP that precipitated the war in 1983, the communal policies of the SLFP-LSSP coalition—for which the NSSP leaders bear responsibility—lit the fuse.

The NSSP jettisons socialism

More than two decades later, it is ludicrous to suggest that there can be a return to the policies of national economic regulation. Incapable of making an objective assessment of their record, the only lesson that the NSSP appears to have drawn is that more care should be taken in relation to advancing "socialist" rhetoric, for fear of alienating local businessmen and proprietors.

The NSSP's complete rejection of socialism was made explicit in an interview by the NLF candidate Jayaneththi in the *Rawaya* newspaper on October 30. In an indirect swipe at the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), he declared: "Some people who call themselves leftists are advocating

socialism in the presidential election. It is impossible to go to socialism in one country. We clearly reject that very word socialism. What is necessary for us now is not socialism. The question is what is the left solution to the crisis the country is in."

These comments are a malicious misrepresentation of the SEP's election manifesto. The document states very clearly that socialism in one country, whether Sri Lanka or anywhere else, is impossible. At the centre of the program of the SEP and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the struggle to mobilise the working class internationally in a global offensive against imperialism, based on the necessity of refashioning the world economy on socialist lines. In other words, the answer of genuine socialists to global capitalism is the struggle for global socialism.

The NSSP, however, draws entirely different conclusions. It cites the impossibility of building socialism in one country as the pretext for renouncing socialism altogether and seeking opportunist alliances with the representatives of the national bourgeoisie—at home and abroad. It would require a small book to detail all the opportunist twists and turns of the NSSP's history over the last three decades. During the past 10 years, the NSSP has backed the Peoples Alliance (PA) of President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1994, reached a deal with the Sinhala chauvinists of the JVP in the late 1990s and at the 2004 general election, promoted the right-wing UNP as "the lesser evil".

While opposing "chauvinism", the NSSP accepts the communal framework of official political life in Sri Lanka. Its support for the "peace process" promoted by the major imperialist powers and local corporate leaders is a case in point. Far from fighting to unite Tamil and Sinhala workers around a socialist solution to the war, the NSSP supports a powersharing deal between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that would entrench communal divisions, and pave the way for the deepening exploitation of the working class.

In a new "theoretical" innovation in his column in *Sunday Lakkima* in June, NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratna signalled a further degeneration in the party's political line. As well as hailing radical former generals in Venezuela, the NSSP now declares that the major imperialist powers themselves are a force for progressive change.

"World capitalism today spends money on developing liberal democratic movements. It is correct to say that the money they spent on propaganda and secret repressive measures, in the past, is now spent on developing liberal movements in countries like ours," he wrote.

This is an extraordinary statement from a man who cut his teeth on radical anti-imperialist demagoguery in the 1960s and 1970s. It is even more extraordinary in light of the criminal actions of US imperialism in invading and subjugating Afghanistan and Iraq. Karunaratna does not attempt to square his statements with these neo-colonial exercises, or say whether he regards the puppet regimes in Kabul and Baghdad as evidence of Washington's support for "liberal movements".

Ignoring the US crimes in Iraq, Karunaratna cites President Kumaratunga and UNP leader and presidential candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe and their attempts to restart the peace process in Sri Lanka as evidence of US support for "liberal movements". The NSSP's support for these bourgeois politicians and parties—who have a long record of attacks on the democratic rights and social position of working people—is nothing short of obscene. It represents the dead-end of radical politics.

To claim that the imperialist powers, specifically the Bush administration, encourages and supports "liberal" movements around the world is politically criminal. Washington's strategy in Sri Lanka is no different from its perspective in the Middle East and Central Asia. Driven by an insoluble economic crisis, US imperialism is seeking to establish its domination over its European and Asian rivals. The war in Sri Lanka is an obstacle to its economic and strategic ambitions on the Indian

subcontinent. Washington's current support for the Sri Lankan peace process is simply a tactic that could rapidly change if peace talks fail to meet its interests.

The NSSP's political contortions represent a capitulation to capitalist politics all down the line. In diametric opposition to everything the NSSP stands for, the SEP insists that the working class can only begin to defend its democratic rights and social conditions by making a decisive political break from all the bourgeois parties and their radical hangers-on. Far from being an impossible utopia, the SEP's socialist and internationalist program is the only realistic answer to the predatory activities of global capital and the eruption of imperialism and war.



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