

Sri Lanka: Interview with FSP leader Duminda Nagamuwa

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Three weeks after the election, the new government has introduced an interim budget. Meanwhile, some of the promises in the 100-days-program are being carried out or have already been done. However, certain questions still remain of the 100-days-program. In this juncture, Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) Politburo Member, Duminda Nagamuwa spoke to The Nation on current developments.

The issue of Kumar Gunaratnam is being raised by several sides. The FSP too held a protest over the matter on Saturday. What is the FSP position on the matter?

During the past few years, there were many, who lost the right to do politics in this country. The left movement, media, Tamil people and broadly speaking those who have criticized the Rajapaksa Government were threatened in various ways. Some were killed and some disappeared. There was a clear threat to freedom of expression and even to the lives of the dissidents. Kumar Gunaratnam was one such person.

Even according to the existing law, Gunaratnam is a citizen of this country, and was educated and did politics here for decades. He had to leave because he was not accorded the protection according to the law. He was abducted on April 7, 2012, and there is a police entry with regard to the event. But it has not been investigated. If something was done at the time, Gunaratnam may not have had a reason to leave the country.

Media Minister, Gayantha Karunathilaka recently invited all those who left the country for fear of their lives to return. Some activists, who left the country did so by violating immigration and emigration laws. But while inviting them to return, the government is taking steps against the person who had returned already.

We think this is a result of a pre-determined decision to deprive Gunaratnam of engaging in politics. Also, it is a warning to other activists as well. Once they return, they might also end up in similar situations. We urge the government not to send people away while inviting others in. We will continue our struggle in the political arena as well as within the legal framework as well.

So, the FSP believes that there is a lot to be done to ensure democratic rights?

Absolutely. The government has proposed a 100-Day-Program, and has created a mentality where the people focus on the program while forgetting the other steps that could be done. Many of these other steps can be done quickly, easily and with practically at no cost. But the government is yet to do or even speak on these matters.

The government is yet to take action for those who were abducted, killed or are in detention. President Sirisena received a high percentage of votes in areas where this is a continuing issue. However, the government has still been silent on it. There is also the proposed electronic identity

card program, which the government is silent about.

There are also important issues such as the kidney disease in Rajarata. The government has to clearly state their stances against the multi-national corporations on this matter.

Furthermore, there is the issue of the military getting involved in the civil affairs. Ever since the emergency regulations have been removed, the government has released gazette notices giving the Minister of Defense to call for the military when the Police is deemed incapable to deal with a situation. This is how the army got involved in Rathupaswala. We are planning to go to the courts to stop the issuing of the gazette notice which is renewed each month. The next gazette notice is due on February 3, and we plan to go to courts before that. We think other interested parties will also fight for this with us.

Speaking of the courts, what do you think of the recent drama regarding the Chief Justice?

There is no doubt that Shirani Bandaranayake was a victim of political revenge by the Rajapaksa Government. Her removal was illegal.

During that period, one question that was raised was the issue of sovereignty of Parliament and judiciary. Debate was raised as to which was more supreme. What we think is that the issue should never have arisen. The supreme sovereignty lies with the people. However, even the judiciary is not independent in that sense as it serves primarily the ruling class. For example, it is through the judiciary that the rulers try to hinder trade union action by requesting for injunction orders for example. Of course, the appointment of a new Chief Justice will have some changes, but the main features of the judiciary will remain the same.

The government seems to be doing well in giving people concessions through the budget as it has many benefits for the people. What is your idea on this?

Actually, we are still to see the entire picture. There are several facts to be considered here for us to do so.

Firstly, we have a question as to the procedure by which this was introduced. Usually, the first step is to introduce the amendments to the Appropriation Bill. Then only the Budget Speech takes place. However, in this case there was a 'Budget Speech' of sorts before anything else.

Secondly, this is a Budget which is introduced with an election around the corner. Therefore, it is obvious that the government has to give some concessions. This was the case with the last Budget of the Rajapaksa Government also.

Thirdly, the economic strategies of the government are still not clear. There have been some points of criticism over the years of government fiscal policies. The main sources of government revenue were taxes, borrowing and selling government properties. The bulk of the taxes are paid by the poor section of the people. On the other hand, extensive borrowing has increased the debt burden of the country. Meanwhile on the expenditure side, there was cutting down on welfare such as education and health. The salaries of the public servants did not improve substantially. While there has been some developments in these aspects, it is still unclear as to how the government is planning to replace the revenue it is losing and pay for increased expenditure.

Although the government has promised an election at the end of the 100-Day-Program, it has not officially announced it. So, how are we to say that the Budget is proposed with an election around the corner with no doubt?

They will have to go for an election for the simple fact that there is a cold war between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP). That can be said by what is happening in the Parliament. The Opposition is stronger than the government. So, an election is on the cards at any event.

But what we now have is a national government. There is no real need for an election?

The argument for a national government was put forward as a weapon to attract all opposed to Mahinda Rajapaksa. After Rajapaksa was defeated, the argument has no real need. The cold war between the SLFP and the UNP is now an obvious fact. This is really a politically unstable situation although it appears to be totally the opposite. Only an election can resolve this power struggle.

At such an unstable juncture, a Left movement should seize the opportunity to further its cause rather than try to prop-up the system. However, what the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna doing is helping the system. It is in the National Executive Council which is apparently running the government as a 'kitchen Cabinet,' and is also preparing a code of conduct for politicians. Thereby, they are helping the system to survive with temporary reforms. The government led by Maithripala Sirisena and the UNP is using the JVP to add credibility to the government. The JVP wants to increase its number of seats in the Parliament. But it does not see that it is being used in the meantime.

Chamara Sumanapala and Duminda Nagamuwa

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*<http://www.nation.lk/edition/interview/item/37929-there-is-a-cold-war-between-slfp-and-unp-nagamuwa.html>