

# Sri Lankan ex-lefts boost rightwing UNP

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The ex-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) has renewed its alliance with the rightwing United National Party (UNP), promoting it as a defender of democratic rights and the living standards of the masses. In the recent weeks, the NSSP has participated in joint activities with the UNP, praising its leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, as a “liberal democrat” and “social activist.”

The NSSP has linked up with the UNP as popular opposition grows against the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and its austerity measures and abuses of democratic rights. The ruling class desperately needs a political safety valve to defuse the anger of the masses and the NSSP has stepped in to promote the pro-business UNP as a progressive alternative.

The NSSP front with the UNP is called the Movement for Justice and Fairness (MJF). It includes the Democratic People’s Front, a capitalist party based on Colombo Tamils, and the New Sinhala Uruymaya, an extreme Sinhala chauvinist party.

The MJF’s first public protest meeting in Colombo on November 29 had two demands. The first was to oppose the government’s budget, which has compounded the hardship facing ordinary working people by further raising prices. The second was for the release of Sarath Fonseka, the former army commander, who was arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges after he contested the 2010 presidential election as the joint opposition candidate.

Fonseka’s treatment certainly amounts to an abuse of democratic rights that sets a dangerous precedent for similar measures against all government opponents. But the NSSP-UNP front focuses on Fonseka’s jailing to the exclusion of the thousands of Tamil detainees who are being held without trial as suspected members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Moreover, while Fonseka has been framed up on

bogus charges, he along with Rajapakse and other senior government and military figures are responsible for war crimes, including the murder of thousands of Tamil civilians in the lead-up to the LTTE’s defeat in May 2009.

The UNP has no record of fighting for democratic rights or defending living standards. It is responsible for initiating the pro-market restructuring agenda in the late 1970s, for launching the country’s bloody communal war in 1983, and the massacre of some 60,000 Sinhala rural youth in the late 1980s. It supported Rajapakse’s renewed war, defended its crimes and backed the detention of Tamil political prisoners.

To promote the UNP as a defender of democracy and a supporter of the poor is politically criminal. It is to deceive the working class and try to shackle it to a section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. Yet that is exactly what the NSSP is doing.

At the November protest meeting, UNP leader Wickremesinghe condemned the jailing of Fonseka, declaring: “Rajapakse is strangling democracy. In America millions have come to the street to defend fundamental rights and the struggle has spread from there to the Arab [world]. We must take up this fight in Sri Lanka.” He made no call for the freeing of Tamil political prisoners.

NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratna spoke next, hailing Wickremesinghe as a fighter for democratic rights and declaring, falsely, that he stood for the release of all political prisoners. “We are ready to fight together against the terror regime of Mahinda,” Karunaratna said. “All must come into the streets to overthrow the dictatorial regime.”

Despite these appeals for a mass movement akin to the Arab Spring, neither the UNP nor its NSSP apologists want the revolutionary overthrow of the Rajapakse regime. Wickremesinghe declared that the

UNP would take the “struggle for the release of Fonseka to the United Nations Human Rights Commission”, in the form of a petition of one million signatures.

The petition drive was officially launched on December 1 by Wickremesinghe, who was again accompanied by Karunaratna. This plea to the UN is in reality an appeal to the US and other Western powers that have exploited the issue of democratic rights in Sri Lanka to try to pressure the Rajapakse government to end its orientation towards China. This campaign is in line with the NSSP’s pro-imperialist leaning. During the war, the NSSP, along with various Tamil parties, made futile appeals to the “international community”—that is, to the major powers—to intervene to halt the fighting and defend the rights of Tamils.

While allied to openly chauvinist parties such as New Sihala Uruymaya in Colombo, the NSSP also promotes the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) as a defender of the democratic rights of the Tamil minority in the north and east of the island. Underlying this apparently contradictory political line is the NSSP’s organic hostility towards any struggle to unify and mobilise the working class independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie.

In a column in Irida Lakkima on December 25, Karunaratna was effusive in his praise for the UNP leader, declaring: “He built up his image as a liberal democratic capitalist leader. He has turned to the social program carried out by world capitalist leaders like Obama in the recent capitalist crisis. Reactionaries have branded Obama as a socialist [for these policies].”

According to Karunaratna, it is a badge of honour to be following “world capitalist leaders” like President Obama. The remarks not only signal the pro-US orientation of the NSSP, but its support for the pro-market austerity measures being carried out by the Obama administration to shift the burden of the global crisis onto American workers.

Karunaratna went on to elaborate the “theory” behind his front with the UNP, saying that it would help radicalise the UNP and enable the “left” to “draw the lower ranks of the UNP into a fight against the racist and militarist forces”. In fact, by bolstering Wickremesinghe and the UNP as “democrats”, the NSSP is helping to trap workers, youth and poor behind a bourgeois party that has no intention of championing

their basic rights and that will inevitably turn against any mass movement that develops.

The NSSP’s alliance with the UNP is the outcome of its long history of class collaboration. In the 1980s and 1990s, the NSSP boosted the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLPF)—Rajapakse’s party—as the progressive alternative to the “rightwing UNP”. The NSSP recently made its rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class explicit. The party openly renounced the struggle for socialism, repudiated the October Revolution and insisted that it was necessary to align with sections of the national bourgeoisie. (See: “Sri Lankan NSSP repudiates socialism and the October revolution”)

The NSSP’s further lurch to the right is in line with the political orientation of pseudo-radical organisations around the world. In the US, the International Socialist Organisation covers up for the anti-working class policies of the Obama administration, the Democratic Party and the trade unions. In France, the New Anti-Capitalist Party—which like the NSSP is affiliated with the Pabloite United Secretariat—is supporting the big business Socialist Party.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers and youth to reject the treacherous politics of the NSSP that can only end in a political disaster for the working class. The alternative is to build a politically independent and unified movement of the working class to draw in the urban and rural masses in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism internationally. That is perspective that the SEP fights for.



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