

Sri Lankan election: The two faces of the United Socialist Party

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In the course of the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign, the question is sometimes raised: Why are three socialist candidates running for president? What is the difference between the SEP and the other parties: the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP)?

For decades, the SEP has explained the unbridgeable class gulf that exists between it and these middle class, radical organisations on issues of principle and program. From its inception, the SEP has fought for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the ruling class. The NSSP and USP have always functioned as left satellites of the Colombo political establishment, subordinating workers to one or other of the main bourgeois parties.

In the past, these issues may have appeared obscure. Today, under conditions of the deepening crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism, the relationships between these ex-radical parties and the parties of the bourgeoisie are on open display.

Last Friday, USP leader Siritunga Jayasuriya mounted a platform in central Colombo with the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and one of its allies—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party-Peoples Wing (SLFP-PW). In the current presidential election, the UNP and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) are backing General Sarath Fonseka, the former army commander, as a “common candidate” against incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse. Jayasuriya is the USP's presidential candidate.

None of this stopped the “socialist” Jayasuriya participating in this fraudulent “Platform for Freedom”, praising the right-wing politicians for their defence of democratic rights and being showered with praise in return. For the UNP and the SLFP-PW, Jayasuriya has carried out an important service in helping to give them democratic credentials to boost Fonseka, who ruthlessly waged the Rajapakse government's communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The meeting was particularly grotesque as it was called to mark the first anniversary of the death of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, who was killed in broad daylight as he drove to work. His murder was one of hundreds carried out by pro-government death squads acting with the complicity, if not under the direction, of the security forces. In the course of the presidential campaign, the Rajapakse and Fonseka camps have traded accusations over Wickrematunge's death. In reality, President Rajapakse and General Fonseka both bear responsibility for the crimes of these death squads.

The UNP and its allies are desperately seeking to dress General Fonseka up as a democratic alternative to Rajapakse. And Jayasuriya obliged by joining them at the meeting. While he remained silent on Fonseka, he had no compunction about praising Fonseka's backers. He boasted that at Wickrematunge's graveside last year he, together with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and SLFP-PW leader Mangala Samaraweera, decided to form the Platform for Freedom “in order to ensure democracy and end the unlawful murders”. He declared: “I am proud to admit that it is I who proposed this idea to set up this Platform for Freedom”.

Jayasuriya's boasting continued: “Haven't we advanced considerably one year since then! I proposed that instead of an open bloc of political parties, a new variant should be introduced. Now that idea has gained ground. Our sole aim is defending democracy and freedom. For that we must end the presidential dictatorship. We have come so far in the face of politically directed police violence and repression.” The front had “managed to bring together social forces that many thought were so disparate that it would be impossible to get them together”. He concluded by declaring that the Platform for Freedom had to continue, no matter who came to power.

It is indeed a remarkable alliance—testimony to the complete political degeneration of the USP and the NSSP, which also joined the Platform of Freedom last year. For years the two parties encouraged workers to support Rajapakse's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) as the “lesser evil” compared to the conservative, bourgeois UNP. Now Jayasuriya is unashamedly

boasting that he initiated an alliance with the former “greater evil” and is singing the praises of the UNP “democrats”! While he does not mention Fonseka by name, the unstated message is that the general is the means for ending Rajapakse’s “presidential dictatorship”. Moreover, Jayasuriya wants to maintain relations after the election.

All of this was music to the ears of Wickremasinge and Samaraweera who were more than happy, for the time being at least, to go along with this disgusting political charade. Wickremasinghe paid tribute to Jayasuriya, declaring: “He took the initiative in forming this force. We followed him. Today we have advanced far. I salute Siritunga. Threatened with assassination we were afraid to come out. Then Siritunga came forward. It paved the way for us to be able to challenge the incumbent president.” Indeed without the USP and NSSP, it would have been far more difficult for the UNP, which has a long history of anti-democratic thuggery, including the operation of death squads in the late 1980s, to put on a democratic mask.

Samaraweera was similarly effusive, declaring: “The platform must go on”. He praised Jayasuriya and the NSSP’s leader, Vickramabahu Karunaratne, for putting aside “ideological differences” to align with the UNP. Urging Jayasuriya to go one step further and join the opposition coalition against Rajapakse, Samaraweera declared: “We must direct this force to end the Raja Pavula [royal family—a reference to the Rajapakse administration]”. After praising Jayasuriya as a loyal and reliable ally, he declared: “Unfortunately I am not in a position to vote for him. My party is backing General Fonseka. However I say publicly I will give my second preference to Siritunga.”

To date, the USP has avoided openly backing Fonseka, but that may still happen if the election goes to a second round. As for the NSSP, its leader Karunaratne is having second thoughts, even declaring recently that it might have been a mistake to join the UNP in the Platform for Freedom. No one should be fooled by Karunaratne’s contrition. As a veteran of countless opportunist alliances, he has no doubt sensed that his latest project is becoming exposed in the eyes of workers and youth, and has begun to back away.

Jayasuriya’s comments on the Platform for Freedom with Wickremasinghe and Samaraweera are in marked contrast to the USP’s election rhetoric directed to workers and youth. Under the headline “Support Siritunga Jayasuriya’s candidature against the capitalist butchers!” the USP’s latest statement declares that “there is no choice for common people between the two main bourgeois candidates”.

After denouncing the crimes of the Rajapakse regime, it

continues: “General Sarath Fonseka has become a pawn in the hands of warmonger chauvinists and neo-liberal capitalists... He was part of the crimes perpetrated by the Rajapakse government during the past four years. His break with the Mahinda-Gotabhaya duo [Rajapakse brothers] is not on any policy difference. He himself displayed the same arrogant style that is intrinsic to these two Rajapakses. Voting Fonseka to get rid of Rajapakse, or vice versa, would be equally disastrous.”

All of this demonstrates that Jayasuriya is a leading exponent of the practice of all bourgeois politicians, that of talking out of opposite sides of their mouth at the same time. While the USP declares Fonseka to be “a pawn of warmonger chauvinists and neo-liberal capitalists,” Jayasuriya rubs shoulders and engages in mutual back-slapping with the general’s backers. For the working class, such opportunist manoeuvring inevitably has disastrous consequences.

Only the SEP is warning that, whoever wins the election, the next government will launch a devastating “economic war” on working people and will use the police-state apparatus built up during decades of civil war to suppress any opposition. Powerful sections of the ruling elite are backing Fonseka as a more reliable instrument for imposing this agenda. By joining the Platform for Freedom, the USP and NSSP have helped promote the UNP and its allies as “democrats” who in turn are presenting Fonseka as the democratic alternative. If the general does win the presidency, the USP and NSSP will bear political responsibility for his regime and its crimes against the working class.

To return to the original question, this episode underscores the fact that there are not three socialist candidates running for president, just one. The SEP’s Wije Dias is the only candidate fighting for the independent political interests of the working class on the basis of internationalist and socialist principles. The SEP urges workers and youth to support and participate in its campaign.

The author also recommends:

SEP manifesto for the 2010 Sri Lankan presidential election
A socialist program to fight for social equality and democratic rights

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