

Sri Lankan pseudo-lefts promote right-wing UNP leader as presidential candidate

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Intense political manoeuvring is underway in Sri Lankan ruling circles as President Mahinda Rajapakse prepares to call an early presidential election for January, some two years ahead of schedule. He fears that any delay will only put him in a worse position amid rising opposition among workers and the poor to his government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

Among the various fake left groups, an intense discussion is taking place over whom to support. Wickremabahu Karunaratne, leader of the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), made his position clear at a press conference on October 27. His party will support United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and campaign to make him the "common candidate" for all opposition parties.

Even within the ranks of the NSSP, which has a long history of collaboration with bourgeois parties, Karunaratne's declaration provoked a degree of opposition. The UNP is after all a right-wing capitalist party, well known for its unabashed pro-US orientation. Last week, Karunaratne disclosed that a minority of NSSP members opposed his decision and were in talks with other groups to field a less objectionable figure—a "common left candidate."

Karunaratne, however, is proceeding with his campaign to assemble a rainbow coalition of the so-called left and the right to bring a UNP president to power. During his press conference last week, the NSSP leader sounded like a campaign manager seeking to promote Wickremesinghe ahead of other possible "common opposition candidates."

Karunaratne declared: "This gentleman is willing to devolve power to the merged northern and eastern provinces. He is ready to provide a solution to the national question. Though he is a capitalist leader we can give him a critical support."

The reference to the "devolution of power" as a "solution for national question" is aimed at enlisting the support of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). The TNA is a coalition of capitalist parties based on Tamil communalism pushing for a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo that would provide greater autonomy for a merged north and east. Such an arrangement has nothing to do with the democratic rights of Tamil workers and poor but represents the interests of the Tamil elite. The TNA has not yet announced its position, but declared it will not favour Rajapakse.

Appealing to business, Karunaratne continued: "This gentleman has declared that he would even bargain with monetary capital and would bring economic development instead of the entertainment economy now carrying on." The reference to the "entertainment

economy" is a jab at the government's attempt to reach a deal with Australian billionaire James Packer for luxury resorts and casinos.

Asked about the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Karunaratne called on it to back Wickremesinghe to fight the government's "fascist-style" policies. At this stage, the JVP is challenging the legitimacy of Rajapakse even standing for a third term. The previous limit on the number of presidential terms was two, but the government rammed through a constitutional amendment lifting it to three.

The Rajapakse government is certainly an autocratic regime, mired in Sinhala chauvinist politics. It restarted the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2006 and is responsible for the army's war crimes in crushing the separatist movement in 2009. Rajapakse has used the police-state apparatus to suppress opposition in the working class to his austerity agenda.

However, by portraying the UNP leader as a defender of democratic rights, Karunaratne is seeking to dupe working people. The UNP, the island's oldest bourgeois party, has a long record of attacking living conditions and democratic rights. The UNP government of President J.R. Jayewardene in the 1970s was among the first in the world to turn to pro-market restructuring, with devastating consequences for working people. As social tensions rose, it instigated the anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 that precipitated the bloody civil war with the LTTE, costing hundreds of thousands of lives.

Wickremesinghe served as a minister in the UNP governments of Jayawardene and President Ranasinghe Premadasa. They were notorious for their pro-business policies, ruthless prosecution of the war, and abuse of democratic rights. During the late 1980s, Premadasa's government used military-supported death squads to slaughter an estimated 60,000 Sinhala rural youth in order to stamp out discontent and suppress the JVP.

Karunaratne declared that Wickremesinghe will bring about "real economic development" but what this signifies is clear from his record as prime minister between 2001 and 2004. Wickremesinghe's "Regaining Sri Lanka" program was a massive assault on the public sector. It accelerated privatisations and made deep inroads into jobs and essential services, while further opening up Sri Lanka as a cheap labour platform.

If Wickremesinghe wins the election, with the NSSP's assistance, he will be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in imposing the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank and

suppressing the opposition of workers.

While Karunaratna paints the UNP leader in bright democratic colours, Wickremesinghe has already made clear that any changes will be limited. His recently announced guidelines for the presidential campaign focus on a limited devolution of power to provincial councils to satisfy the Tamil elite, and constitutional change to abolish the executive presidency. The abolition of the executive presidency, which the UNP established in 1978, is a constant theme of opposition parties—one that is always promised but never carried out.

At the same time, Wickremesinghe is seeking support from very right-wing forces. These include Democratic Party leader Sarath Fonseka, the former army chief who prosecuted the war against the LTTE under Rajapakse and was responsible for war crimes.

Wickremesinghe is also wooing the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is currently part of the ruling coalition. The JHU is promoting a 19th constitutional amendment to curtail the powers of provincial councils, give greater rights to the Buddhist establishment and “resettle” Sinhalese in the north and east driven out by the conflict. All these measures would heighten communal tensions. Rajapakse has postponed consideration of the amendment until after the election. But Wickremesinghe has fully endorsed it, even though it directly contradicts his own promise for a provincial devolution of powers.

The NSSP’s support for Wickremesinghe is part of a broader realignment of pseudo-left tendencies internationally behind the wars, interventions and provocations of US imperialism. Just as they have backed US regime-change operations in Libya and Syria, and supported Washington in its confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, so they have aligned themselves with the US “pivot to Asia” that is aggressively directed at undermining and preparing for war against China.

The NSSP’s campaign for the UNP and “democratic rights” is completely in tune with the “pivot.” Since the LTTE’s defeat in 2009, the Obama administration has waged an utterly cynical campaign over Sri Lankan war crimes and “human rights” to pressure Rajapakse to distance his government from Beijing. The US backed the war against the LTTE and turned a blind eye to the military’s atrocities. Wickremesinghe has signaled his support for Washington, attacking the government for making Sri Lanka a “satellite of China” and calling for a “balanced foreign policy.”

Karunaratne justifies the NSSP’s alliance with the UNP in the manner of countless political scoundrels. Writing in the *Daily Mirror*, Karunaratne declared: “There is a school of thought that believes a common action program of the Left with the UNP was a meaningless exercise.” He evoked the united front proposed by Leon Trotsky in the early 1930s against the Nazis.

The analogy is false on every level. Unlike Karunaratne, Trotsky never suggested “a united front” with capitalist parties. Rather it was the political means for uniting the German working class in the fight against fascism. Trotsky insisted that a united front of the German Communist Party (KPD) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) must not entail any mixing of slogans or programs, much less agreement on a common candidate in an election. Its purpose was to carry out well-defined concrete actions to defend the working class and its organisations from the Nazis. At all times,

the KPD had to retain the right to criticise the SPD and expose its vacillations, so as to win over the working class.

Karunaratne’s “united front” recalls the Popular Fronts of the 1930s, through which the Stalinists subordinated the working class in France and Spain to the bourgeoisie on the basis of a common capitalist program. The outcomes were a disaster for the working class.

The NSSP has a long history of such class collaborationism. Karunaratne entered politics by joining the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). He remained a member after it entered the capitalist government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964, betraying the fundamental principles of Trotskyism. Karunaratne stayed inside the LSSP for more than a decade and bears responsibility for all the anti-working class policies implemented by the second Bandaranaike government and its LSSP ministers from 1970.

Karunaratne quit the LSSP in 1978 to form the NSSP not over issues of principle but because the LSSP was widely despised in the working class and suffered a catastrophic electoral defeat. The NSSP’s sordid record over the past 30 years includes coalitions with Bandaranaike’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (now headed by Rajapakse), the Sinhala chauvinist JVP and, since the early 2000s, an ever-closer alignment with the UNP. At the end of 2009, the NSSP and its breakaway, the United Socialist Party, joined the UNP’s bogus Platform for Freedom. Every opportunist alliance has been justified by appeals to the “united front.”

The working class can only fight for its social and democratic rights by establishing its political independence from all factions of the capitalist class, as well as their pseudo-left apologists. Only one party in Sri Lanka is engaged in independently mobilising the working class on the basis of socialist internationalism—the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. We urge workers and youth to join the SEP to build it as the mass party of socialist revolution.



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