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Debates in the NSSP: Why we formed a public faction in the Sri Lankan section of the FI

Sunday 20 July 2014, by [AMARASINGHE Suranjaya](#), [GAMAGE Jerard](#), [GAMINI Terrance](#), [JAYATILAKE Linus](#), [LANKAPELI Dharmasiri](#), [LEWLIYADDA Upali](#), [Pushpamala](#), [RATNAYAKE Champika](#), [RATNAYAKE Mahinda](#), [SKANTHAKUMAR Balasingham](#), [WIJETHILAKA Niel](#), [WIMALARATHNA A. G.](#) (Date first published: 29 June 2014).

Why we formed a public faction in the Sri Lankan section

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This text (for circulation) elaborates the communication to the International dated 12 May 2014 notifying the declaration of a public faction in the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) by a group of its leading members. It also develops on the report of the political degeneration and organisational collapse of the NSSP submitted for the information of the meeting of the International Committee, dated 3 March 2013, by a group of Political Bureau members.

These three documents speak to the dual crisis of the Sri Lankan section - the inter-related problems of the crisis *in* the NSSP, and the crisis *of* the NSSP. Clashing political conclusions have been drawn by comrade Bahu's group and by the faction in response; but in truth neither has overcome the underlying problem: that is, the failure of the project that the NSSP represented and our collective incapacity to develop an alternative revolutionary socialist political programme and appropriate organisational form and culture relevant to our times.

The immediate trigger to the opposition to the General Secretary includes the question of the electoral alliances unilaterally negotiated by him with petit-bourgeois parties; the connexions between those parties and the traditional party of the capitalist class (United National Party); and the consequences for the identity and character of the Party.

In recent years comrade Bahu has promoted an electoral bloc between the NSSP and the Democratic Peoples' Front of Mano Ganeshan, and the National Unity Alliance of Azath Salley. These parties are both led by Colombo-based businessmen who happen to originate in communities of Hill Country Tamils and Muslims respectively. This fact of their ethnic minority identity, and their opposition to the Mahinda Rajapakse regime, is thought to be sufficient for the NSSP to contest elections on the lists fielded in the names of these petty-bourgeois formations; despite the fact that their election platforms have no anti-capitalist content and have no orientation towards the mass of the working class, most of whom are of Sinhala nationality.

In a period of neoliberal reaction and the weakness of the workers movement, these petty-bourgeois forces cleave to the ideology of the capitalist Right and are satellites of the United National Party (UNP). Thus, Azath Salley having formed an alliance with the NSSP for the 2013 provincial council elections in which comrade Bahu campaigned for Salley's candidates; contested himself on the list of the United National Party to secure his own election. Meanwhile Mano Ganeshan, on whose party list comrade Bahu was elected to the Dehiwela-Mount Lavinia Municipal Council in 2011, will

himself form an alliance with the UNP in the forthcoming general election (in late 2014 or early 2015) to ensure his own election to parliament. Whereas comrade Bahu has attempted to use these electoral alliances to balance the so-called agitational alliance with the UNP, in reality the balance-sheet is one of failure, including manipulation of the NSSP by these parties, and loss of the NSSP's political identity.

To the embarrassment of many, comrade Bahu's infatuation with the leader of the United National Party leads him to use his public journalism as a platform to defend Ranil Wickremesinghe from his critics within and without the UNP and to rehabilitate and whitewash the UNP leader as an embodiment of secular liberal democratic values in a state that according to the general secretary is on the fast-track to fascism. Bahu even uses his regular column in a bourgeois daily owned by the kinsman of the UNP leader to respond in writing to the criticisms that we have repeatedly raised within the leading bodies of the NSSP [1]

In a familiar manoeuvre, a lesson from the past ("...for the sake of definite objectives, to come to an agreement with the devil and his grandmother"), is recalled, at the point at which the greatest violence is about to be done to revolutionary marxism. (Significantly the same extract similarly out-of-context has been cited by a former regime apparatchik to canvass support for a "united front" with Mahinda Rajapakse in the face of the "clerical fascism" of the extreme racist Sinhala nationalist Bodhu Bala Sena and its backers within the regime including sections of the military!)

All the quotes from Trotsky cannot mask the obscenity of conflating (neo-)liberal democracy with early 20th century European social democracy (i.e. reformism), nor the emotive invocation of "fascism" without any argument of (i) its application to a dependent capitalist state; (ii) the approximation of the current authoritarian populist Sinhala Buddhist regime to even a "fascist-type" or "fascist-style", as Bahu variously describes it, one; and precisely how the "secularism"; "liberal" and "democratic" credentials of the opposition leader are manifested nor the assimilation of those values and principles by his political party and its supporters.

As for the "common action programme of the Left with the UNP", this is an empty-shell. It is only comrade Bahu who strives to will it into existence. It has no independent dynamic, no sections of the masses behind it, no strategy to overthrow the regime beyond substituting the leader of the opposition (Ranil Wickremesinghe) for the incumbent president. For those non-UNP forces that also believe longstanding antagonisms with the UNP to be secondary to the immediate task of removing the Mahinda Rajapakse cabal, there is no hesitation in extending support to the UNP and its leaders without the half-way house of "agitational front campaigns" such as the Samagi Balawegaya and its cardboard predecessor the Vypakshaya Virodaya.

Another serious error of the NSSP, but over a longer period, has been the question of its tactics in relation to Tamil nationalism. The NSSP has the correct position of supporting the right to self-determination of the Tamil nation. However, it wrongly applied this line by uncritically 'tail-ending' the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) - incidentally an organisation frequently denounced as "fascist" or "semi-fascist" by its left-wing critics within the Tamil nation, underscoring the elasticity of this term. Since the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the NSSP has simply re-positioned itself behind the pro-capitalist parliamentary Tamil National Alliance within Sri Lanka and behind the pro-LTTE diaspora organisations abroad.

The mistake was in equating the LTTE with the Tamil liberation struggle: in forming alliances with the reactionary Tamil leadership and not with the popular classes of the Tamil nation. The clear evidence of the dead-end into which we led ourselves is the elimination of our organised presence in the North and East (initially by the diktat and terror of the LTTE) and the inability to rebuild ourselves even five years after the end of the war because the NSSP did not differentiate itself

sufficiently from the LTTE. So, in the North and East as well as in the South, the NSSP is simply viewed as cheerleaders for the LTTE: a single-issue ('national question') political organisation.

These issues and more have been raised within the leading bodies of the Party for several years now. Only rarely has the debate been seriously joined by comrade Bahu and his supporters who have chosen to carry on their disastrous course regardless. There is no point in expending our energies in further internal debate because the Party exists now only in name and in the personality of its general secretary (hence, the constant reference in this text to comrade Bahu). Its cadre are barely a few dozen. Its branches are inactive. Its members without training in Marxism. Its press is irregular. Its last conference in 2008. A future conference would likely be 'packed' by ex-members pressed into action out of unquestioning loyalty to the general secretary; and therefore no credible arbiter of the differences within the Party.

Therefore, we have now decided to turn outwards and to do ourselves what we have been calling on the NSSP as a whole to do. We have not left the Party. We have not split the Party. We continue to participate in its framework, discharging our responsibilities within the Political Bureau, the Central Committee, and as leaders of trade unions historically linked to the Party. However, we have begun to organise ourselves as a public faction of the Party. We are making open what has been a poorly kept secret, which is that there are two incompatible lines within the Party. We know that these divergences are not unique to us as they find their expression (but not identically) in other Left parties inside and outside the government.

In recent weeks we have explained our perspectives at regional discussions attended by the broad Left. We have reconnected with many former cadre and sympathisers of the NSSP who peeled away in disgust or disappointment with the orientation of the Party in recent years. We are continuing our dialogue with the left-split from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, the Frontline Socialist Party which has itself been embroiled in internal crisis and fractured. We are also extending our solidarity to the struggles of university students who are an isolated front of courage and defiance of the repressive government and its agenda of privatisation of higher education and militarisation of its campuses.

On 1 July 2014 we launch a new paper, Vame Handa ('Left Voice'), as an instrument for our public interventions centred around 'Regrouping the Left'. We do not pretend to have answers to all our questions. Our appeal is that those of us on the Left opposed to the Rajapakse regime but not ready to embrace the neoliberal opposition in the name of 'lesser evilism'; should collaborate notwithstanding ideological differences on historical debates, nor past political identities. Our common objective is to construct an extra-parliamentary Left that takes up the struggles of the working class and popular masses; of the specially oppressed; of minority nationalities including the Tamil nation; and against capitalism and imperialism.

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/172-opinion/45902-false-assumptions-and-erroneous-theorisation-.html>. See on ESSF (article 32556), [On issues in debate in the Sri Lankan N SSP - Four articles](#).