

Sri Lankan SEP holds press conference to announce its presidential campaign

Our correspondents
29 November 2014

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a media conference at the National Library's conference hall in Colombo on Wednesday to announce its intervention in the January 8 presidential elections and to introduce its candidate, SEP political committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena. Journalists from the English-weekly *Sunday Times*, the English-daily *Ceylon Today* and the Sinhala-dailies *Mavbima*, *Lankadeepa* and *Lakbima* attended the event which was chaired by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias.

Opening the press conference, Dias explained that the election had revealed deep divisions within the Sri Lankan ruling class. "The legality and constitutionality of President Mahinda Rajapakse's running for this election has been the subject of serious debate during the past weeks. This is an expression of a grave political crisis of bourgeois rule," he said.

The speaker then referred to Sri Lankan Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena's defection from the government and his decision to challenge Rajapakse as the "opposition common candidate" in the election. Sirisena is secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

Dias said that the brief election campaign may be the shortest for major election in Sri Lanka history and further highlighted serious divisions within the Sri Lankan ruling elite.

"What is behind this is the seething crisis of the world political situation," Dias said. He explained that the US and other imperialist powers were once again driving mankind to another world war. In line with its global strategy, Washington was aggressively working to integrate countries in Asia, including Sri Lanka, into the "pivot to Asia", i.e., its military preparations against China.

The US, Dias explained, was using the war crimes

committed by the Sri Lankan military during its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to force Rajapakse to end his government's close ties with China and to fully embrace Washington's geo-political strategy.

US demands that Colombo join its "pivot to Asia," the speaker said, was behind the crisis now confronting the Rajapakse government.

"Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, as a representative of the US-based Clinton Foundation, played a key role in organising this explosion [Sirisena's defection] in the Sri Lankan government. The media have also reported that various opposition parties, particularly the United National Party (UNP), held discussions with several Western diplomats on how to intervene in the coming elections and the crisis faced by the government."

Dias told journalists that the SEP was running its own presidential candidate in order to mobilise the working class on the program of international socialism against the threat of imperialist world war and the attacks on living conditions and democratic rights.

This perspective was the only progressive solution for the crisis, Dias said, and introduced the SEP candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena. A dedicated fighter for socialism for the past 30 years, Wijesiriwardena has been a leading member of the SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League. He is a retired teacher and has been renowned as a consistent fighter for the defence of the rights of teachers, students and other workers and the oppressed against the attacks of successive governments.

Wijesiriwardena pointed out that the SEP election campaign was an integral part of the party's political struggle, in collaboration of its co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International, to

build a global anti-war movement of the working class. The SEP campaign was in opposition to all other parties and the media, which were attempting to keep the masses in the dark about the growing world war threat, he said.

In contrast to Rajapakse's boasting about Sri Lanka's rising per capita income, the SEP candidate explained that social inequality and poverty was growing. "Sri Lanka's Gini coefficient, which measures social inequality, has increased from 0.34 in 1990-91 to 0.40 in 2012. The top 20 percent receives 53.5 percent of the country's national income while the share of the lowest 20 percent is just 4.4 percent. This is the real situation that the working class and the oppressed masses face under the Rajapakse government."

Wijesiriwardena explained that if Rajapakse won the election he would carry out austerity measures that would further increase social inequality. The IMF has dictated that the budget deficit must be slashed to 4.5 percent by the end of this year and to 3.8 percent of GDP by the end of 2015. "If Sirisena wins the election he will continue the same IMF-dictated austerity measures. Whichever regime comes to power, the working class and oppressed masses will be subjected to the same austerity measures under capitalism," he said.

"That's why we explain that without abolishing the capitalism and establishing a socialist system of common ownership of the means of production under the working class, the problems faced by working people and oppressed masses can't be solved. Without that we will not be able to prevent world war and the social counter-revolutionary attacks by governments worldwide."

In opposition to Rajapakse, the so-called common candidate Sirisena and those from pseudo-left parties like the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), United Socialist Party (USP) and Frontline Socialist Party, Wijesiriwardena said that the SEP was the only party in the elections representing the working class.

Replying to a question on the party's stand on the executive presidency, Dias explained: "It is not just the executive presidency. We want to replace the entire capitalist order itself. It is a revolutionary change. We are a revolutionary party fighting for socialism.

"We are for the drafting of a new constitution by a constituent assembly elected for that particular purpose,

not converting an elected parliament bogusly as a constituent assembly as was done in 1972 and 1978... The SEP raises the demand for a constituent assembly as part of the party's struggle to mobilise the working class independently on a revolutionary program to overthrow the capitalist order as a whole."

Asked about the SEP's attitude to the "opposition common candidate" Sirisena, Dias made clear that the SEP gave no political support to the "common candidate" and did not regard him as any better than Rajapakse.

"Sirisena is a bourgeois candidate chosen by a significant section of the Sri Lankan capitalist class and is backed by the right-wing UNP," Dias said. He also pointed out that NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne had until recently been promoting UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as the 'best common candidate.' "They have become mouthpieces for the bourgeoisie," he said.

On November 27, *Ceylon Today* published a report on the SEP's press conference. *Suriyan FM*, a privately-owned Tamil language radio channel, also reported on the SEP's presidential campaign in its main news bulletin on Wednesday night.



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