

Sri Lanka - NSSP tactics and strategy: an alternative view

Saturday 29 November 2014, by [GAMAGE Jerard](#), [LANKAPELI Dharmasiri](#), [WIJETHILAKA Niel](#) (Date first published: 3 March 2013).

Mahinda Rajapaksa's regime retains the support of most Sinhala people. His government has a parliamentary majority exceeding two-thirds. The subordination of the public service, police service and judiciary to the government is such, that state and regime are more-or-less indistinct. The minorities are either cowed through violence or its threat; or their political representatives have been co-opted through ministerial office and state patronage.

Working class organisations have collapsed. The struggle of free trade zone workers against the proposed private sector pension scheme in May 2011 is a rare success. The longest running industrial action in decades, the three-month long strike of university academics in 2012, ended with the government reaffirming previously promised salary increments. The grip of the state over the mass media, even where privately-owned; and the growing militarisation of state and society are suffocating the weak opposition.

Yet, despite the unbearable cost-of-living, rampant corruption, and authoritarianism of the regime, its re-election (even in a free and fair poll) is almost guaranteed. Consequently, there will be enormous pressure from opponents of the regime for the electoral opposition to unite its scattered forces and to concentrate its campaign against the government. We can recall such pressure in 1994, causing the split of Vasudeva Nanayakkara and his supporters who abandoned the Party for the SLFP-led coalition. Such was also the experience in 1960 and 1964 of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, leading to its popular front with the SLFP from 1964 and continuing to this day.

The political line of this report has been debated on many occasions in the Political Bureau (PB) of the NSSP. The crux of the crisis within the NSSP is the issue of political alliances (class independence); and the question (strategy and tactics) of how to advance from a one-sided relationship of forces, after decades of decline, disorientation and disarray within the workers and Left movement.

On 11 February 2013, our Party signed a memorandum of understanding with the United National Party (UNP) - the historic representative of the capitalist class - along with six small parties of petty-bourgeois ideology; a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) legislator; as well as a group of NGO leaders supportive of the UNP, to formalise an alliance of oppositional forces. It is not clear if the TNA (dominant representative of Tamil nationalism since the defeat of the LTTE) has joined. The United Socialist Party (affiliate of CWI) is also a member of this alliance.

The 'Agitation of the Opposition' (Vypakshaya Virodhaya) has a 7-point programme: strengthening democracy and fundamental rights; national reconciliation; ensuring equality of law (sic); social justice; eradication of bribery and corruption; international vision; and rebuilding the domestic economy. There is nothing remarkable here: as every parliamentary opposition movement has said the same when out of power, and done the opposite when in government.

These are vague and ambiguous slogans, with no concrete commitments on even democratic

demands such as abolition of the executive presidency (to reverse centralisation of power in one individual); full implementation of the 13th Amendment (land and police powers for the provinces); or the activation of independent state bodies with responsibility for elections, the public service, the judicial service, bribery and corruption, human rights etc.; and implementation of all the recommendations of the post-war presidential Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission. In fact, there is only one point that unites these misfits and oddities – some former supporters of the government and the war, and long-time opponents of the Left and power-sharing with the Tamil nation – and that is: “to throw out the Rajapaksa regime”.

According to UNP leader, Ranil Wickremasinghe, and also comrade Bahu, this is not an electoral front and the constituents will make their own political choices at the next presidential and/or general election (expected by the UNP in 2014). Indeed, it is on this premise of safeguarding class independence, in the electoral arena, that the PB and Central Committee have gone along with comrade Bahu’s line so far.

Of course, there is no one in our Party who does not want an immediate end to this oppressive, neoliberal and racist regime. Of course, there is no one in our Party who finds fault with joint actions for the overthrow of the regime, including with the UNP.

It is true that the memorandum does not declare itself to be the manifesto of a future electoral alliance. But our fear is that this is precisely what it signals: the maturation of a political project for a grand coalition centred on the UNP led by Ranil Wickremasinghe; to confront the governing coalition centred on the bourgeois populist Sri Lanka Freedom Party led by Mahinda Rajapaksa ... and the tragicomedy of the Left represented in both camps, rather than as alternative to both!

If we do not differentiate ourselves from this UNP-led alliance now, we will ourselves be unable to explain, come 2014, why it is not “sectarian” or “divisive” or “playing into the hands of the government” – not to support or join a political cum electoral alliance – against the unrelenting juggernaut of the Rajapaksa brothers.

We categorically denounce the idea that the ‘liberal democratic’ complexion of the UNP leader somehow makes him (and by extension, his party) tolerable to the Left, even in our extreme despair. Wickremasinghe’s (personal) support for limited power-sharing and incomplete democratic reforms, in the form of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (1987) and the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (2011) is only to capture the Tamil vote, knowing that he lacks the ability to secure the majority of the Sinhala electorate.

The UNP is the party of government that engineered the anti-Tamil riots of July 1983 and sparked the war. The UNP is the party of government that drowned in blood tens of thousands of Sinhala youth during the second JVP insurrection (1987-1989). The UNP is the party of government that obstructed full implementation of regional self-government for the Tamil-majority North and East after 1987. The UNP is the party of opposition that blocked the 2000 draft Constitution that promised to share power with the Tamil-majority region. Ranil Wickremasinghe was a leading member of the UNP throughout this period, and its main leader from 1994 onwards.

Most recently, in the struggle against the impeachment of the Chief Justice (December 2012-January 2013), the UNP leader once again appeared to be passive in the campaign against the Rajapaksa regime’s attacks on judicial independence and supportive of the government’s self-evident excuse for authoritarianism in the form of ‘parliamentary supremacy’. Currently, when the Muslim minority are facing Sinhala-Buddhist racism, the UNP leader adds fuel to the fire with his comments on halal certification of foods.

The UNP leader has not been able to unite his own party behind his leadership. His acts and omissions cause doubt and suspicion whether he is against the Mahinda Rajapaksa regime or accomplice to it. He has no reason to oppose the government's economic programme because it is a repackaged version of the neoliberal 'Regaining Sri Lanka' policies that he tried and failed to implement between 2002 and 2004. In fact, the current urban, tourist and some physical infrastructure development projects of the current government are plans from the UNP regime led by Wickramasinghe's Uncle in the late 1970s that were suspended following the war.

What are the activities of the Vypakshaya Virodhaya? Since last year, it consists mainly of propaganda rallies organised by the UNP, on whose platform comrade Bahu speaks as leader of the NSSP. There was the joint May Day event in Jaffna last year, at which one of us spoke on behalf of the NSSP; and recently there was a protest organised by the TNA again in Jaffna in which the joint Opposition including comrade Bahu and other NSSP comrades also participated. However, outside of the protests in Jaffna, these rallies are for the UNP faithful who are mobilised to participate in them by district-level leaders of that party.

Let us underline this point: we are in favour of broad and mass agitational campaigns on democratic and social issues, even with the premier party of the traditional capitalist class. Yes, "strike together", but do not forget to also "march separately".

The memorandum alerts us to the dynamic which is in motion: and it is one of a rainbow alliance - including the Left, the Right, the parties of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim small and medium businesspeople, and Sinhala nationalist forces.

We should recognise that those sections of the radical Left and progressive movement that are not enamoured by the born-again democrat and pro-minority Wickremasinghe, believe the Vypakshaya Virodhaya to be nothing other than a campaign to rehabilitate the UNP leader's public reputation and to raise him to the presidency. In his inability to motivate the UNP faithful at grassroots level; to unite his parliamentarians behind his leadership; to compete with Mahinda Rajapaksa as champion of the interests of the Sinhala Buddhists; to convince the 'new' capitalists that he can represent them better than the current regime - the UNP leader is forced to reach outside his party and his class for electoral support from minorities and progressives.

It is disorienting to the Party, when comrade Bahu differentiates between bourgeois democratic tasks as preliminary to socialist tasks ("social transformation must be preceded by the completion of democratic tasks left behind by the wicked rulers - Tamil national problem, removal of dictatorship, agrarian reorganisation, countering IMF dictates etc.", *Daily Mirror*, 27 February 2013), in implicit justification for an 'agitational' alliance with the bourgeois UNP and an 'electoral' alliance with petty-bourgeois organisations such as the Democratic Peoples' Front of Mano Ganesan and the Muslim-Tamil National Alliance of Azath Salley.

It is harmful to the integrity and reputation of our Party when its leading personality is perceived within the broader Left, working class and progressive movements, as an ally of the leader-for-life of the UNP - the party that is legitimately hated for supporting imperialism, neo-liberalism, smashing the trade union movement, attacking the free health and education system and subsidies for the poor, and for instigating violence and war on the Tamil nation.

It is debilitating to the Party, that its own revolutionary programme is now buried under the so-called 'liberal democratic' demands and slogans of the Vypakshaya Virodhaya. It is not only that reference to socialist transformation is absent from the political propaganda of the Party; there are no demands for structural reforms that have an anti-capitalist content. Both within our ranks and outside of it, the NSSP is now only defined as the uncompromising defenders of the right of self-

determination of the Tamil nation and fellow-traveller of Tamil nationalism. Nothing more. There are no independent political campaigns in the name of the Party – only the (important) broad campaigns on the truth and justice for the disappeared and for release of all political prisoners. There is no campaign to grow the Party.

It is evident that the pull of the UNP reflects the utter marginalisation of the Left; and the overpowering feeling of helplessness in our ranks and circles. However, support in any form for the UNP sows confusion and suspicion of the NSSP within the working class and the radical Left.

So, what should our strategy be in this period, and in our circumstances?

We seek to construct an anti-capitalist bloc that acts together in the trade unions, in social struggles and in the electoral arena, and independently of both capitalist parties. Within this process and project, we seek maximum collaboration with those who stand for the revolutionary transformation of state and society.

There is no possibility to construct such a political instrument with the dominant Sinhala radical party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP—Peoples Liberation Front), because it is infected to its core with Sinhala nationalism. However, unlike some comrades within our Party, we do not believe that the left split from the JVP – the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) – should be dismissed as no different from its parent party. The FSP has politically broken with the JVP's Sinhala nationalist, pro-war and one-time popular frontist politics. Its youth and student supporters are the most critical of the JVP ideology. The leaders of the FSP are open to dialogue and joint actions with the NSSP. But we are unable to engage more intensely with the FSP and others because they are repelled by our alliance with the UNP. The hatred felt towards the UNP by large sections of the poor and oppressed, and their historical memory of its murderous past, cannot be underestimated.

We do have major differences with the FSP on the national question. They use the slogan of “equality for the Tamil people”, but do not recognise the right of the Tamil nation to self-determination. We do not conceal our perspective and our criticisms of the FSP in debates with them. However, we do not think that the FSP should be discarded, or dismissed as non-Leftists, simply because it does not share our ideology. Why should its ideological positions be seen as fixed and unchanging, and not subject to modification?

Comrade Bahu condemns the FSP because they do not come out in support for the 13th Amendment and therefore the concept of devolution of power to the minorities. However, certain constituents of the Vypakshaya Virodhaya have opposed the full implementation of the 13th Amendment previously, and from the perspective of Sinhala nationalism. In fact, even the Tamil National Alliance rejects the 13th Amendment as inadequate and no basis for reform of the unitary state. The 13th Amendment is not where the line should be drawn in the sand between friends and foes. It is simply of convenience to justify the present course of the Party in its alliance with the UNP, allowing for softened criticism of the UNP and its leader, while directing fire at sections of the Left that are non-racist but do not (yet) understand the critical issue of state reform and power-sharing with minority nations and communities.

For decades, the NSSP has been identified as intransigent defender of the democratic and national rights of the Tamil nation, including and up to the right to self-determination. This has won it the respect of large sections of the Tamil people and progressive Sinhala people. However, another precious part of our revolutionary Marxist heritage is our unwavering opposition to coalition politics (popular fronts) with capitalist parties. This is not something we learned only from political texts; it is the bitter fruit we have been made to taste since 1964.

There are no short cuts for the Left to take power. The Left cannot ride bourgeois or petty-bourgeois parties towards victory. It cannot leap-frog the crisis of the workers movement and the crisis of Left and the Socialist project. There is no substitute for the patient mobilisation of the working class and the oppressed; or the strengthening and renewal of our battered organisations. There is no contradiction between our larger political project of a mass party of workers and poor peasants; and the construction of our own revolutionary organisation.

Once a Party of some hundreds, we are now reduced to a few dozen. Once a Party that influenced many thousands of workers, our trade unions are now confined to a handful of old industries and a few semi-government workplaces. Once a Party that was attractive to radical youth and women, now they can be counted on the fingers of both hands. Once a Party that actively participated in debates on international politics and the application of Marxist theory in our context, today we only rehearse some old ideas and at best debate matters of tactics.

We have fallen into a deep well, with no perspective of climbing out. At least now, we should honestly and self-critically confront ourselves and be determined to look for ways to begin the climb.

Niel Wijethilaka, Jerard Gamage and Dharmasiri Lankapeli

P.S.

The authors are members of the Political Bureau (PB) of the NSSP.