

# Sri Lanka: Will Sajith survive leadership?

Monday 27 September 2010, by [KARUNARATNE Vickramabahu \("Bahu"\)](#) (Date first published: 26 September 2010).

Sajith Premadasa is slowly but steadily, taking steps to assume the leadership of the party. Thus the UNP leadership crisis could lead to a split unless Ranil takes a tactical step back. All those who are supporting Sajith still accept that Ranil is the wisest political leader who understands relevant political issues. Some consider him as the person with a vision for the party; they feel that he has been a shrewd political leader and it is unfair and wrong to construe that he is greedy for power. However, they all agree that the majority of the UNP members spread throughout the country want a change of leadership. Among those an overwhelming majority of party members want Sajith Premadasa as the UNP leader. Many have suggested that Ranil should give up the position of party leader and remain as opposition leader.

## Party leadership

Though Ranil is aware of this situation in the party, he insists on staying on. The radicals emphasize that there is no problem of him remaining as the opposition leader in parliament. What they want is for him to give the party leadership to Sajith Premadasa, because Sajith is the popular choice. Apparently there is a countrywide consensus among UNPers for Sajith Premadasa to take over the reins of the party. Nevertheless there is no claim that Ranil's political vision is wrong, but his tactics and the popular image are not acceptable. Thus I sum up the debate within the UNP.

Sajith says that if he comes to power that he will open a new Premadasa era. What does he mean by Premadasa era? That can be seen in several different angles. President Premadasa got elected with the help of the JVP. The last few weeks during the presidential elections, the JVP changed sides and supported Premadasa. That certainly helped Premadasa to get 50% in the first count. Hence, having assumed power, president Premadasa was keen to come into an agreement with Wijeweera. He spent much effort towards this aim. However, the military wing of the JVP opposed any reconciliation. Then Premadasa Sr called an all party conference to get approval for the Operation Combine; a politicalised repression that led over 50 000 deaths and disappearances. On the other hand, President Premadasa launched an islandwide reform programme aimed at marginalized and discriminated villages.

## Did not change

Many who suffered due to caste discriminations were benefited by these programmes. Though Premadasa did not associate with Sinhala chauvinist organisations, he did not favour the provincial councils or the devolution of political power. Also, he did not change the economic policy of Neo Liberalism. So, when Sajith promises to bring back the Premadasa era it cannot draw universal approval. Surely we do not need a repetition of killings and disappearances in the south; nor the military and political repression. In such an unfortunate happening, at least we need the assurances of social democracy to face the politics of that second era of Premadasa. What we need at the moment is a popular social democratic force to challenge the dictatorship based on Sinhala chauvinism. Can Sajith give leadership to such a movement based on town and country poor? I do not see such a transformation.

UNP leadership in the past took a dual form: a combination of two people complementing each

other; DS& Oliver, Dudley&JR, and JR& Premadasa Sr. In such a combination one played the role of a popular leader, the stage actor with speeches full of humour and piercing slogans. The other was the sober theoretician with a pragmatic strategy. It was such combination that challenged the attacks from the collective leadership of the left. Strangely enough the UNP today has failed to achieve even such a dual leadership that complements each other. On the contrary, the two leaders are competing with each other; Sajith speaking to the downtrodden with the help of social democratic elements while Ranil is trotting the world to gain support of international powers of Neo Liberalism. The latter programme has no meaning as Mahinda has become the darling of global capitalism. In spite of few sharp words from Washington, Mahinda is saluted for creating a better investment climate. International bourgeois press praises Lanka of Mahinda as an attractive place to visit. On the other hand, Sajith has not established any credibility within the working class. It is true there is a base for him within the urban petty bourgeoisie, small traders and services. But the organized workers movement is still hostile to the tradition of Premadasa.

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