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Sri Lanka: Pseudo-left blames working people for Rajapakse's election victory

The pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) in Sri Lanka has cynically blamed workers and the poor for the victory of Gotabhaya Rajapakse in the November 16 presidential election.

Rajapakse, a former military officer, served as defence secretary during the final stages of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and was responsible, along with his brother, then President Mahinda Rajapakse, for the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and other atrocities.

The NSSP at one time claimed to be Marxist and Trotskyist. Today it functions as nothing than a political apologist for the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and promoted this bourgeois party in the election as a democratic alternative to the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) of the Rajapakses.

Writing about the election outcome, NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne declared: "By the fascistic campaign [of Rajapakse], the country is divided. By that 'Sinhala only,' they have a monopoly on what passes for patriotism. A majority of the Sinhala-Buddhists have accepted this politics freely, [the SLPP] as their sole representative."

On December 7, Karunaratne again blamed the electorate for the Sinhala communal politics of Rajapakse, writing: "The Sri Lankan people are divided into several nationalities and remain averse to being united as 'One Lankan,' signifying the further polarisation within the voter base..."

There is no doubt that the election outcome reflected a certain polarisation along communal lines. Rajapakse was able to garner about 52 percent of the overall vote, above all from the island's Sinhala majority. The country's Tamil and Muslim minorities overwhelmingly voted from the UNP candidate, Sajith Premadasa.

However, the chief responsibility for this outcome lies not with the electorate but with all those parties, especially the pseudo-left organisations such as the NSSP, that sought to keep voters trapped to the parliamentary framework dominated by the major parties of the Sri Lankan ruling class—the SLPP and the UNP.

The vast majority of those who voted for Rajapakse did so as a protest vote against the previous “unity” government of President Maithripala Sirisena of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of the UNP which ruthlessly implemented the austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Sirisena ousted Mahinda Rajapakse in the 2015 presidential election in what amounted to a US-orchestrated, regime-change operation. Washington had backed Mahinda Rajapakse during the war against the LTTE that came to a bloody end in 2009.

The US turned a blind eye to the military's war crimes. According to UN estimates, at least 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed in the final months of the war, around 300,000 were rounded up and put in detention camps, and thousands of “missing” were abducted and killed by military-sponsored death squads.

However, the Obama administration, as it ratcheted up its aggressive confrontation with China, was not prepared to tolerate the close relations that the Rajapakse regime had developed with Beijing. As soon as the election was announced, Sirisena, a senior government minister, stood against Mahinda Rajapakse with the backing of the UNP as well as various trade unions, NGOs and the pseudo-lefts and the Tamil bourgeois parties such as the TNA.

The new so-called “good governance” government ruthlessly imposed the dictates of the International Monetary Fund for cuts to jobs, wages, conditions, essential services and price subsidies, provoking widespread opposition including strikes and protests. Significantly, in these class struggles workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—united in fighting for their common class interests but those strikes and protests were sabotaged by the trade unions.

NSSP leader Karunaratne played a particularly vile role. He denounced the workers' struggles and student protests as conspiracies against the government aimed at "helping fascistic Mahinda Rajapakse camp." Other pseudo-left groups, such as the United Socialist Party (USP) and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), backed the trade unions in limiting the struggles to futile protests to pressurise the government for concessions.

In last November's presidential election, the NSSP openly advocated a vote for the "liberal democrat" UNP candidate as the only alternative to the "fascist" Rajapakse. Karunaratne's use of the term "fascist" has nothing in common with that of the Marxist movement. While Rajapakse's campaign was based on virulent anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism and a call for a "strong" government and anti-democratic measures, he has as yet not been able to build a mass fascistic movement based on the petty-bourgeoisie as Hitler did in Germany and Mussolini in Italy.

Moreover, the entire Colombo political establishment, including the UNP, has been deeply mired in communal politics which has been exploited time and again to divide the working class. Sajith Premadasa's father, President Ranasinghe Premadasa, presided over a government that carried out the brutal suppression of Sinhala rural youth, killing an estimated 60,000, in the period 1988–1990 then restarted the vicious communal war against the LTTE.

In April last year, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe "unity" government mobilised the military and imposed sweeping emergency laws in the wake of the Easter terrorist bombings. All of the parties, including the pseudo-left, endorsed the measures and ignored evidence that the top government and military officials had advanced warning of the attacks but did nothing. NSSP leader Karunaratne attended the all-party conference and shamelessly praised the armed forces and police.

As the Socialist Equality Party warned at the time, the chief target of the emergency measures was the struggles of the working class that had provoked deep fears in ruling circles. The main political beneficiary was Gotabhaya Rajapakse who exploited the bombings to push for a "strong" government and even tougher measures in the name of "national security."

The role of the NSSP and other pseudo-left groups in the November presidential election was above all to block the SEP's campaign for the political independence of the working class from all bourgeois parties—the SLPP and UNP alike—and a unified struggle of all

workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

The emergence of the new Rajapakse regime in Sri Lanka is an expression of a turn by the ruling classes in every country towards dictatorships and fascism in response to the revolutionary upsurge of the working class. The only way to fight the danger of fascism is through the mobilisation of the working class at the head of a revolutionary movement of the masses to put an end to capitalism—the source of the drive to war, austerity and police state methods of rule.

The NSSP, however, is determined to keep the working class confined to the parliamentary arena and shackled to the UNP. With a general parliamentary election looming, Karunaratne advises workers and the poor: “Think of the next struggle. The parliamentary election is of critical importance. It can be won. Surely SLPP’s victory can be reduced to a marginal one.”

In other words, the best that the NSSP hopes for is a marginal victory for the SLPP under conditions in which the UNP is in deep internal crisis, he declares: “Everything depends on the UNP not fragmenting and the non-SLPP forces not turning against each other.” The Sinhala chauvinist JVP must be included in this front, he emphasises.

The NSSP’s parliamentary cretinism leaves the working class bound hand and foot to the bourgeoisie—either the UNP or the SLPP.

The SEP calls on workers, youth and intellectuals to reject this bankrupt political outlook and to turn to the methods of class struggle. We urge the formation of independent action committees to unite workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—in workplaces and neighbourhoods to oppose the attacks on living conditions and democratic rights. The struggles of the working class and rural poor can only be united in the fight for workers’ and peasants’ government as part of fight for a union of socialist republic of South Asia and internationally. This is the perspective for which the SEP fights.

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