Factional infighting in Sri Lankan opposition following electoral defeat

Nanda Wickremasinghe
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Factional conflict has erupted inside the United National Party (UNP) following the defeat of its candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe at the November 17 presidential election. While the dispute appears to have been papered over temporarily, the conflict is a sign of a deeper decay, not only of the right-wing UNP, but of the political establishment as a whole.

Wickremesinghe lost to Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) by just 48.4 percent to 50.29 percent in a campaign that was charged with communal politics. Big business backed Wickremesinghe as the better prospect to renew the stalled peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and press ahead with economic restructuring. Rajapakse and his allies responded by stirring up chauvinist sentiment against the "peace process".

A lot was riding on the outcome for the UNP. Having lost the powerful executive presidency in 1994, it campaigned against attempts by president Chandrika Kumaratunga to postpone the election until next year. Kumaratunga prematurely sacked a UNP-led government in February 2004 and the party lost control of parliament in general elections two months later. Hoping to capitalise on dissatisfaction with the incumbent SLFP-led coalition, UNP leaders were stunned by the defeat on November 17.

The following day, UNP chairman Malik Samarawickrema handed in his resignation to Wickremesinghe. The *Daily Mirror* reported party spokesman Tissa Attanayake as saying that Wickremesinghe would resign from the party leadership and be replaced by deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya. While the newspaper retracted the report, there were clearly moves afoot.

Another UNP leader, Rajitha Senaratne, corroborated the story in an interview with the BBC. According to Colombo press reports, Senaratne, G.L. Peiris, Mahinda Wijesekara and M.H. Mohomed—all ministers in former UNP-led government—were seeking to replace Wickremesinghe with Jayasuriya.

Following a meeting of the party's working committee on Monday, Jayasuriya stated that he was not part of a conspiracy to oust Wickremesinghe. But he kept his options open, declaring his wholehearted support for "a decisive reorganisation initiative in the event that a majority of the party" felt that was needed.

The support for Jayasuriya as party leader is significant. He is viewed as a counterweight to the Sinhala chauvinist campaign waged by Rajapakse's allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). These parties attacked Wickremesinghe for signing the 2002 ceasefire with the LTTE and, because of his support for new peace talks, for having "a secret pact with the LTTE".

UNP leader Senaratne told *Lakbima*: "If we are to dispel the doubts created in the minds of the Sinhala Buddhist masses it is necessary to have a program [and leader] that dresses up, speaks, and behaves in a manner familiar to the masses. If not we will not be able to alter the conception that has been drummed into the masses that we are an outlandish force subservient to the West."

The conclusion that the UNP should have answered the SLFP, JVP and JHU in kind is not surprising. All the bourgeois parties in Sri Lanka, including the UNP, rely on communal politics as the means for dividing the working class and deflecting attention from the social impact of their policies. Decades of anti-Tamil discrimination by successive UNP and SLFP governments led to civil war in 1983.

The political paralysis of the UNP reflects the

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dilemma of the ruling class as a whole. After two decades of bloody fighting, the corporate elite wants an end to the economically damaging conflict but the major parties are organically incapable of extricating themselves from the Sinhala chauvinism that led to it. The UNP wants a prominent leader able to whip up communalism like the JVP and JHU, but, at the same time, capable of reaching a power-sharing deal with the LTTE.

Unable to find such a figure, the UNP has set aside the dispute, in part because a rift in the party would be disastrous in the campaign for local elections due next year. But the crisis is still simmering. A recent article in the *Island* cited a UNP leader as saying that one faction wanted Jayasuriya as UNP leader and Wickremesinghe as head of the United National Front (UNF)—the UNP's alliance with minor parties.

The communal campaign waged by Rajapakse and his allies had an impact. He won 11 rural electoral districts with a Sinhalese majority, including Moneragala, Hambantota, Matara, Galle, Kalutara, Ratnapura, Kegalle, Gampaha, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. In major urban areas, such as Colombo and Galle, as well as in Nuwara Eliya, Badulla and the East where the population of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims is more mixed, the UNP gained a majority.

The polarisation served to deflect attention from the underlying social crisis facing the majority of working people. If the UNP failed to win the election, it was not because the majority of Sinhalese actively support Rajapakse's aggressive stance against the LTTE and a return to war. Rather, many recall the UNP's last term of office between 2001 and 2004 when it carried out a ruthless program of restructuring.

The UNP-led UNF government slashed social services and public sector jobs in order to pay for financial concessions to big business and foreign investors and fund an extensive infrastructure program. In its three years in office, the cost of living index rose from 3,244 to 3,862. Unemployment jumped as state enterprises were closed down or sold off to the private sector.

Welfare benefits were cut by one third. Fertiliser subsidies were slashed, leading to a doubling of prices, and further financial burdens were imposed on farmers. At the same time, spending on public health and education was further reduced, while private services were encouraged for those who can pay.

The UNP's own blueprint—*Regaining Sri Lanka*—admitted that in six of the seven provinces in southern Sri Lanka, more than 40 percent of people are officially considered to be under the poverty line of 950 rupees ($US9.50) a month. In the rural North Western and Uva provinces, 52 and 55 percent of people live in poverty respectively.

According to the World Bank and IMF, which endorsed *Regaining Sri Lanka*, economic restructuring and the rule of the capitalist market would lead to improved living standards for all. In fact, the UNF's policies only deepened the social divide between rich and poor, leading to broad discontent and its loss at the April 2004 general elections. Over the past year, however, the SLFP-led alliance has implemented a similar agenda of privatisation and spending cutbacks.

The narrowness of the margin in last month's presidential poll is one indication of the widespread alienation and opposition to both parties. Few people believed the long lists of campaign promises wheeled out by both parties. Many people voted against the candidate they disliked, rather than for a candidate they positively supported. The distrust will only deepen as Rajapakse ditches his election pledges and intensifies the social assault.

Like the UNP, the ruling class as a whole has no solution to the deepening social crisis. Its only answer to rising discontent is to whip up the poison of communalism, which carries with it the danger of a return to war. That was the content of Rajapakse's campaign, to which the UNP had no answer.

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