

Sri Lanka: The political decomposition of the LSSP

Vilani Peiris
29 April 2010

The April 8 parliamentary election has again underlined the putrefaction of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). In the 1940s and 1950s, the party commanded the allegiance of the most militant and class conscious sections of workers on the basis of the struggle for Trotskyism. Today, having betrayed those principles in 1964, it is a desiccated corpse that functions as loyal faction of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA).

As it has done for years, the LSSP did not campaign in the election under its own banner, but that of the UPFA. It was allowed to stand five candidates in five districts, winning just one seat in Kegalle district with a relatively unknown member, Y.G. Pathmasiri. As part of the UPFA's arrangements, President Mahinda Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) allocated a national list seat to the current LSSP leader, Tissa Vitharana.

In the initial allocation of ministries, Vitharana, who was the minister of science and technology in the previous Rajapakse government, was overlooked. After whining to Rajapakse over the neglect of the party, it appears that Vitharana may be given a ministerial job when the president returns on April 30 from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation meeting.

This cringing subservience is reflected in the LSSP's support for all the Rajapakse's anti-working class policies and crimes over the past four years. It backed Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that resulted in thousands of civilian deaths as well as the incarceration of more than a quarter of a million men, women and children following the LTTE's defeat last May.

The LSSP's support for the communal war flows directly from its betrayal of Trotskyist principles when it entered the bourgeois SLFP-led coalition government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. The party that had fought for socialist

internationalism, courageously defended the citizen rights of Tamil plantation workers and opposed the SLFP's racist "Sinhala only" language policy, junked its previous program of socialist revolution and embraced parliamentarism and the Sinhala chauvinism of the Bandaranaike government.

The LSSP's betrayal was the outcome of a protracted nationalist degeneration, encouraged at every step by the opportunist International Secretariat of the Fourth International led by Michael Pablo and Ernest Mandel. Its full implications became apparent in the second Bandaranaike government that took office in 1970. The LSSP supported the ruthless suppression of the misguided Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising in 1971 that resulted in the death of at least 15,000 Sinhala rural youth.

LSSP leaders held key cabinet posts in the Bandaranaike government. As minister for plantation industries and constitutional affairs, Colvin R. de Silva was responsible for the 1972 constitution that entrenched Sinhala as the state language and Buddhism as the state religion. The constitution along with another forms of official anti-Tamil discrimination led ultimately to communal war. As finance minister, N.M. Perera imposed the brunt of the 1974-75 global recession onto the backs of the working people, creating enormous hardship and suffering.

The LSSP was thrown out of the coalition in 1975 and, like the SLFP, suffered a devastating electoral defeat at the 1977 election that brought the right-wing United National Party (UNP) to power. The UNP imposed pro-market restructuring and, as social tensions increased, plunged the island into war against the LTTE, which the LSSP backed. Subsequently, the LSSP joined a renewed coalition with the SLFP that brought President Chandrika Kumaratunga to power in 1994. Since then, it has virtually ceased to exist as an independent party.

Like its cavernous headquarters in central Colombo, the

LSSP is nothing more than an empty shell. The leaders who once fought for revolutionary Trotskyism, only to betray its principles, are for the most part dead. The new generation of leaders is thoroughly imbued with the politics of parliamentary manoeuvre. Tissa Vitharana, a doctor and relative of N.M. Perera, joined the LSSP in the late 1950s and assisted Perera. He entered parliament in 2004 through a national list seat to become party's sole parliamentarian and leader.

The LSSP leadership is literally in the SLFP's pocket. Its political committee has 13 members—apart from Vitharana who is likely to resume a ministerial post, eight others are paid government “advisors”. The party claims to have 700 members, but no more than 150 attend party meetings. Its “monthly” newspaper, *Samasamajaya*, is published intermittently.

The LSSP no longer even pretends to have its own program distinct from President Rajapakse's so-called Mahinda Chinthanaya (Mahinda Vision). In an interview with the *Sunday Observer*, newly-elected MP Pathmasiri explained: “The main theme during my election campaign was LSSP ideology and policies which are quite compatible with Mahinda Chinthana Idiri Dekma (Perspective of Mahinda Vision).”

The LSSP previously had mass trade unions in the private and public sectors that had a long history of struggle. Many of them have disappeared completely and the remaining few are little more than formal names with a few hundred members. Insofar as the LSSP unions exist, they play a completely treacherous role in assisting the bloc of government unions to suppress any opposition by workers.

A discussion is underway in the LSSP leadership over how to prevent the party's complete collapse. Lal Wijenayake wrote to the leadership more than a year ago advising that the party to distance itself from the government by not accepting ministerial posts and making limited criticisms of its gross abuses of democratic rights. Wijenayake joined the right-wing UNP on its “Platform for Freedom” in January to posture, falsely, as a “democrat”. Fearing Rajapakse's wrath, the LSSP promptly suspended Wijenayake from membership of the party's central committee.

To try to bolster its fortunes, the LSSP has joined its longtime ally, the Stalinist Communist Party, in forming the Socialist Peoples Alliance (SPA) with other ex-left groups, including the Democratic Left Front (DLF) and the Peoples National Liberation Front. The SPA's parliamentarianist

orientation was underscored last week, when, after a meeting at the LSSP's headquarters, it resolved to beg the SLFP for a ministerial post for DLF leader Vasudeva Nanayakkara.

Insofar as Rajapakse has any need for services of these ex-lefts, it is to offer a threadbare disguise for its reactionary policies. The main job of LSSP leader Vitharana in the previous government was not as science minister but as chairman of the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) set up in May 2006 to prepare a “political solution” to the grievances of the Tamil minority. While Vitharana went through the motions, Rajapakse prepared the military and plunged the country back to war in July 2006 in flagrant breach of the 2002 ceasefire.

At last week's meeting of the SPA, Vitharana hailed the government, declaring: “In this country people have given a very good mandate for this government. People gave this mandate to continue the fight against imperialism. We must make people aware of this and we have this responsibility.” The LSSP ended any genuine struggle against imperialism decades ago. Vitharana is simply echoing Rajapakse's propaganda designed to counter the very limited criticisms of the US and European Union of the military's human rights abuses.

As Vitharana manoeuvres for a cabinet post, the Rajapakse government is preparing to implement the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund in the wake of deepening global economic crisis. Like the rest of the ex-left milieu in Colombo, Vitharana will muster up what remains of the LSSP to attempt to suppress any independent movement of the working class against the Rajapakse government.

The Revolutionary Communist league (RCL), the forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party, was founded in 1968 in a political struggle against the LSSP's historic betrayal. The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is the only party that embodies the revolutionary principles of Trotskyism that provide the sole foundation on which the working class can defend its basic rights in the coming class struggles.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact