

Sri Lankan election: the NSSP's electoral cretinism

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26 January 2010

The Sri Lankan presidential election has underscored the unbridgeable class gulf that exists between the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), and the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and all other former radical organisations.

The SEP is campaigning to educate and mobilise the working class on the basis of a socialist program, warning that the next government will launch an onslaught on living standards whether President Mahinda Rajapakse or General Sarath Fonseka wins the election.

The NSSP is preoccupied with manoeuvres with the bourgeois parties, as it has been since its inception in 1977. These machinations have taken on a particularly sordid character as the ruling elite has shifted dramatically to the right. The NSSP is now proposing to try to influence Rajapakse or Fonseka, both of whom are responsible for ruthlessly waging the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Writing in his regular column in *Lakbima* on January 17, the NSSP's leader and presidential candidate, Wickemabahu Karunaratna, is clearly seeking his own place in the Colombo political establishment. "If we get at least 100,000 votes," he declares, "my presence will not be as a nonentity. The ruling class will have to treat me as a person with the backing of a hundred thousand... To win concessions we have to exert pressure. The best thing is to prepare someone for that task."

Like all opportunists, Karunaratna is preoccupied with numbers, political intrigues and the promotion of false illusions. Even if the NSSP leader had the interests of workers at heart—which he doesn't—would Rajapakse or Fonseka listen to someone who has received 100,000, or 200,000, or for that matter 2 million votes?

The answer is a foregone conclusion. The representatives of the bourgeoisie act in the interests of the tiny wealthy elite. As soon as the election is over they will tear up the campaign promises they made to millions of voters and proceed to impose the agenda of big business. For the ruling class, the issue is simply who can best impose its demands and quell any opposition from workers.

Those who are mesmerised by Karunaratna's magic number should recall a few historical lessons. In 1980, as President J. R. Jayawardene began to launch his free market agenda, he thought nothing of sacking 100,000 public sector workers in order to crush a general strike. In 1989-90, the United National Party (UNP) government unleashed the security forces and death squads that

killed an estimated 60,000 youth to suppress opposition in the south of the country. In 2006, Rajapakse plunged the country back to war even though over 60,000 people had already died in the conflict. After the LTTE's defeat last May, Rajapakse and his top general Fonseka rounded up nearly 300,000 civilians and illegally imprisoned them in detention camps.

The representatives of the ruling class responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands regard petty-bourgeois figures such as Karunaratna with contempt—using them when the situation suits and dispensing with their services when it does not. For politicians like Karunaratna the only requirement is a complete lack of principle and the ability to balance between the needs of their latest political allies and the maintenance of enough credibility in the eyes of workers to be able to continue to dupe them.

The NSSP was never a Marxist or a Trotskyist party. It was formed in 1977 in a split with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), more than a decade after that party betrayed the principles of socialist internationalism by entering a bourgeois coalition government with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Karunaratna remained in the LSSP as a second coalition government that included the LSSP suppressed an uprising of Sinhala rural youth in 1971, imposed a communal constitution that entrenched Buddhism as the state religion and introduced a series of discriminatory measures against Tamils. Karunaratna and his group only left the LSSP after the party had been widely discredited in the working class during the second coalition government. The NSSP, however, never broke from the coalitionist politics of class collaboration and parliamentary cretinism.

The NSSP backed the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord that paved the way for the entry of Indian "peace-keeping" troops into the North and East to forcibly suppress the Tamil minority and armed groups such as the LTTE. In the mid-1990s, Karunaratna formed an alliance with Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), promoting the dangerous lie that this Sinhala extremist party was a progressive force that defended the interests of working people. From 2001, the NSSP supported the UNP as the "lesser evil" and backed its talks with the LTTE in the imperialist-sponsored "peace process" as the means for ending the war. All these manoeuvres ended in disaster for working people.

In early 2009, as the Rajapakse regime intensified the war against the LTTE and its repression against political opponents, the NSSP joined the UNP's "Platform of Freedom"—helping to

promote this right-wing party, with a long history of repressive measures in government, as a defender of democratic rights. Karunaratna appeared at a UNP rally last February to declare his “respect” for “the commitment of the UNP leader [Ranil] Wickramasinghe to communal harmony and democracy”.

By dressing up Wickramasinghe as a “democrat”, Karunaratna and his fellow opportunists of the United Socialist Party (USP) rendered great assistance to the UNP in their eventual promotion of Fonseka—the general responsible for the slaughter and imprisonment of Tamil civilians—as a champion of democracy. Whereas the USP still boasts of its continued association with the “Platform of Freedom,” Karunaratna, the consummate political manoeuvrer, sensed that this association would further tarnish his already tattered reputation. In distancing himself, he even publicly declared that the alliance might have been “a mistake”.

No one should take this declaration as signifying any fundamental change of course. Rather it paved the way for the NSSP’s latest opportunist alliance, with M. K. Shivajilingam, a dissident leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). The TNA—an amalgam of bourgeois Tamil parties—functioned as the parliamentary mouthpiece of the LTTE up until its military defeat in May. Since then the TNA has been desperately seeking to reintegrate itself into the Colombo political establishment. In the presidential election it has not the slightest qualm in backing General Fonseka, the military architect of the LTTE’s destruction.

Shivajilingam and Karunaratna, both of whom are presidential candidates, are clearly hoping to capitalise on the widespread disgust and hostility, particularly among Tamil voters, to the two warmongers—Rajapakse and Fonseka. Both Shivajilingam and Karunaratna are attempting to resurrect the program of “self determination” that proved to be such a disastrous trap for Tamils. Shivajilingam wants to further entrench communal divisions within the constitution by promoting a form of federalism that envisages two prime ministers—one Sinhala and one Tamil—under a Sinhala president.

Shivajilingam’s racist outlook is further underlined by his support for the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during last year’s general election in India. When the Congress Party filed an official complaint, the BJP denied that Shivajilingam had been its campaign manager in the state of Tamil Nadu, but confirmed he had “expressed support for us and highlighted the situation in Sri Lanka”. Shivajilingam’s backing for the BJP, which is responsible for anti-Muslim pogroms, is a sharp warning: his perspective is a Tamil, Hindu enclave within a federal Sri Lanka that would repress its minorities just as viciously as the Colombo government.

Karunaratna shamelessly supports this right-wing communal politician in the name of defending the democratic rights of Tamils. His support for “democracy” however, remains entirely within the framework of capitalism and bourgeois politics. Just as the NSSP’s international allies, such as the NPA (New Anti-capitalist Party) in France, have formally dropped all their Trotskyist pretensions to manoeuvre with the Socialist Democrats and Stalinists, so Karunaratna is dumping his socialist rhetoric to accommodate to bourgeois parties and politicians.

Karunaratna declares in his January 3 column in *Lakbima*:

“Under this capitalist rule, the working people cannot gain even the freedom and democracy of civil society, let alone liberation. Accordingly, even we are compelled to fight for freedom and democracy instead of socialism”.

Karunaratna erects a Chinese wall between the struggle for socialism and the struggle for democracy in order to justify his support for openly capitalist politicians. However, the whole history of Sri Lanka over the past 60 years demonstrates that the struggle for democratic rights can only be advanced on a socialist basis. The parties of the ruling class, in particular the UNP and SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) have deliberately promoted communal politics to divide the working class and cling onto power. The result has been repression, pogroms and a devastating 26-year war that has resolved none of the underlying issues.

The Socialist Equality Party, like its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), has been based since its formation on the principles of Permanent Revolution—that the working class is the only social force capable of defending basic democratic rights as an integral part of the struggle for socialism in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally. The RCL was founded in 1968 in direct opposition to the LSSP’s betrayal, which was fostered and encouraged by the opportunist “International” to which the NSSP is affiliated. It has opposed all forms of communalism and racism, including the LTTE’s separatist perspective.

For more than 40 years, the RCL/SEP has told workers the truth, regardless of whether that was immediately popular or not, and campaigned to unite the working class and face it up to its historic tasks—to take power and restructure society from top to bottom along socialist lines to meet the needs of working people, not the wealthy elite. In the aftermath of the election, as the next government launches its direct assault on living standards, the working class is going to need precisely such a party to lead it in struggle.

Unlike the NSSP, the SEP is not a party of class compromise, parliamentary manoeuvres and left demagoguery, but is based on a scientific program and an irreconcilable political opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie and its apologists. To prepare for the coming class battles, we urge workers and youth to vote for the SEP candidate Wije Dias, to carefully study our program and perspective, and to join our ranks.



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