

Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka opposes moves to authoritarian rule

31 July 2001

The following speech on the upcoming referendum in Sri Lanka was delivered in Sinhala on the state-run Rupavahini TV channel last night by Kamalasinghe Ratnayake, a member of the Political Committee of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board. The SEP has been allocated two other 15-minute time slots including one in Tamil.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga announced the referendum in early July at the same time as she suspended parliament in order to avoid an opposition no-confidence motion against her minority government. The vaguely worded referendum question simply asks whether voters are in favour of changing the constitution—without specifying the changes.

The SEP speech was subject to the government's censorship regulations and the stringent rules applying to broadcasts by registered political parties. These include the requirement that no individual or recognised political party be referred to by name. The station management also has broad grounds for rejecting or editing any speech. The material must give "proper concern to public benefit" and cannot be "harmful to cordiality or civilisation or pursuant to crimes or leading to turmoil or provoking any racial or religious tendencies or provoking public feelings".

Notes are provided to indicate which parties are being referred to in the speech. Two recent articles explain the political context of the speech.

See:

Sri Lankan President suspends parliament to avoid no-confidence vote [14 July 2001]

Sri Lanka government in a minority as key coalition partner quits [26 June 2001]

The coming referendum has raised crucial issues before the working people of this country. Why has the president called this referendum? What sort of rule is the present regime preparing for? What should be the alternative of the working class?

The referendum poses the question: "Is a new constitution as a national importance and necessity needed for the country?" The question appears to be simple. But the actions taken by the government during last few weeks indicate what type of rule is being prepared.

Early this month the President imposed the Prevention of Terrorism Act and Public Services Ordinance, including countrywide essential services orders, when the government was unable to extend the emergency. Parliament was prorogued to prevent a no-confidence motion against the government being debated. In the name of the referendum campaign, demonstrations have been banned. When the opposition broke the ban, demonstrators were tear-gassed and shot. Two were killed and dozens arrested, though later released. Following the attack on Colombo airport by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the government warned against "destabilisation" in the south and renewed its campaign for re-imposing emergency rule.

In calling the referendum and recently addressing the nation, the President insisted that the country needs a "stable government". But the government needs a stable regime for no other reason than to implement

the political and economic agenda dictated by the Western powers, the IMF and the World Bank, and big business.

The government cannot postpone the implementation of IMF-World Bank conditions as it lacks the much-needed loans to avert a foreign payments crisis. The loan conditions include restructuring the entire public sector including closures, privatisations, the slashing of jobs and working conditions, cutting welfare programs like Samurdhi [a meagre poverty alleviation program], further inroads into free education and health care, the overhaul of labour laws to allow for unhindered exploitation, reduced holidays and so on. The ruling class is under pressure to implement these demands as the economy has been battered by huge military expenditures and the developing world downturn.

Above all, the war is the question of questions confronting the whole country. The conflict was the creation of the weak ruling class in Sri Lanka which provoked racial discrimination against the Tamil minority to divide the Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking working class along ethnic lines and protect its rule. It transformed this racism into war in 1983 to open the economy for foreign capital while intensifying its attacks on the rights of working class and the poor.

The ruling class can no longer bear the huge military expenditure, nor the political instability created by the war. The Western powers and India demand the government join the main opposition party [1] in coming to a settlement with the LTTE and Tamil parties to end the war. They propose this solution not to establish the democratic rights of Tamils or to alleviate the economic burden on the masses but to prevent Sri Lanka from becoming a destabilising factor on the Indian subcontinent and threatening their interests in the region.

However, whenever the government seeks peace talks with Tamil parties, including the LTTE, or prepares to make the slightest concession to them, Sinhala extremist groups oppose such moves and come onto the streets. These chauvinist forces were nurtured by the two main bourgeois parties themselves, as a social base to divide and suppress the workers and poor. The result is now political paralysis for the parties of the ruling elite.

They are desperate and seeking a way out. Big business wants these parties to come together to provide so-called stability. The government has sought and is still seeking a deal with the main opposition party for that purpose. But if the ruling party [2] cannot come to a deal with the opposition, it is ready to go on its own to impose autocratic rule from above, a Bonapartist form of rule, using the powers of the executive presidency and resting directly on state apparatus. Be it a national unity regime of the two big business parties or Bonapartist rule by the president, a more authoritarian, anti-democratic regime is being prepared that will impose the agenda of big business and suppress the working masses. This process now unfolding contains great dangers for the working people—Sinhala and Tamil alike.

The main opposition party has the same agenda. Its demagogic utterances about democratic rights are a complete fraud. Its 17-year rule was marked by the beginning of the war, rule through emergency laws, attacks on democratic rights and the cold-blooded repression of youth. It

prorogued parliament and took other anti-democratic measures to hang onto power. Until the beginning of this month, the opposition was holding discussions with the government, openly and secretly, to form a regime that suits big business.

Throughout its more than 50-year rule and in the present political impasse, the ruling class in Sri Lanka has demonstrated its bankruptcy and inability to solve any of the problems of the masses—democratic as well as social—and revealed its reactionary nature. It completely changed the constitution twice and made other major constitutional changes, saying that they would establish democratic rights and create conditions for prosperity. But the result has been increased repression and ethnic divisions that have been disastrous for the masses.

Last year the present government presented a constitution drafted with the support of the opposition, which proposed institutionalising and deepening ethnic divisions in the name of the devolution of power. It was withdrawn when the chauvinists came onto the streets. The government is now hinting that the constitutional changes currently being prepared will only be drafted after consultation with the Buddhist hierarchy.

The Tamils live amid the continuous destruction caused by the war. Both communities are burdened by the war, which not only erodes their living standards and slashes welfare to divert money to military expenditure but involves tremendous human cost—the killing and wounding of thousands and the turning of hundreds of thousands into refugees. The majority of the masses live in poverty earning less than 100 rupees a day. Young people have no job prospects other than becoming cannon fodder for the war. Peasants are being deprived of their livelihood as big business encroaches into the rural areas.

The old left parties [3] in the ruling coalition have taken the initiative in defending every reactionary piece of legislation and the attacks on the democratic rights, jobs and living standards of the masses. They have taken a leading role in campaigning for the referendum aimed at strengthening authoritarian rule. They became parties of the state decades ago and are doing everything to defend the state. They demand the re-imposition of emergency powers, support the ban on protests and defend the shooting down of demonstrators.

The Sinhala chauvinist front [4] that once claimed to be socialist and wore a radical mask has started a new round of talks and dealings with the ruling and the opposition parties, big business and the police in the present crisis. It had the same reactionary record in the past of collaborating with ruling parties and engaging in fascist attacks on the masses. This organisation has shown again that it is ready to serve the ruling class to carry out its agenda. It supports and demands the intensification of the war. The referendum call has become another platform for this and other extremist organisations to further incite chauvinism.

Ex-radicals such as the Sri Lankan Pabloite outfit play an abject role in the present crisis. One section [5] has rallied behind the government, saying that the referendum should be used by the people to achieve a constituent assembly and a “left-peace government”. This organisation, which has a record of supporting the two main big business parties, is calling for a Yes vote and is working to tie the masses to the government. The other section [6] is behind the main opposition party. Both are working from two directions to trap the working class by dressing up the main bourgeois parties in democratic clothes. All these tendencies worked in 1994 to bring present government into power and are responsible for its ruthless war and other attacks on the workers and the poor. Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposed the government from the outset and warned that it would attack the rights of the masses on all fronts.

In the present grave political crisis the working class cannot sit on the sidelines letting the desperate, reactionary ruling class and its agents impose their solutions, which are destructive for the workers and the poor. It should have its own solution for the crisis, independent of these

bourgeois parties. The referendum is nothing but a façade for a move by the ruling class to a more authoritarian regime.

The Socialist Equality Party calls upon working people to say No to the question put in the referendum. They must act independently on an international socialist perspective to unite Sinhala and Tamil speaking people against the attacks of the ruling class.

The working class must fight for a constituent assembly elected openly and democratically by the working masses to settle all the democratic questions. We call for an end to all discrimination—ethnic and religious, the abolition of Buddhism as the state religion and the priority given for the Sinhala language, and the abolition of all repressive laws so as to guarantee democratic rights. The so-called constituent assembly hinted at by government leaders will, as in the past, be convened behind the backs of the people and against them in order to strengthen the hands of the ruling class.

A progressive solution to the war and the establishment of peace can only be achieved by the working class, with the support of the oppressed. As part of this struggle the SEP calls for the complete and unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan forces from the north and east. Workers should not give a cent or a man for the war that is not ours. The SEP opposes the separatist program of the LTTE, which is divisive and based on a settlement that will place Tamils at the behest of the imperialists.

By forging the unity of Sinhalese and Tamils, the working class will strengthen its hand to deal with the attacks of big business and fight for a rational system that will reorganise the economy to meet the needs of working people. To do this requires the unity of the international working class, in particular the working class of the Indian subcontinent. In this spirit the SEP puts forward the perspective of the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Socialist Federation of the Indian subcontinent.

The Sri Lankan working class has a history of taking politically-independent initiatives in the 1940s and early 1950s under the Trotskyist leadership [7] against the attacks of the bourgeoisie and to defend its class interests. It was betrayed in 1964 when leaders of this party entered into a bourgeois coalition government. This betrayal paved the way for the ruling class to go ahead with its attacks unhindered. The working class must turn to and assimilate these historical lessons.

The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) which defends the principles of Trotskyism and fights for the political independence of the working class. It fights for the perspective of socialist internationalism through the *World Socialist Web Site*, the world organ of the ICFI. We call upon workers, youth and intellectuals to rally round this perspective.

Notes:

1. The main opposition party is currently the United National Party (UNP). In 1991, UNP President Ranasinghe Premadasa prorogued parliament in order to block an impeachment motion against him.
2. The ruling party is the Peoples Alliance coalition. Its major component is President Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). It also includes the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL), a number of Tamil parties and the Sinhala chauvinist MEP.
3. LSSP and CPSL.
4. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was formed in the 1960s on an eclectic mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and Maoism. In the late 1980s, it opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord under which Indian troops attempted to impose a peace settlement in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, and murdered workers, trade union leaders and political parties who opposed its campaign. The JVP entered parliamentary politics in 1994.
5. The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP).
6. The United Socialist Party, a breakaway from the NSSP, along with former NSSP leader Vasudeva Nanayakkara.

7. In the 1940s and 1950s, the LSSP fought for the principles of the Trotskyist movement but increasingly adapted itself to the Sinhala chauvinism of the SLFP. In 1964 the LSSP along with the Stalinist CPSL joined the government of Kumaratunga's mother, Sirima Bandaranaike.

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