

Sri Lanka: Pseudo-left NSSP prepares to support US-backed “colour revolution”

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In the lead-up to Sri Lanka’s August 17 general election, the leader of the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), Wickremabahu Karunaratne, is playing a particularly sinister role as the propagandist for President Maithripala Sirisena and the right-wing, pro-US United National Party (UNP).

Karunaratne was a vocal cheerleader for the ousting of Mahinda Rajapakse in the January 8 presidential election, which he routinely declares was a “democratic revolution” against the “fascist Rajapakse regime.”

Nothing could be further from the truth.

What took place in January was a US-backed regime-change operation stitched up months in advance by UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga both of whom are well-connected in Washington. As soon as Rajapakse called the election, Sirisena resigned as health minister and stood against his party leader with the backing of the UNP and other parties, as well as dozens of academic groups, civil organisations and non-government organisations (NGOs) based on layers of the upper middle class.

Karunaratne was in the forefront of this operation appearing on platforms with Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, seeking to dupe the masses by presenting them as “defenders of democracy” and covering up their long history of involvement in attacks on working people. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe represent layers of the ruling class frustrated that their interests were being sidelined by the autocratic rule of Rajapakse and his cronies, and were concerned that his close ties with China could lead to reprisals from the US. The peculiar situation now exists where Sirisena remains a member and is nominal leader of the Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Washington’s antagonism towards Rajapakse had nothing to do with his government’s responsibility for the military’s atrocities in the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or his police state methods. As it prepares for war against China, the US was determined to bring the strategically-located island of Sri Lanka back into its orbit. If Sirisena had lost in January, the makings of a US-orchestrated “colour revolution” to reverse the “stolen election” were already in place—with the NSSP and other pseudo-left organisations primed to play a leading role.

Seven months later, Karunaratne is preparing for a repeat performance and his “revolutionary” ravings have become even more absurd. His NSSP is fielding candidates in five electoral districts, but this is little more than camouflage for the real thrust of his campaign—to ensure the UNP’s victory and Rajapakse’s defeat.

Karunaratne went into overdrive last month after Rajapakse became a candidate, raising the possibility of him returning to power as prime minister. In a column entitled “Between Fear and Hope” in the government’s propaganda organ, the state-owned *Daily News*, he issued an appeal to prepare for a “second encounter” with the “regenerated enemy” to defend the so-called “democratic revolution.”

The entire column was based on a completely false, but nevertheless very revealing, comparison between the situation in Sri Lanka and the events in Russia in 1917. Having drawn a parallel between the January 8 election to the February Revolution in Russia that overthrew the Czarist autocracy, Karunaratne declared that now “we are going through as a Kerenskyan period” and likened Rajapakse’s decision to stand as an election candidate to the counterrevolutionary coup attempt by General Kornilov in August 1917.

A few facts are needed. The February Revolution that overthrew the Czar involved a genuine mass movement of the working class, led by the most class-conscious workers schooled by Lenin and the Bolshevik Party that gave rise to the formation of revolutionary workers’ councils or Soviets. The bourgeois provisional government that was formed and led by Alexander Kerensky from July 1917 continued to prosecute Russia’s involvement in World War I and was utterly incapable of meeting the pressing needs of the masses. Kerensky’s support collapsed after he was implicated in Kornilov’s counter-revolutionary moves. The provisional government was overthrown in the October Revolution led Lenin and Trotsky that established a workers’ state for the first time in history.

Before dealing with the political implications of Karunaratne’s column, it is necessary, at least in brief, to expose the main features of his grotesque analogy.

* Karunaratne states that though “50 years of parliamentary democracy” have prevailed in Sri Lanka, “we almost lost that democracy and were fighting against a [Rajapakse] regime as dictatorial and reactionary as the Czarist regime!”

The façade of parliamentary democracy has always been threadbare in Sri Lanka. Successive UNP and SLFP governments resorted time and again to whipping up Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism to deny basic democratic rights to the Tamil minority, and to police-state measures against the working class and oppressed rural masses.

Wickremesinghe was a minister in the UNP government that unleashed military-backed death squads in the late 1980s that slaughtered an estimated 60,000 rural youth. If the UNP wins the election, like Rajapakse and the SLFP, it will not hesitate to use the police-state apparatus developed in three decades of communal war to suppress the working class.

While the Rajapakse government was certainly autocratic and responsible for war crimes against Tamils and brutal repression against the working class, it was not “fascist”—a term used by Marxists, not as an arbitrary epithet, but to denote regimes such as Nazi Germany that destroyed all workers’ parties and organisations. It should also be noted that Sirisena was part of the “Rajapakse regime” from 2005 until November 2014 and is directly responsible for all its crimes.

* Referring to the “democratic revolution” in January 2015, Karunaratne declares: “Do not ask for soviets; but mass organisations, such as the Movement for Social Justice, Samagi Balaya and Vipakshaye Virodhaya, Janatha Handa, Vidiye Virodhaya, the Anti-corruption Front,

the People's National Council, the People's Democratic Council, People's Voice, the National Trade Union Centre, and many others..."

The list is a striking demonstration of the class orientation of the NSSP. All of these organisations are based in layers of the upper middle class and are led by academics, Buddhist monks, lawyers, trade union bureaucrats and NGO functionaries. None of them has a mass membership. Needless to say, they have nothing in common with the soviets built by Russian workers, peasants and soldiers in 1917—genuinely democratic organisations of the working class and rural masses.

These groups were all active in the January election, holding meetings and protests to highlight Rajapakse's "dictatorial rule" and cover up the real purpose of the US backed regime-change operation. The most apt comparison is with the various middle-class organisations that have played prominent roles in the "colour revolutions" fomented by Washington in Eastern and Central Europe as well as the failed attempt in Iran in 2009. The pro-US orientation of the Sri Lankan groups is clear from their criticisms, either open or indirect, of Beijing for helping the Rajapakse government.

* In his effort to paint events in revolutionary colours, Karunaratne refers to the National Executive Council (NEC) set up by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe—the government's top advisory body—as Sri Lanka's "revolutionary council," bemoaning the fact that it has been dismantled in the lead-up to the August 17 election.

The only "revolutionary" aspect of the NEC is the revolutionary bombast emanating from Karunaratne who is a member of this top 13-member advisory body to the UNP-led government. It was formed to draw in support from other bourgeois parties including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents the Tamil elites. Former President Kumaratunga and General Sarath Fonseka, who as army chief was directly responsible for the slaughter of Tamil civilians in the final stages of the war against the LTTE, are also members. Karunaratne functions as their propagandist-in-chief.

* The most telling aspect of the analogy with 1917 in Russia is that, far from criticising Kerensky, who opened the door for counter-revolution in the form of Kornilov, Karunaratne hails Kerensky as the defender of liberal democracy. Faced with "the second coming of the deposed Czar, Mahinda," Karunaratne declares that Sri Lanka has the advantage of having not just one Kerensky, but two! "Unlike in Russia, instead of one person, we [have] got a combination to lead the struggle for liberal democracy in the form of the duo Maithree [Sirisena] and Ranil [Wickremesinghe]," he writes.

Such statements are not only aimed at creating as much political confusion as possible, but are a guarantee to the ruling class, amid rising social tensions in Sri Lanka, that the NSSP will play the same basic role as Kerensky did in 1917—that is, to defend bourgeois rule to the last. In his account of 1917, Karunaratne makes no mention of the role of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, who from April through to the October Revolution, engaged in a relentless political exposure of Kerensky, the provisional government and the various compromisers within the soviets—the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries—on which the regime rested.

If it were just a matter of gross theoretical blunders and historical lies, Karunaratne could be left to his ridiculous musings. But there is a definite logic to his efforts to dress up Sirisena and Wickremesinghe in revolutionary clothing. His column is an appeal to those layers of the upper middle class that rallied behind Sirisena in January to prepare for action again should the UNP lose the August 17 election to Rajapakse. "All mass organisations [that] participated in the January revolution are live and active," he explains.

The only revolution that Karunaratne is preparing to lead is a "colour revolution"—if that is what Washington signals. Having invested

significant effort in removing Rajapakse as president in January, the US is not about to allow him to return as prime minister in August and swing Colombo back towards Beijing. Engineering a "colour revolution" in Colombo is one of Washington's options.

The concerns in Washington are already evident from the fact that the US and international media is following the election closely. The US-based website, *Foreign Policy* journal, published an article on July 31 headlined "Back to the future," which warned: "[T]he possibility of him [Rajapakse] becoming prime minister is not out of the question. The former president's return to power would complicate further efforts at democratic reform within the war-torn country."

It is not necessary to speculate on the outcome of the August 17 election and subsequent events to identify the reactionary role that Karunaratne, the NSSP and the other pseudo-left organisations, such as the United Socialist Party and the Frontline Socialist Party, will play. Just as Syriza, which they all hailed as a model, has done in Greece, these groups will direct their energies to blocking any independence movement of the working class and subordinating working people, in this instance, to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe faction of the ruling class. This would be the purpose of a "colour revolution" in Sri Lanka.

The crucial lesson from the Russian Revolution was that it confirmed all the essential aspects of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. The incapacity of any section of bourgeoisie to meet the democratic and social aspirations of the masses meant that the tasks of the democratic revolution fell to the working class as part of the struggle for socialism in Russia and internationally. Led by the Bolsheviks, the Russian working class won the rural masses to its side in the course of 1917 to overthrow the provisional government and establish a workers' state.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party standing in the election that is fighting for the revolutionary mobilisation of workers in opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie—those represented by Rajapakse and Sirisena-Wickremesinghe alike—and their various hangers-on and pseudo-left apologists. Our perspective of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and the world is based on Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. We call on workers, rural toilers and youth to study our program, support our election campaign and join the SEP to lead the revolutionary struggles ahead.



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