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Sri Lanka: “People are becoming conscious of the futility of the politics of racism”

Sunday 13 September 2015, by [KARUNARATNE Vickramabahu \(“Bahu”\)](#), [RAMAKRISHNAN, T.](#) (Date first published: 7 September 2015).

Interview with Vickramabahu Karunarathne, general secretary of the Nava Sama Samaj Party (NSSP).

VICKRAMABAHU KARUNARATHNE, the 72-year-old general secretary of the Nava Sama Samaj Party (NSSP), does not represent a strong political formation in terms of numerical strength. But his views are quite forceful, and he has been forthright in expressing opinions on issues concerning good governance, freedom of the media, and corruption. When asked how many votes his party secured in the recent parliamentary elections, he came his reply: “We contested in five districts and got about 300 votes.”

Dr Vickramabahu completed his doctorate in electromagnetic theory from Cambridge University, United Kingdom, during 1967-70. He joined the Lanka Sama Samaj Party in 1962 and founded the NSSP following his expulsion from the LSSP in 1972. A councillor in the Dehiwala urban local body adjoining Colombo, he was an important member of the National Executive Council set up by the government to strengthen democracy which included key figures among those who took part in, to quote him, the “January 8 Upsurge”.

In an interview with *Frontline* he discusses various issues ranging from the impact of the elections on the future of Sri Lankan polity, the Tamil question, to the plight of workers in plantations. Excerpts:

Q: How do you view the results of the parliamentary elections?

The elections have demonstrated once again that people have moved sharply away from fascist, communal forces represented by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. This trend could be seen in the presidential elections in January this year. There is a positive gain from this election to show that more and more people are becoming conscious of the futility of the politics of racism. The elections have also reinforced the need for strengthening liberal, democratic forces in the country.

Q: What is your take on the vote share of the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) which is, according to my calculations, around 40 per cent? Does this mean that a substantial section of the voters in this country supports Rajapaksa, who was the UPFA’s candidate for the post of Prime Minister?

Let me go by the number of votes polled by the UPFA, which is around 47 lakh. Of this figure, you have to remove at least 15 lakh, which, I believe, is the share of Maithripala Sirisena, the head of the UPFA. So, only about 30 lakh votes are Mahinda [Rajapaksa]’s. And, for this, I say, “hats off, Mahinda [Rajapaksa].” But, as I have said earlier, more and more people are moving away from him, which is the reality. However, what I feel is that had Maithripala acted much earlier against

Mahinda, it would have been better. This would have further eroded the appeal of Mahinda.

Q: Was it not against the spirit of democracy for Maithripala Sirisena to say before the parliamentary elections that he would not make Mahinda Rajapaksa Prime Minister even if the UPFA were to get a majority?

No. Maithripala was compelled to take that position in order to defeat undemocratic, fascist forces which was the best way to do it. I strongly believe that Mahinda should be stopped from capturing power again. I say this as I know him well. He and I worked together at one point of time.

Q: Is that so? When was that?

It was around 1990 that we worked together on issues regarding the working class. I had even taken him to Australia in 1992 when the Green Left movement wanted a leader of such a background to take part in its campaign.

Though he was then an extremely Left radical, he was silent on the national question, the Tamil question. I had sensed that he had all the parameters of some kind of a fascist leader. I had found that he could be a dangerous leader. So, I had opposed him from the period [in April 2004] he became the Prime Minister. I have been opposed to him since then.

Q: How do you view the performance of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna?

There was certainly attraction [among people] towards the party. Leaders of the JVP talked in a sensible manner on many issues. But, in the final stages of the election campaign, their language was no different from others', especially on the Tamil question. By then it had become a straight contest—either the UNP or Mahinda and the UPFA. So, the people preferred to support the UNP.

Q: Were you approached by the UNP?

Yes. They even offered me a slot in the national list. But I did not take it. For ideological reasons, especially their economic policies, I cannot join them. We contested in five electoral districts on our own. We did not get any seat and we got only 300 votes, but our campaign against Mahinda was very successful. Our main goal was to defeat him. Leaving aside our differences with the UNP or others on economic issues, we are willing to work along with others to safeguard democracy or on social issues.

Q: What should the new government do to address the Tamil question?

First, the 13th Constitutional Amendment should be implemented fully. When we say the 13th Amendment should be implemented, this also means the devolution of powers on police and land to the administration of the provincial council. Second, the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) should be carried out.

As for investigation into any crime, there should be a credible domestic investigation mechanism which is acceptable to the international community. We have enough resources, enough people to carry out this task. Then, the merger of the North and the East.

Q: Is that possible?

Why not? When you can create Greater Colombo, citing commonality as the reason, why not the merger of the North and the East? History and commonality demand it.

Q: What is your stand on federalism?

I am not sure whether the TNA [Tamil National Alliance] has understood the concept fully. But, the bottom line is greater autonomy to provinces. This can be done under the framework of a unitary state. Look how India is managing its affairs. It is not a federal country but more powers have been given to States.

Q: What should be done to improve the lot of the people in the plantations?

At present, there are three or four Pradeshiya Sabhas covering each plantation. This is why they are not able to tackle effectively the private managements of the plantations, which do not take these local bodies seriously. So, each plantation should be made into one urban local body, say municipal council. This will facilitate better development of the areas.

T. RAMAKRISHNAN and Vickramabahu Karunaratne

P.S.

*<http://www.frontline.in/world-affairs/people-are-becoming-conscious-of-the-futility-of-the-politics-of-racism/article7599469.ece>