

Sri Lankan pseudo-left dresses up US regime-change as a “democratic revolution”

By K. Ratnayake
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Wickremabahu Karunaratne, leader of the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), is engaged in a vile political campaign to present the election of Maithripala Sirisena as Sri Lankan president on January 9 as a “democratic revolution.”

The claim is absurd. Sirisena was until last November a senior minister in the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and as such bears responsibility for all its crimes and attacks on the working class. Moreover, Sirisena is working arm-in-arm with Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the right-wing United National Party (UNP), who is now the prime minister. The whole regime-change operation was carried out with the backing of the United States, which has long been hostile, not to Rajapakse’s anti-democratic methods, but to his ties with China.

With a parliamentary election due in June and discontent with the new government growing, Karunaratne has become its apologist-in-chief. He sits on the National Executive Council (NEC), the government’s top advisory body, where he rubs shoulders with Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. A veteran of decades of opportunist alliances, Karunaratne has been handed the job of painting this right-wing, pro-US government in bright “democratic” colours as it prepares to attack the democratic and social rights of the working class.

As a general rule of thumb, the grubbier the political whitewash, the bigger the lies and historical falsifications. So it proves to be the case with Karunaratne.

In the press conference following his NEC appointment, Karunaratne likened the election victory of Sirisena to that of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leader S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1956. Bandaranaike, he claimed, represented two bourgeois democratic trends in Sri Lanka—liberal democracy and village democracy.

Karunaratne declared: “Wickremesinghe brought liberal democracy. Sirisena clearly represented village councils, rural democracy. This is the unity that has come as a liberation force.”

These assertions are utterly false. Karunaratne has invented these tendencies—“liberal democracy” and “rural democracy”—out of thin air. They did not exist in 1956, nor do they exist today.

As Leon Trotsky demonstrated in his *Theory of Permanent Revolution*, the capitalist class in countries of a belated capitalist development such as Sri Lanka is organically incapable of carrying out the democratic tasks of the great bourgeois revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and America. The entire history of Sri Lanka is testimony to the correctness of Trotsky’s conclusion.

The NSSP leader spelt out his argument in greater detail in a column in the state-owned *Ceylon Daily News*: “Many people believe that in 1956 there was a change of government due to mass upsurge. It was

not only a change of government but also a new democratic revolution where traditional villages gave a new lead to the revolution.”

In reality, there was nothing “democratic” or “progressive” about the coming to power of Bandaranaike in 1956. His anti-imperialist and socialistic demagoguery was simply window-dressing for a reactionary nationalist program of Sinhala Buddhist supremacism aimed at dividing working people along communal lines.

Bandaranaike’s campaign was focused on making Sinhala the only official state language and giving a special status to Buddhism. The Sinhalese, Bandaranaike declared, were a “unique race.” On that basis, he mobilised support from layers of the Sinhalese petty bourgeoisie—Buddhist monks, indigenous doctors and small businessmen—who were looking to advance their interests.

It was no accident that Bandaranaike raised the banner of “Sinhala only.” In 1937, he formed the Sinhala Maha Sabha (Assembly of Sinhalese) to promote Sinhala communalism. At the time, Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) leader Colvin R. de Silva, as he turned toward Trotskyism, correctly warned that it was a “dangerously reactionary body” that had potential to become “local variant of brown Fascism.”

As part of the first UNP government after formal independence in 1948, Bandaranaike backed anti-democratic laws that stripped a million Tamil-speaking plantation workers of their citizenship rights. He quit the UNP to form the SLFP in 1951.

Far from being a “democratic revolution,” Bandaranaike’s election in 1956 had more the character of a counter-revolution directed against the working class. Sections of the ruling class swung their support behind Bandaranaike out of fear of the working class and the rural poor.

In 1953, a Hartal [a general strike and shop closures] called by the LSSP had shaken the bourgeoisie to the core and dealt a blow to the UNP government. What the LSSP planned as a one-day protest mushroomed into an island-wide uprising that forced the UNP cabinet to meet on a British warship in Colombo harbour.

After winning the 1956 election, Bandaranaike enacted his “Sinhala only” policy, stripping the country’s minorities of basic rights and provoking widespread protests by Tamils. The rural Sinhala petty bourgeoisie who Bandaranaike mobilised—Karunaratne’s so-called village democrats—mounted a series of anti-Tamil pogroms and eventually assassinated Bandaranaike when he balked at implementing all their demands.

As proof of Bandaranaike’s “democratic revolution,” Karunaratne cites “the most important action” of his government—the signing of the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact in 1957. The pact was a wretched deal with S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, leader of the Federal

Party—the main party of the Tamil bourgeoisie—to establish regional councils for the island’s north and east and “reasonable status” to the Tamil language. Bandaranaike’s main aim was to quell the mounting Tamil protests.

Karunaratne blames the failure of the pact on the opposition of the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party. However, despite the backsliding of the LSSP in the 1950s from the principles of socialist internationalism, the party correctly opposed the poisonous and divisive “Sinhala only” policy and the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact.

Karunaratne’s re-writing of the history of the 1956 election, and his embrace of a pact between the Sinhala and Tamil ruling elites at the expense of working people, demonstrate just how mired he and the NSSP are in the communal politics of the Sri Lankan establishment.

In opposing “Sinhala only,” the LSSP showed considerable foresight in warning that it would plunge the island into communal conflict. What it did not foresee is that its own actions in betraying the working class in 1964 by entering the bourgeois SLFP government of Bandaranaike’s widow—Sirima Bandaranaike—would open the door for such conflict.

In 1972, the LSSP was part of the SLFP-led government that brought in a new constitution enshrining Sinhala as the state language and Buddhism as the state religion, setting in train bitter communal divisions that were to erupt in 1983, under a UNP government, in a quarter century of civil war.

In his bid to invent an indigenous rural democratic tradition, Karunaratne drags in and falsifies Karl Marx. Like Bandaranaike, he declares, Wickremesinghe and Sirisena represent the unification of Western democracy and “Asiatic commune democracy.” He continues: “This Asiatic democratic heritage, as pointed out by Marx, was powerful enough to resist colonial powers and social restructuring imposed on villages.”

Marx and his co-thinker Frederick Engels did not speak of “an Asiatic democratic tradition” but an “Asiatic mode of production”—an “Asiatic despotism” that rested on primitive, self-contained villages or communes. This pre-capitalist economic formation proved to be highly resistant to change—a barrier to the development of the productive forces and social progress.

On top of village social relations mired in backwardness, caste and religion, an oppressive state structure arose that rested on taxes and tributes extorted from the rural population. Engels explained in *Anti-Duhring*: “Where the ancient communities have continued to exist, they have for thousands of years formed the basis of the cruelest form of state, Oriental despotism, from India to Russia.”

Engels emphatically rejected the claims of the Russian populists, the Narodniks, that socialism could arise on the basis of the village communes. “The Russian commune has existed for hundreds of years without ever providing the impetus for the development of a higher form of common ownership out of itself,” he wrote.

Karunaratne’s attempt to concoct a rural democratic tradition is even more ridiculous than the Narodniks’ glorification of the Russian commune over a century ago. Just as the growth of capitalist relations in Russia in the 19th century shattered the Russian commune, the imposition of British colonial rule in Sri Lanka and India long ago destroyed pre-capitalist relations in these countries.

Today, the villages are thoroughly integrated into Sri Lankan and international capitalism. The global corporations and banks that dominate the Sri Lankan economy penetrate into the village through a multitude of means, including the predatory activities of middlemen

and loan sharks. The social divide between better-off farmers and landless day labourers has deepened. The village councils that Karunaratne hails as the basis for “rural democracy” were in fact established by the British as a means of colonial administration. Their counterparts today are dominated by the wealthier layers of the rural petty bourgeoisie.

Karunaratne’s promotion of “rural democracy” is not only false, but reactionary and dangerous. Workers and youth should take a warning from his claim that in 1956 the “traditional village gave the lead to the working class,” as it represented “commune democracy, coming from ancient village culture.”

Trotsky repeatedly explained that the peasantry cannot play an independent political role, but is compelled to follow either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. In the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Tsarist autocracy, backed by the liberal bourgeoisie, was able to mobilise the peasantry, in the form of the army, to crush the working class. In 1917, the working class, under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, was able to win over the peasantry and establish the first workers’ state in the world.

In 1956 in Sri Lanka, Bandaranaike mobilised layers of the Sinhala rural petty bourgeoisie as a base of support for his government against the working class. Amid a rising wave of strikes, he strengthened the anti-democratic Public Security Act in March 1958 and shortly after imposed a 10-month state of emergency.

Karunaratne is invoking this experience under conditions of a far deeper crisis of capitalism in Sri Lanka and internationally to subordinate working people to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe faction of the ruling class and cultivate a base of support among the rural petty bourgeoisie that will be directed against workers and youth. It should not be forgotten that Wickremesinghe was part of the UNP government that gave the green light to military-backed death squads to massacre 60,000 rural youth in 1988–1990.

The Socialist Equality Party warns that the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government will be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in imposing the austerity demands of international finance capital and suppressing the resistance of workers and the urban and rural poor. The SEP is confident that the working class can win broad layers of the oppressed peasantry to its side in a revolutionary struggle to establish a workers’ and peasants’ government as part of the broader fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally. This requires a relentless struggle for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie and their pseudo-left apologists such as Karunaratne.

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