

Ex-radical stands for Colombo mayor on ticket of Sri Lankan ruling coalition

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In upcoming local municipal elections in Sri Lanka, it is worth noting the candidacy of long-time, middle class radical Vasudeva Nanayakkara, leader of the Democratic Left Front (DLF), who is standing for the position of mayor of Colombo on the ticket of the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA). The UPFA—a coalition led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—holds power nationally.

In the island's presidential elections last November, two other outfits previously associated with the DLF—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP)—ran nominally independent candidates. Nanayakkara, however, used his tawdry credentials as a “socialist” to unequivocally back the SLFP candidate, Mahinda Rajapakse.

Nanayakkara appeared on the campaign platform with Rajapakse, alongside leaders of the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). While the JVP demanded that Rajapakse issue a series of ultimatums to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to undermine the existing ceasefire, the DLF leader endorsed the SLFP candidate's absurd claims to be “a man of peace”.

After Rajapakse narrowly won the election, he appointed Nanayakkara to chair a committee of retired senior state bureaucrats to supervise the implementation of his election manifesto—Mahinda Chintanaya or Mahinda's vision. Having sung Rajapakse's praises during the election, Nanayakkara had no difficulty in presiding over a committee tasked with covering up the litany of broken promises.

The payoff for Nanayakkara was the UPFA nomination for Colombo mayor, currently held by the opposition United National Party (UNP). Throwing himself into the campaign, this erstwhile “socialist” is in no way distinguishable from any other establishment candidate in the local elections.

Large sections of the Colombo municipality are squalid slums where many people live in poverty without basic essentials such as clean water, electricity and other services. Rather than indicting capitalism and the growing gulf between rich and poor, the DLF leader advises the slum dwellers to accept it.

At a small “pocket” meeting at Vauxhall Street in central Colombo on March 10, Nanayakkara declared: “We do not challenge the existence of income differences between the rich, the middle classes and the poor. Let those differences be there. We only demand that the conditions of those who live in the slums be improved to make life tolerable.”

According to Nanayakkara, the problems with the Colombo municipal council are not rooted in the profit system but with the corruption and mismanagement of past UNP administrations. His advocacy of “participatory democracy” as the solution to the city's problems has been given widespread media coverage.

“Participatory democracy” in Colombo is nothing new. Rather it is the program that has been carried out for years under the UNP. Workers and residents are encouraged to “participate” in the slashing of jobs and services, and opening up sectors of the city administration to private

profit.

A UN Habitat report in 1999 outlined a “new vision” of “partnerships and participation”: “Partnerships with the NGOs and the Private Sector to maintain dispensaries, traffic roundabouts, the traffic lighting system, street signs and to provide common amenities to the poor, the privatisation of selected municipal services by the Council leading to effectiveness and efficiency in terms of stemming wastage, supervision and value for money.”

Services were handed over to private contractors with significant job losses. In January 2006, the city faced a major crisis after the privatised garbage disposal system broke down, provoking a public outcry. Nanayakkara is simply giving a new spin to the restructuring and privatisation measures.

As private businesses have taken over municipal services, national governments—both led by the UNP and SLFP—have slashed funding to local government. Far from criticising the current UPFA government, Nanayakkara has hinted at further restructuring. He told *Lakbima* that “the municipality spent more in maintaining its establishment than in maintaining services”.

The fact that Rajapakse requires the services of Nanayakkara and his DLF is a sign of political crisis. Rajapakse won the presidency last November by using the JVP and another Sinhala extremist party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), to polarise the electorate along communal lines. The demands of the JVP and JHU for a revision of the current ceasefire, the strengthening the army and the dismissal of the Norwegian facilitators of the so-called peace process, all pointed to a renewed war.

At the same time, the 20-year war, which has claimed more than 65,000 lives, is deeply unpopular. So while posturing as the defender of the Sinhala majority, Rajapakse also had to insist that he was committed to peace. To lend some credibility to this fraud, he turned to Nanayakkara and the DLF, who have a long history of supporting peace talks sponsored by the major powers.

The “peace process” has never been to meet the social needs and democratic aspirations of working people but rather to serve the interests of business—both Sri Lankan and foreign investors. The US and other major powers have pushed for a negotiated powersharing arrangement because the war in Sri Lanka threatens to cut across their growing economic and strategic interests on the subcontinent, particularly in India.

In the wake of the presidential election, violent attacks have resulted in the deaths of more than 200 people—military personnel, LTTE officials and fighters and innocent civilians. Under international pressure, the Colombo government and the LTTE held the first peace talks in nearly three years in Geneva in February. While both sides agreed to nothing more than maintaining the current ceasefire, Rajapakse's allies—the JVP and JHU—denounced the outcome as unconstitutional and a betrayal of the nation.

Even though Rajapakse is aligned with these communal extremists, Nanayakkara has continued to speak of the president in the most glowing

terms. At a neighbourhood meeting in Colombo on March 12, he dismissed suggestions that the country was headed towards war. “There were people who said that the return of Mahinda Rajapakse would soon bring war. And racist pogroms. But their vile wishes have been beaten. Their hopes have been dashed to the ground,” he declared.

“President Rajapakse is working with a great deal of dedication to bring peace to the country. Therefore a program has been introduced by Mahinda Chintanaya to let all nationalities in this country live in equality and to reconcile them and develop the economy of the country,” he added, urging the crowd to vote for the UPFA in the local elections.

Nanayakkara’s transformation into a shameless apologist for Rajapakse is not a break from the past but the logical outcome of his long history of opportunist politics. At the core of his rotten manoeuvring is his rejection of the political independence for the working class, which he has repeatedly sought to subordinate to one or other wing of the Sri Lankan ruling class. Previously, he attempted to dress up his accommodation to the ruling elite in anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist rhetoric. Now even that has been dumped.

Nanayakkara began his career as a youth leader in the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which in 1964 completely abandoned its Trotskyist principles and joined the bourgeois SLFP coalition government of Sirima Bandaranaike. For Nanayakkara, who fully supported the decision, it was the beginning of a long career of unprincipled manoeuvring and double-dealing—the like of which is probably unsurpassed, even in the fetid world of radical politics in Sri Lanka.

As an LSSP MP from 1970 to 1975, Nanayakkara was fully implicated in the bloody military suppression of a JVP-led uprising of Sinhala youth in the south of the island. He also backed the imposition of a communal constitution in 1972 that made Buddhist the state religion and Sinhala the only state language. While he speaks today of equality for all, Nanayakkara supported all the discriminatory measures against Tamils imposed by the coalition government and thus is directly responsible for laying the basis for civil war.

Nanayakkara did not split from the LSSP on any principled basis, but only after the party was expelled from the government in 1975. With the LSSP widely discredited among workers, Tamils in particular, Nanayakkara along with other LSSP members sought to form a new “left” party—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP)—as a vehicle for their political ambitions. Following the return of the UNP after the 1978 election, the NSSP played a crucial role in undermining the struggle by workers, culminating in the 1980 general strike, against the UNP President J.R. Jayawardene’s open market policies.

Since the eruption of civil war in 1983, the NSSP and its splinter groups—the DLF and USP—have functioned as “left” apologists for the factions of the ruling elite that have sought a peace deal with the LTTE as the conflict increasingly undermined their economic interests. At every critical turning point, the major bourgeois parties have turned to these radical outfits to provide their blessings and block any independent movement of the working class.

In 1986, the NSSP participated in the round table conference of parties called by Jayawardene to lend legitimacy to a peace deal that involved the deployment of Indian troops in the war zones of the North and East. The Indo-Lanka Accord signed in 1987 proved to be a complete disaster as the Indian “peace-keepers” attempted to disarm the LTTE, provoking bitter fighting.

In 1994, the NSSP promoted the illusion that the SLFP and its presidential candidate Chandrika Kumaratunga offered a progressive alternative and the means to end the war. Not content to support Kumaratunga from a distance, Nanayakkara broke from the NSSP and rejoined the LSSP, which was part of the SLFP-led Peoples Alliance (PA). He was duly awarded a parliamentary seat, which he held until 2000.

Kumaratunga’s attempts to reach a peace deal rapidly fell apart and the

new PA government intensified the war in May 1995. Nanayakkara had no hesitation in voting for the war budget and the government’s declaration of emergency, giving sweeping powers to the security forces. “If the war situation has arisen,” he argued, joining the chauvinist bandwagon, “we must prepare against that too.”

As the war dragged on and the government broke its promises on improved living standards and democratic rights, popular disillusion and hostility grew. Nanayakkara shifted tack again, quit the government and the LSSP in April 1999, and sought to refashion himself as a spokesman of peace. Initially he and his newly formed DLF promoted Kumaratunga’s “devolution plan” as the means to restart peace negotiations.

But when the PA’s plan was defeated and Kumaratunga prorogued parliament, Nanayakkara abruptly lined up with the UNP on the pretext of opposing the government’s undemocratic practices. Speaking on national TV, he justified his new opportunist turn by declaring: “Like wild animals that drink water from the same waterhole in times of drought, we should forget all past animosities and unite to fight dictatorship of the president.”

Under the pressure of big business and the major powers, the UNP became the champions of the “peace process” as the means of opening up the island for foreign investment. Nanayakkara, along with the NSSP, now backed the right-wing party, which was directly responsible for starting and prosecuting the war, as the vehicle for peace. Amid a rising tide of strikes and protests in January 2004 against the UNP’s economic restructuring program, the NSSP and DLF leaders met privately with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to offer advice on containing the growing movement.

When the UNP lost power in April 2004, Nanayakkara shifted his allegiances back to the SLFP, particularly after Rajapakse emerged as its presidential candidate for last November’s elections. If Nanayakkara manages to win the post of Colombo mayor, he will exploit the position to propagate the lie that the Rajapakse government will meet the aspirations of ordinary working people.

Above all, he will seek to contain and undermine the growing opposition from workers, farmers and young people that has arisen just two years after the UPFA won power and four months after Rajapakse was elected. A little over a week ago, several hundred thousand public sector workers held a one-day stop work to demand a pay rise. Their union committee, reflecting the intense popular hostility to the entire political establishment, called for members to spoil their ballot papers in the local election. Nanayakkara responded with the same worn-out line: back the UPFA over the UNP as the lesser evil.

With the country teetering on the brink of civil war and foreign capital demanding further economic restructuring, the capitalist class is acutely aware of its vulnerability. With all the major parties, including the JVP, increasingly discredited, Nanayakkara has again been called up for service. His name on the UPFA ticket is the sharpest warning of what is in store for the working class, in Colombo and throughout the island. Far from bringing peace and prosperity, the Rajapakse government is doing the opposite.



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