The decay of parliamentary democracy in Sri Lanka

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26 February 2010

An editorial in last weekend's *Sunday Times* entitled, "Give us honourable MPs please," bemoaned the impotence of the Sri Lankan parliament and the poor quality of parliamentarians. The editorial was one of a number of opinion pieces and comments calling for an improvement in political standards as the country prepares for parliamentary elections on April 8.

The media clearly recognises that broad layers of voters are alienated from and even hostile to all the major political parties and institutions of government. The purpose of such articles is to deflect these sentiments from any closer examination of the underlying causes, which lie in the decay and crisis of the profit system itself.

The editorial began by noting that it was "hard to see" what the last parliament had "to show by way of progressive legislation". It pointed out that most legislation consisted of minor amendments and that most parliamentarians spent "their time sitting in committees whose recommendations were largely ignored by the executive; extending the emergency regulations; and bickering with one another". In other words, parliament has become an impotent rubber stamp for the government.

The *Sunday Times* offered the simplistic explanation: "The foremost reason for this drop in the quality of parliament has been the drop in the calibre of persons entering it." After citing figures for the falling number of lawyers, businessmen, teachers and public servants in parliament and the rise of the professional politician, it made a half-hearted appeal to party leaders to select better candidates. In the final analysis, the editorial blamed voters for looking for favours, rather than choosing intelligent and dignified representatives.

In reality, the degeneration of bourgeois democracy is completely bound up with the incapacity of the ruling elites to in any way address the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people—that is, the vast majority of voters. President Mahinda Rajapakse, who narrowly won power in 2005, brought nothing but a renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and economic hardship. After defeating the LTTE last May, he promised peace and prosperity, but living standards have further deteriorated.

Rajapakse has relied on increasingly autocratic methods of rule. He operates through a cabal of relatives, close aides, top bureaucrats and generals and rests on an unstable parliamentary majority that has been maintained by appointing all government MPs to some ministerial post. As a result, the president largely ignores his unwieldy cabinet, as well as parliament.

Rajapakse faces virtually no opposition in parliament because the main opposition parties—the United National Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—agree with his agenda of communalism, militarism and pro-market restructuring. Rajapakse won a second term of office at the January 26 presidential election precisely because voters saw no real difference between him and opposition candidate—General Sarath Fonseka, who had ruthlessly prosecuted Rajapakse's war.

The *Sunday Times* tut-tuts over declining parliamentary standards, but has nothing to say about the government's use of anti-democratic methods and thuggery to suppress opposition. Since the presidential election, Rajapakse has launched a vicious crackdown on opposition parties, media critics and opposition union officials, the high point of which has been the arrest of Fonseka on unsubstantiated allegations that he was planning a coup. It is in this political climate of fear and intimidation that the parliamentary elections are being held.

The government's stated objective is to obtain a two-thirds majority in parliament, enabling it to change the

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constitution. The president already has sweeping executive powers to appoint and fire ministers and indeed the government as a whole. Under the state of emergency that the parliament has routinely renewed, the president has extensive additional powers, including to censor the media and ban industrial action. If the government is seeking to change the constitution, it will be to further entrench Rajapakse in office and legitimise his anti-democratic methods.

In the final analysis, Rajapakse's police state-measures are not directed against the opposition parties, but against the working class. The government is heavily in debt, was forced to borrow from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and, as soon as the election is over, will be compelled to make deep inroads into the social position of working people—along the lines of what is currently taking place in Greece. Despite sharp tactical differences, particularly over the orientation of foreign policy, the opposition parties have no fundamental disagreement with Rajapakse over his economic agenda or his anti-democratic methods.

The *Sunday Times* hankers for a mythical past when "gentlemen politicians" ruled the roost in the Sri Lankan parliament. From the outset, these "gentlemen"—representatives of the island's venal ruling elites—acted with complete contempt for democratic rights and used communal politics to divide working people. One of the first acts of the parliament in 1948 was to abolish citizenship rights for a million Tamil-speaking plantation workers—about 10 percent of the population.

Only the Trotskyist movement—the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India, which later unified with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—opposed this sweeping anti-democratic measure. Its MPs would certainly not have been described as "gentlemen" by the bourgeois press of the day. They were revolutionary Marxists who used parliament as a means of educating and independently mobilising workers to fight for their rights and class interests on the basis of a socialist program.

The degeneration of the LSSP was expressed most sharply in its adaptation to parliamentary politics and the parties of the capitalist class, which culminated in its entry into a bourgeois coalition government led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964. The LSSP's betrayal was a savage political blow against the working class, and a turning point in bourgeois politics. The lack of principled, working class opposition allowed communalism and opportunism to flourish not only in the existing bourgeois parties, but in petty bourgeois radical outfits such as the LTTE and the JVP. Ultimately that led to the eruption of civil war in 1983.

The start of the war was bound up with a turn to pro-market restructuring by the then United National Party government—part of the broader process of the globalisation of production. The conflict was not primarily an anti-Tamil war, but was directed at dividing and suppressing any opposition from the working class. The war has been associated with the continued erosion of the democratic rights and living standards of working people. That in turn has given rise to growing hostility to the entire political establishment which is reflected in an increasingly fragmented collection of parties that use the most unscrupulous methods to win votes.

The solution proposed by the *Sunday Times*—the return of the gentleman politician—is simply ludicrous. So extreme are the class tensions in Sri Lanka that what is emerging is a police-state regime that will not hesitate to ruthlessly defend the interests of the island's wealthy corporate elite to impose the agenda demanded by the IMF and international capital.

The working class needs to draw the necessary historical lessons. Its interests cannot be defended through the politics of parliamentary combination and manoeuvre, but only through its own independent mobilisation on the basis of a socialist program that seeks to restructure society as a whole to meet its social needs, not the profits of a wealthy few.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing in the April 8 election to educate and warn working people about Rajapakse's impending "economic war" and to revive the methods of class struggle that have been suppressed for decades. The SEP will use the campaign to encourage the formation of action committees in workplaces, working class suburbs and in towns and villages to defend the rights of working people. Our candidates oppose all forms of nationalism and communalism and fight for the unity of workers—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—as the basis for the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government and socialism in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally.

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