

Sri Lankan ex-lefts and the impeachment crisis

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The impeachment and sacking of Sri Lankan Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake and the installation of a government crony to replace her on January 15, in violation of rulings by the country's top courts, marks another step towards police-state rule. President Mahinda Rajapakse is strengthening his grip over the state apparatus as he prepares to deepen the assault on the working class.

Rajapakse's actions provoked opposition among the judiciary and legal fraternity threatening to plunge the country into a constitutional crisis. This opposition reflects concerns within sections of the ruling class that the government's autocratic methods are discrediting the entire framework of parliamentary politics on which bourgeois rule has rested since formal independence in 1948. Their fear is that the resistance of workers to job losses and deteriorating living standards will develop into a direct struggle against the police state apparatus with dangerous revolutionary implications.

Throughout this political crisis, the ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP) have intervened to block such a struggle by subordinating workers and youth to the opposition United National Party (UNP)—i.e., to that section of the bourgeoisie, most concerned about maintaining the threadbare illusions in parliamentary democracy in Sri Lanka.

While they posture as socialists, the political practice of the NSSP and the USP demonstrate that they are based on layers of the upper middle class and are an integral part of the Colombo political establishment. Early last year these pseudo-left organisation joined the so-called Protest of the Opposition, an alliance led by the UNP, which included the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and openly Sinhala chauvinist parties—the Motherland People's Front and New Sihala Urumaya.

The government initiated impeachment proceedings in parliament against the chief justice on trumped-up corruption charges last November. What angered President Rajapakse, who had appointed Bandaranayake, was that the Supreme Court had ruled as unconstitutional legislation that stripped economic powers from provincial councils and concentrating them under the central government.

As the record demonstrates, the UNP, with the support of the ex-lefts, sought at every stage to confine any opposition within the parliamentary arena and helped to legitimise the government's unconstitutional moves.

The impeachment process was a sham from the outset. The

government members lined up to sign the impeachment motion without even knowing what the charges were. After the motion was handed to the parliamentary speaker, Chamal Rajapakse, on November 1, the Protest of the Opposition issued a statement on November 6, duly signed by the NSSP and USP leaders, which, far from denouncing the fraudulent impeachment, advised the ruling coalition on parliamentary procedure.

The UNP, along with other opposition parties, initially participated in the parliamentary select committee established to examine the charges, thereby legitimising the process. The UNP even backed the government against the courts. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe urged the speaker to reject a Supreme Court request to postpone the impeachment inquiry until a case against it had been heard. On November 23, the speaker declared the Supreme Court's ruling was null and commended Wickremesinghe for supporting his decision.

The NSSP and USP not only stuck by their alliance with the UNP, but, when protests organised by the legal fraternity emerged, the ex-lefts sought to bring them under the wing of the UNP. At the same time, the NSSP and USP shamelessly promoted illusions in the judiciary and legal organisations as defenders of democratic rights.

NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne called for the formation of a broad front, "uniting" under the UNP "across class divisions" to become a "democratic fighting movement" against the Rajapakse government. Such a class collaborationist front was a trap for the working class from the outset. The UNP, however, never had the slightest intention of building "a fighting movement" of any sort against the Rajapakse government. It was far more fearful of any mobilisation of working people than it was about the anti-democratic methods of the Rajapakse government.

Indeed the UNP was increasingly criticised for failing to back the limited protests by lawyers. Karunaratne stepped in to defend Wickremesinghe from those who "blame Ranil for inaction." In a column in *Lakbimanews* on December 30, he declared: "If the public fails [to support the protests], there is no point in blaming the liberal opposition [i.e., the UNP]." Instead he blamed the "urban working class" for succumbing to "Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism and backing Rajapakse."

Karunaratne's attack on the working class is utterly cynical. These pseudo-lefts together with trade unions have repeatedly blocked the working class from waging a political struggle against the Rajapakse. If workers did not join the protests, it was because

they had no faith in the opposition parties and did not believe the NSSP's lies about the UNP being a defender of democracy.

Moreover, the judiciary and legal fraternity, with the assistance of the ex-lefts, have deliberately confined the protests to the defence of their narrow class interests. Again it has been Karunaratne who has been in the forefront of proclaiming the chief justice and the judiciary, which is notorious for its anti-working class actions, as a bastion of democracy.

This patronising of the judiciary and legal fraternity epitomises the class orientation of the NSSP towards the state apparatus and the upper echelons of privileged middle class. The protests have focussed exclusively on the defence of the institutions of bourgeois rule—parliament, the courts and the constitution—with no reference to the government's onslaught on the basic rights of working people.

The USP is no different. Whereas the NSSP openly defended the UNP from criticism, the USP acted as Wickremesinghe's adviser, suggesting that he should be more actively engaged in the protests. Its newspaper, the *Red Star*, pleaded with the UNP to support the protest movement against impeachment, and not "to ignore it or weaken the struggle."

When the UNP finally joined the protests on January 10—just prior to Bandaranayake's dismissal—USP leader Siritunga Jayasuriya was ecstatic. He told a meeting after the protest: "We must sacrifice our lives to win democracy. Everyone, in the left and the right, must be united against this dictatorial rule."

The UNP only joined the protests at the last minute. Soon after they fizzled out and the judiciary bowed to the Rajapakse's threats and began working with his new appointee as chief justice.

Throughout the crisis, NSSP leader Karunaratne acted as an apologist for the UNP. Writing in the *Daily Mirror* on January 9, he declared that Wickremesinghe "has done his duty as a prominent leader of the liberal democratic international to advise the President to abide by the agreements within the [British] Commonwealth [on parliamentary procedures on impeachment process]."

The "liberal democratic international" that Karunaratne refers to is the International Democratic Union which includes such right-wing bourgeois parties as the US Republican Party, the Conservative Party in the UK, Germany's Christian Democratic Union and the Liberal Party in Australia.

The NSSP and USP are playing a similar political role to their ex-left counterparts internationally in subordinating any opposition to one or other section of the bourgeoisie. Their attempts to dress up the UNP as in some way "progressive" or "democratic" is just as obscene as the efforts of the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt to promote firstly the military, then the Muslim Brotherhood and now the bourgeois National Salvation Front led by Mohammed ElBaradei.

Karunaratne presents the UNP as a "Liberal Democratic party." But since its formation in 1947, this right-wing bourgeois party has been mired in communal politics and has never hesitated in using police state methods to defend the interests of the bourgeoisie. Following formal independence from British imperialism in 1948, one of the UNP's first acts in government was to abolish the citizenship rights of nearly a million Tamil plantation workers and

their family members.

The UNP was responsible for imposing the IMF's pro-market agenda in Sri Lanka in the late 1970s and ruthlessly crushed the 1980 public sector general strike by sacking 100,000 workers. The UNP was responsible for the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms and plunging the island into civil war. It is notorious for the death squads that massacred an estimated 60,000 rural youth in 1989-1990.

The UNP's posturing on "democracy" is in line with the US stance following the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. The Obama administration, which fully backed Rajapakse's war, has raised limited criticisms of the government's war crimes and abuse of democratic rights as a means of pressuring it to distance itself from China. The UNP has always pursued an openly pro-Western foreign policy and never indulged in the anti-imperialist rhetoric employed by its bourgeois rival—Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

The NSSP and USP have always rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and subordinated workers to its various manoeuvres with different sections of the political establishment. Now, like their counterparts internationally, they function openly as a tendency in bourgeois politics.

The impeachment crisis is another graphic demonstration of one of the fundamental tenets of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: the organic incapacity of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development like Sri Lanka to carry out basic democratic tasks, let alone meet the pressing social needs of working people.

The working class is the only social force capable of waging a genuine fight for basic democratic rights as part of the struggle to overthrow capitalism. It can only do so, however, by establishing its political independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie and mobilising the rural poor in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

Workers must certainly draw the sharpest warning from Rajapakse's stifling of any semblance of judicial independence. The working class cannot defend its democratic rights through a "broad front" of "left and right" bourgeois parties, which will inevitably turn on working people. Rather workers have to unite and mobilise independently, drawing the rural masses behind them, in the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam. That is the perspective for which the Socialist Equality Party fights.



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