

Sri Lankan presidential election:

SLFP candidate issues a manifesto for communal violence and war

By Wije Dias and presidential candidate for the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party
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The candidates of the two main bourgeois parties in the November 17 Sri Lankan presidential election—Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP)—have both produced manifestos with long lists of election promises.

Only the gullible would believe these empty pledges. Rajapakse now presents himself as a born-again saint with a magic wand to resolve all the problems of the masses. Since 1994, however, his SLFP has led coalition governments that continued the open market economic policies introduced by the UNP and thus share responsibility for the social devastation imposed on working people for the benefit of foreign and local investors.

The UNP and SLPF have ruled the island since independence in 1948—the UNP for 34 years and the SLFP for 22 years—and have created one disaster after another. Widespread poverty is worsening and the island’s limited public education, health and welfare services are being gutted to make way for private profit-making bodies. In response to political opposition, both parties have invariably attacked democratic rights and whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class.

The outcome was a devastating 20-year civil war to maintain Sinhala Buddhist political supremacy over the island. Both Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse were cabinet ministers in governments that drowned the island in blood from 1983 to 2002 with more than 66,000 dead, many more injured and maimed and over a million people displaced, either overseas or in local refugee camps.

Predictably, in Rajapakse’s election manifesto, pretentiously titled *Mahinda Chinthana* or Mahinda’s Vision, the key issue of war takes a back seat, appearing only on page 30. It is predictable because the prime minister wants to bury the fact that his election pacts with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) commit him to policies that set the course for renewed war—something the vast majority of voters do not want.

The JVP was part of the SLFP-led ruling coalition until May when it quit in protest against a deal by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, accepted by her Prime Minister Rajapakse, with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to jointly undertake rehabilitation work for survivors of the December 26 tsunami.

Desperate for the support of the JVP, which has a significant active base, Rajapakse signed an election agreement that renounces the tsunami aid deal, demands the renegotiation of the ceasefire and calls for the strengthening of the armed forces.

As a consequence, the JVP is playing a major role in Rajapakse’s campaign, stirring up communal sentiment and promoting his sugar-coated election promises. The JVP’s demagogic propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa has been appointed as the co-manager of Rajapakse’s election campaign. Some political commentators have even joked that the JVP has a presidential candidate, even though none of its members are standing.

Of course, Rajapakse’s manifesto does not openly call for the resumption of fighting, which was formally ended by a ceasefire agreement signed by Wickremesinghe government with the LTTE in February 2002. However, the conditions laid down by Rajapakse for the reopening of peace talks amount to an unacceptable ultimatum to the LTTE and thus lay the basis for the resumption of war.

The section of “Mahinda’s Vision” on “peace” reads like a leaf taken directly from the JVP’s propaganda material. It accuses Wickremesinghe of signing a ceasefire agreement “in much haste and a short-sighted manner” and thereby “compromising national security”. “Attempts were made to foist such agreements on the people of our country while the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam did not abide by such agreements... Notwithstanding such failures, there are certain persons who are still advocating that we follow the same old path,” it states.

In a particularly sinister passage, the manifesto warns: “If this unfortunate process continues, it is very likely that some of those persons who are today following democratic and non-violent courses of action, may also be driven to violence at a future date.” This can only be interpreted as a threat by Rajapakse’s partners—the JVP and JHU—to wage a violent campaign against the current ceasefire. It should be recalled that the JVP, now in parliament, murdered scores of workers and political opponents during the period 1987-89 in its fascist crusade against the Indo-Lanka Accord—the first failed attempt to end the war.

Wickremesinghe’s attempts to reach a peace deal with the LTTE beginning with the 2002 ceasefire ran into similar obstacles. The so-called peace process was never undertaken out of concern for

the devastating impact of the war on ordinary working people—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim. Rather, the UNP was responding to pressure from corporate circles in Colombo and the major powers to end the war, which had become an obstacle to plans to integrate the island into global processes of production.

President Kumaratunga, backed by sections of the military and the JVP, denounced the ceasefire as “compromising national security” reflecting the dependence of the ruling elite on chauvinist politics and its inherent inability to find a democratic solution to the communal conflict. When the SLFP in league with the JVP narrowly won last year’s general election, Kumaratunga did an abrupt about-face and called for the restarting of the “peace process” but with no more success than Wickremesinghe.

Rajapakse now proposes a “fresh approach”, including two roundtable conferences based on “an undivided country, a national consensus and an honourable peace” with all parties to be invited. “Where there appears to be disagreements I shall endeavour to develop a national consensus. In developing such a consensus, the sovereignty of Sri Lanka, the territorial integrity, unitary structure of the state, the identities of the different communities, the need to ensure peaceful co-existence amongst such communities, would be preserved,” his manifesto declares.

There is nothing new in this “fresh approach”. Its appeal for “national consensus” is a time-worn card played by the Sinhala Buddhist elites to maintain their dominance at the expense of the Tamil minority. Of course, the LTTE will be excluded from the all-party talks. The “unitary state”, forcibly maintained through war, has relegated Tamils to second class citizens discriminated against in language and religion as well as in education, business and jobs.

Rajapakse calls for “a specific time frame and a clear agenda” for talks with the LTTE. “Our agenda, which shall be open and transparent, shall include vital concerns such as renouncing separatism, demilitarisation, entry into the democratic process, a discussion towards a final solution and the implementation of such a solution,” he states. This is a recipe for war, not peace. Before negotiations even begin, he is insisting that the LTTE give up its arms and definitely renounce its demand for a separate Tamil statelet in return for the vague promise of “a discussion towards a final solution”.

During negotiations with the Wickremesinghe government, the LTTE agreed to give up its demand for a separate Tamil Eelam in return for limited autonomy within a federated administrative structure and a unified Sri Lanka. The aim of such a deal was a powersharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites to intensify their mutual exploitation of the working class. It was nevertheless opposed by sections of the ruling circles in Colombo, including the military hierarchy, Buddhist clergy, state apparatus and business whose interests are bound up with the maintenance of Sinhala supremacy.

The JVP, JHU and other Sinhala extremist parties bitterly opposed the “federal structure,” denounced the facilitators of the peace process as “pro-LTTE” and mounted a chauvinist campaign against even the limited attempts to jointly administer tsunami aid. Rajapakse’s manifesto caves in to all their demands, including a promise to hold “open and frank discussions with the co-chairs of

the peace talks, United States of America, European Commission and Japan”.

Significantly, Rajapakse insists that he will not only maintain but extend the constitutional clause that elevates Buddhism to the status of state religion. While encouraging people “to develop closer links to temples, churches, kovils and mosques,” the manifesto declares that “the preference given to Buddhism in terms of the constitution will be consolidated”. This goes hand in hand with the strengthening of the police and the security forces.

Like Wickremesinghe, Rajapakse has no solution to the war that meets the democratic aspirations and social needs of ordinary working people. His “fresh approach” turns out to be nothing more than the preparation for a return to military conflict to maintain the communal constitution and Sinhala Buddhist supremacy, using the most anti-democratic methods if need be.

I am standing as the presidential candidate for the Socialist Equality Party to advance a socialist alternative to war and social inequality. We call on working people to fight for the following policies:

- * Demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all security forces from the north and east of the island. The forcible maintenance of the unitary state has resulted in entrenched discrimination against the Tamil minority and the domination of militarism and attacks on basic democratic rights throughout the island.

- * Oppose every form of oppression and champion the rights of all, regardless of their ethnicity, language or religion. Any resolution to the war requires the repudiation of the Sri Lankan constitution, which entrenches communalism and the autocratic executive presidency. The SEP advocates the establishment of a genuinely representative Constituent Assembly to enable ordinary working people, rather than cliques of capitalist politicians, to decide on all outstanding issues of democratic rights.

- * Fight for socialist policies. The defence of democratic rights is bound up with the struggle for social equality. Society must be reorganised from top to bottom so that the wealth created by the working class is used to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not to boosting corporate profits. The SEP fights for the establishment of the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for the United Socialist States of South Asia and the global struggle to abolish capitalism.

Above all, this requires the building of the SEP as the new mass party of the working class to carry out these historical tasks. We call on workers, young people and intellectuals to support our campaign, seriously study our program and apply to join the SEP.

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