

SEP concludes presidential election campaign with successful Colombo rally

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) concluded a powerful six-week campaign in Sri Lanka's presidential election with a well-attended meeting Saturday, January 23, at the Public Library Auditorium in Colombo. Workers, youth, students, peasants and housewives listened attentively to the party's candidate in Tuesday's election, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, and other speakers. A lively question-and-answer session followed.

In the preceding weeks, SEP members and supporters had campaigned and held meetings in many parts of the island, including Jaffna, the capital of the war-ravaged Northern Province. During the campaign, they distributed about a hundred thousand copies of the SEP election manifesto and other materials.

SEP Political Committee and WSWs International Editorial Board Member K. Ratnayake chaired the meeting. He thanked the SEP members and sympathisers for their dedication in bringing the program of international socialism to the widest audience: "During the campaign, the SEP has been able to speak and discuss with thousands of workers and youth about its perspective."

Ratnayake observed that even after the Sri Lankan state's war victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and establishment boasting about a united Sri Lanka, the rival ruling class candidates—incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse and opposition former army chief Sarath Fonseka—have made anti-Tamil communalism the main plank of their respective campaigns. "This ruling class," said Ratnayake, "cannot abandon the communal politics that it has used to divide workers on ethnic lines since the independence."

Ratnayake said the elections were taking place under conditions marked by open flouting of democratic norms. Rajapakse has retained all the wartime emergency laws, continues to keep more than 100,000 Tamils in detention camps, and has openly violated the country's election laws.

Kalpa Fernando, speaking on behalf of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) Sri Lankan chapter, discussed the profound social crisis confronting students and youth.

Both presidential candidates have made a flurry of promises and claims about providing jobs and improving the education system. Rajapakse, noted Fernando, made similar promises four

years ago. Fonseka, who worked under Rajapakse as the commander of the Sri Lankan army in its war of extermination against the LTTE, claims that if he is elected he will provide youth 2,000 rupees (US\$17.50) a month while they receive vocational training. But Fonseka has not explained how, under conditions of world economic crisis, and where the country's future has been mortgaged to pay for the communal war, he will find the money to fund such a program—woefully inadequate as it is.

"On the issue of private universities," continued Fernando, "Fonseka's response is that he will appoint a committee to investigate the issue. In other words, he is not against the privatisation of education."

The Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), the student group of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Sinhala chauvinist party that claims to be leftist, has joined with the United National Party, one of the two principal parties of the Sinhala bourgeoisie, to promote Fonseka's candidacy. "Students and youth," said Fernando, "should reject" the reactionary communal perspective of the IUSF and the JVP "and join the fight for a socialist program based on internationalism as the only means to solve problems of unemployment, education and cultural uplift."

SEP Presidential candidate Wije Dias began his speech by referring to a column written by one Gamini Viyangoda, who has been promoted as a radical intellectual by various pseudo-socialist groups. In the current weekend *Ravaya* paper, Viyangoda had denounced the SEP's campaign. Wrote Viyangoda, "One can vote for Wije Dias to reject Mahinda Rajapakse and Sarath Fonseka. With such a vote, none of the two get rejected. What is preserved is only the theoretical virginity of Wije Dias."

"Here," explained Dias, "Viyangoda gives the name 'virginity' to the theoretical and programmatic consistency and correctness of the SEP. He had intended to use the term in a derogatory sense. But he has revealed his inability to name any other party of such principled qualities. He justifies his decision to vote for Fonseka, saying that 'when one is confronted with two black figures one has to differentiate from the thick black one, the light black.' This man's light black in the 2005 election was Rajapakse, and now he has become thick black,

and the newfound light black is Fonseka. What pathetic figures these ex-radicals are!”

Dias then spoke of the acute political and economic crisis facing Sri Lanka. All the other candidates in this election, including those of the pseudo-left, Dias explained, try to hide the real issues involved in the calling of the election two years early, reducing it to a mere power struggle between Rajapakse and Fonseka.

In fact, Rajapakse decided to call an early election with the aim of strengthening his hand in the face of growing social unrest and under conditions where the next government, whether headed by Rajapakse or Fonseka, will be compelled by the IMF to make draconian social spending cuts.

Recent months have seen strikes and protests by tea plantation workers and petroleum, electricity and water supply workers and growing popular discontent over soaring prices.

Dias said that important sections of the bourgeoisie doubt the ability of Rajapakse, whose government is dependent on a fragile coalition of 17 parties, to deal with the growing resistance of the people. They have rallied behind the ex-general Fonseka, calculating that he will be better able to present himself as “above the political fray” and to mobilize the repressive powers of the state machine.

Dias added, “The appearance of Fonseka on the scene as a defender of democracy, with the support of the right-wing United National Party and the chauvinist JVP, is a grotesque fraud. He depends on the military and openly uses military vocabulary to illustrate how he intends to rule.”

Dias also discussed the impact of the global economic recession and great power rivalries on the South Asian region, with the US expanding its predatory Afghan war into Pakistan and seeking to build up India as a counterweight to a rising China.

“The problems confronted by the Sri Lankan people,” said Dias, “cannot find a national solution. These problems are bound up with international developments and call for internationalist solutions. The SEP is the only party that offers an internationalist program for the working people, poor and the youth. Without a conscious struggle for the unity of the working people of South Asia and internationally, the masses of Sri Lanka will become victims of this or that section of the local bourgeoisie that set up nationalist traps for them under the bogus slogans of patriotism and nation building.

“The SEP struggles for working class rule in the form of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a socialist federation of South Asia and internationally. This fight will continue after this election, and we urge all our supporters to join the SEP and build it as a mass party.”

A lively discussion period followed the speeches. One audience member asked what the difference is between a Bonapartist ruler and an ordinary bourgeois ruler. Dias explained that under conditions of acute crisis and growing working class struggles, the bourgeoisie frequently brings

forward a strongman who claims to embody the nation, standing above the traditional parliamentary political maneuvering and the struggle between the working class and the bourgeoisie. However, in reality the Bonapartist ruler ruthlessly implements the agenda of the bourgeoisie. It is a step towards an open military dictatorship.

Another audience member asked about the possibilities that have opened up for the SEP to carry out open political work among the Tamil workers and toilers in the war-ravaged north and east. Dias, who recently spoke in Jaffna, said that under conditions of continuing political turmoil and economic distress, people in the north are trying to assess what has happened and what is the alternative. They were victims of a ruthless communal war mounted by the Sri Lankan elite and also faced repression from the LTTE, which, because of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination, was nonetheless able to attract many youth.

Throughout the war, and despite the governmental and LTTE repression, the SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), carried out work in the north. Having endured great difficulties, the SEP members in the north are now able to address large numbers of workers and young people eager for a democratic, internationalist and egalitarian perspective.

Before and after the meeting WSWs reporters talked to attendees. A 35-year-old private sector worker said, “We have directly faced the consequences of world economic crisis. Our bonuses have not been paid for more than two years. No permanent workers are recruited now. There is a trade union. But it openly works for the needs of employers. I understand that these are a part of an international phenomenon, and the solution should be international.”

Karunaratne, a peasant from Mahiyangana, a remote area in the Uva Province, said, “I live in an area of peasants. People there are impoverished. They hoped for some sort of relief and improvement after the war. Nothing has happened. President Rajapakse made promises to farmers in the 2005 election, such as a fertiliser subsidy, guaranteed price for paddy and easy loan schemes. Farmers only got the fertiliser subsidy, and this only to some extent. The problems just keep piling up. People are confused and want to know what to do. Now I can explain the SEP program to them.”



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