

Sri Lanka: “Our battle goes beyond elections” - Nagamuwa

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Duminda Nagamuwa from the Frontline Socialist Party (FLSP), which was formed by a breakaway faction of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is among the candidates contesting the upcoming presidential election. Nagamuwa is representing an alliance of leftist political parties. A prominent member of the FLSP, Nagamuwa also served as the Convener of the Inter University Students’ Federation (IUSF) for several years. He sat down with *The Nation* to explain why he chose to come forward as a candidate from the left and what the FLSP hopes to accomplish.

Q: The FSP was hardly in the news during recent times. Are you attempting to use this election to reignite interest to target a general election?

You must be aware of the reasons for forming the FLSP in the first place. We initially conducted a struggle from within the JVP. However, there was an organized attempt to disrupt that struggle. Therefore, we had no option but to break away and go our own way. We formed the Movement for People’s Struggle as a result of that. We also experienced state repression. Our comrades Lalith and Kugan are still missing. We tried to hold a convention, but comrades Kumar and Dimuthu were also abducted several days before the convention.

You might say that we’re after popularity, but whether we like it or not, such elections are the only way for us to enter the political arena. That is not something we are worried about. However, the main focus should be on our policies, whether our views connect with the problems faced by the people and whether we actually address those issues.

I should also clarify our stand on elections. The conducting of elections does not necessarily mean a country has democracy. If you look at our elections, the minds of the voters are already preconditioned by the time Election Day arrives. J.R. Jayewardene, for example, did not possess the kind of resources that Mahinda Rajapaksa has now to condition people’s minds during elections. As such, he mostly used tactics of violent intimidation.

However, in today’s age, the media plays a pivotal role in conditioning the minds of voters. Therefore, a government does not need to rely so much on the violent tactics of the past, though that might well change depending on the situation. This form of conditioning by media is how election campaigns are conducted today.

Q: If that is the case, how do you hope to use the election stage?

Let’s first talk about the JVP. One of the major problems that arose with the JVP was that they came to regard the electoral battlefield as their major battlefield. I say that, because the ‘pitch’ that is this electoral battlefield, has been prepared in advance to suit those in power. The rulers also play the role of match referee. They even make the rules of the game. President Rajapaksa, as you know, started his election campaign over 1½ months before the election was even announced. He jumped the starter’s gun and has already run several laps before the others even got started. This alone should be enough evidence to show that this election is never going to be a fair one.

While this is unfair, we have to nevertheless acknowledge that the people's interest now lie with this system. For many, politics only applies to them when there is an election. This is completely the wrong attitude because any vote that is cast after being under the heel of capitalist politics for so long is never going to be an independent vote. The voters' minds have already been preconditioned to vote a certain way. As such, we hope to ignite other battlefields to take our struggle forward. We will use the election campaign platform for this purpose. The electoral battlefield is never going to be our primary battlefield.

We have no intention of contesting every single election because these elections are a trap for leftist parties. It prevents them from forming a strong political force to take forward the leftist struggle. This was what happened to the JVP.

Q: What do you mean by other battlefields? Are you suggesting mass street protests?

We have to focus on the struggles of trade unions, farmers' organizations and fisheries organizations as these struggles are disadvantages to the rulers. The people have a lot more say when it comes to these struggles. However, whenever we mention such struggles, people automatically worry that it means a disturbance of the peace. We have seen how some complain in the media that such protests on the roads prevent them from going to some place. There is a serious issue here. When the rights of the people have been violated, you need to protest. However, if an individual compares the problems faced by the protestors to some inconvenience faced by him or her, that shows we have a serious issue with democracy. Individuality has taken over our society. This is a tactic that was used in the past with the caste system, divide and rule policy in colonial times and the communal politics that subsequently came into being.

A society based on the individual that does not take the needs of the collective into account is never going to become a just society. As long as it continues, the status quo would remain.

Q: You are a former convener of the Inter University Students' Federation. How do you see the issues faced by those students?

We are firm in our stand that education should never be a commodity. Privatizing education is only going to lower the quality of that education and curb the opportunities available for the oppressed classes to obtain higher education. The university students are primarily struggling against the government's attempts to make education such a commodity. We support that struggle. In a socialist form of government, we would ensure that services such as education and health are free from privatization.

Q: The executive presidency has been the most talked about topic of the campaign. As a presidential candidate, what is your position regarding it?

Clearly, the executive presidency is anti-democratic in nature as it dangerously centralizes power in the hands of one individual. We oppose the executive presidency because of that. However, why cast aside all other slogans in favor of abolishing the executive presidency?

There is no question that the balance of power has to shift, but that by itself will not solve core issues.

For example, the Constitutions of 1972 or 1978 were never put before the people for approval. By contrast, when forming a village welfare society or other group, people debate vigorously on the wording of the constitutions of such groups. However, we have no say on the formulation of laws that govern our lives.

The common opposition is now talking of introducing a new Constitution. Who is going to draft it? The chief architects are likely to be Maithripala Sirisena, Ranil Wickremesinghe, Chandrika Kumaratunga and maybe G.L. Peiris if he switches sides. It will be approved by Parliament. Again, the people will have no say.

However, are they prepared to convene a constitutional council? I don't mean a parliamentary council. This council should be made up of representatives of trade unions, farmers' organizations, fisheries organizations, students' organizations and others. They should be the ones tasked with drafting a new Constitution.

Let's take the common opposition since they're the ones who are talking about restoring democracy. But this is clearly a power play on their part. Even their agreement has holes. The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) says they'll only be involved for 100 days. Ranil Wickremesinghe has joined because he wants to be prime minister. Chandrika Bandaranaike has joined as she wants to take the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) back to the Bandaranaike clan. Maithripala plays the part of King Sirisangabo, but we don't believe he has any intention of making such a sacrifice. Then there's Champika Ranawaka, who bears a grudge against the government for using the Bodu Bala Sena and supplanting him as the leader of Sinhala Buddhist political forces. The fact that the JHU would only be involved in the Sirisena government for 100 days clearly indicates that this is an attempt to replace Mahinda so that the leadership of Sinhala Buddhist political forces will go back to Ranawaka.

This is what we're faced with today. As such, both these parties are simply trying to further their own political power. There is no people centered agenda in both camps.

Q: How do you see the role played by the JVP at this election?

The JVP is clearly faced with a conundrum. This is because they're trying helping two different classes achieve their political goals. They changed their stance so many times during the past few weeks. We accept their argument that Mahinda Rajapaksa cannot contest a third time. However, that is not because of a constitutional issue. There are plenty of sound political arguments regarding why Rajapaksa cannot become president again. However, in the end, comrade Anura Kumara Dissanayake said the JVP won't allow anyone to tear the Constitution apart. How can a self-respecting leftist party talk about upholding this Constitution?

People are now asking us why we're not prepared to accept the lesser of two evils and fielding our own candidate. This was not how it was before. Back in 2000/2001 the slogan 'unuth ekai, munuth ekai' (they are both the same) gained prominence in society. However, after 2004, that slogan was jettisoned. People came to accept the theory of choosing the lesser of two evils. But what's the use of choosing whether you'll be eaten by the Lion or the Tiger? You'll still be eaten in the end. The goal should be to not be killed and eaten.

The JVP has now turned into peculiar sales representatives. On the one hand, they ask people not to go to Mahinda's shop. But they haven't opened a shop of their own. Nor are they telling people to go to another shop. This is irresponsibility in its worst form. At a highly crucial time when a political party needs to make their stand clear, they hint that people should vote for Maithripala without telling them. They're not prepared to take responsibility for people's decisions. There's no question that they believe they can perhaps rope in some of Maithripala's supporters to their own fold in future. That is their ultimate goal and such tactics are what prompted us to break away from the JVP in the first place.

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P.S.

*<http://www.nation.lk/edition/interview/item/35972-our-battle-goes-beyond-elections-nagamuwa.html>