

Right-wing Sri Lankan leader thanks ex-lefts for services rendered

Wije Dias

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A speech last week by Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP) in Sri Lanka, provided a revealing insight into the role played by middle class ex-radicals in keeping the working class tied to the main capitalist parties and thus in propping up bourgeois rule as a whole. He gave fulsome thanks to the leaders of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP) for their support over the past year and wished them well in the current presidential election campaign.

Wickremesinghe was speaking at a public meeting in the southern city of Matara, under the banner of the “Platform for Freedom”—a motley coalition forged by the UNP to contain and exploit growing popular concern and anger over the government’s gross abuses of democratic rights. The platform was established shortly after pro-government thugs attacked the private TV station Sirasa and murdered *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge in broad daylight in January.

The right-wing UNP could not posture as a defender of democratic rights without political assistance. After all, the UNP is the traditional party of the Sri Lankan capitalist class. It began the civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983 and ruthlessly prosecuted the war until being thrown out of office in 1994. Among other atrocities, the UNP is responsible for unleashing the military and associated death squads in the late 1980s, leading to the slaughter of an estimated 60,000 rural Sinhala youth.

But Wickremesinghe was able to rely on the NSSP and USP—parties that claim to be socialist and even, at times, Trotskyist. While the USP formally joined the “Platform for Freedom” coalition, the NSSP ended its formal ties after two months and cautiously supported the “anti-fascist alliance” from a distance. Nevertheless NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne participated in press conferences at the UNP headquarters and joined Wickremesinghe on the stage of an Alternative Independence Day rally in Kandy in February.

This opportunist alliance was particularly grotesque as the NSSP and USP claimed to oppose the criminal war behind

waged by President Mahinda Rajapakse, while the UNP supported the war and defended the army’s indiscriminate shelling that was killing thousands of Tamil civilians. Nevertheless, the NSSP and USP justified their support for the UNP by claiming that Wickremesinghe represented the “liberal wing” within the party, which the working class had no choice but to support.

The consequences of the support of the ex-radicals for the UNP are now apparent. Following the end of the war in May, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) defeated the opposition parties in a series of provincial council polls and Rajapakse has now called early presidential elections. Lacking alternative policies or a viable candidate, the UNP has joined the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in backing General Sarath Fonseka, who was until a month ago Sri Lanka’s top general, as their “common candidate” in order to undercut Rajapakse’s grandstanding as the man who defeated the LTTE.

Even for the NSSP and USP, which each have a long history of opportunist manoeuvres, it was too blatant a step to embrace Fonseka—the general who shares responsibility with Rajapakse for war crimes that include the military-backed death squad killing of critics like editor Wickrematunge. As far as the UNP was concerned, however, the NSSP and USP had already performed their essential political function—dressing up the UNP in democratic clothes has enabled Wickremesinghe to ludicrously present Fonseka as the democratic alternative to Rajapakse.

The UNP has parted ways from the NSSP and USP—for the time being at least—and to show there were no hard feelings, Wickremesinghe publicly expressed his gratitude at last week’s meeting in Matara. “When we organised the Platform for Freedom,” he explained, “we had Mr. Wickramabahu Karunaratne on our platform. He came and joined us at a difficult time that we faced. We value that. He is now a candidate for the presidency. Mr. Siritunga Jayasuriya [USP leader] is a courageous person. He is also a presidential candidate. I wish them well.”

Wickremesinghe continued: “We want clean politics. Wickramabahu Karunaratne and Siritunga Jayasuriya must be active in the politics of this country. They are a strength to democracy. They are bold. They sustain good governance.”

There could be no more damning indictment of the NSSP and USP. It would be as if right-wing Gaullist candidate Jacques Chirac had turned around and publicly thanked the various French radical parties for their tacit support in the 2002 presidential runoff against neo-fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. Or conservative Australian Prime Minister John Howard had expressed his appreciation to the Australia left groups who campaigned for his 1999 military intervention in East Timor. As a general rule, everyone involved understands that such gratitude is best left unstated, to avoid too clearly exposing these sordid political relationships before ordinary working people.

Karunaratne and Jayasuriya have not responded to Wickremesinghe’s comments. Nor will the international opportunist organisations with which they are associated—the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USFI) in the case of the NSSP and the Committee for Workers International (CWI) for the USP—criticise or discipline their Sri Lankan affiliates. The relationship of the NSSP and USP with the UNP has its counterparts in other parts of the globe and is the product of the degeneration of various forms of Pabloite opportunism.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, of which the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka is part, was formed in 1953 in a break with an opportunist trend in the Fourth International led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, who rejected the struggle of Marxism for the political independence of the working class and adapted to the treacherous Social Democratic, Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist leaderships prevailing in different countries.

Half a century later, all these former middle class radicals are jettisoning their claims to be “Trotskyist” as they seek a place within the political establishment. In February, the USFI’s French affiliate, the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR), transformed itself into the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), disowned “any claim for a specific relation to Trotskyism” and affirmed that it was “a pluralistic and democratic party” open to alliances with the Social Democrats and Stalinists.

In their relations with the UNP, the NSSP and USP have only shown more clearly where their co-thinkers around the world are heading. The NSSP was formed in 1977 in a breakaway from the Lanka Sama Samaja Party—more than a decade after the LSSP had betrayed the basic principles of Trotskyism by

entering into a coalition with the SLFP government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike. The NSSP leaders may have split from the LSSP but they never broke with its opportunist politics.

Like the LSSP, the NSSP and later the USP justified their tacit support for the SLFP and other bourgeois formations by declaring them to be the “lesser evil” compared to the UNP. Their accommodation to the UNP began in 2002 when the Wickremesinghe government signed a ceasefire and entered into peace talks with the LTTE. The NSSP and USP became the left cheerleaders for this imperialist-sponsored “peace process”, but their relations with the UNP continued even after the talks had collapsed and the UNP itself declared this year the ceasefire had been a clever trick to allow the army to prepare for the new war.

Following the establishment of the “Platform for Freedom,” NSSP leader Karunaratne accommodated his party ever more closely to the needs to the right-wing UNP. In his regular column in the weekly *Lakbima News* on July 26, he declared that the NSSP would not “stand for socialist demands, even vaguely” in elections and would campaign for a “free democratic state” and “democratic demands”—in line with the UNP.

Even after Wickremesinghe embraced General Fonseka, the NSSP leader was still looking wistfully for an electoral alliance with the “liberal wing” of the UNP. In an interview in last weekend’s *Ravaya*, Karunaratne declared: “If there is anyone agreeable with my democratic demands I could consider [supporting] him. To some extent, it is Wickremesinghe who is the suitable person to be the common candidate”.

Reluctantly, Karunaratne and Jayasuriya have been forced to stand as presidential candidates themselves. The SEP is under no illusion where the central fire of these “socialists” will be directed. It will be against SEP candidate Wije Dias and our party’s socialist program of mobilising the working class independently of all factions of the ruling class—the SLFP, the UNP and their various allies—that are responsible for the present economic and social disaster facing the working class.



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