

Sri Lanka: Let us build a Left alternative!

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These days the focus of most of the country is on the general election scheduled for 17th August 2015. People want to know how the victory achieved by Maithripala Sirisena after defeating Mahinda Rajapakse in the 8th January 2015 presidential election will be reflected in the representation of the contending political party in the new parliament.

The government formed by former Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) General-Secretary Sirisena with the United National Party (UNP) of Ranil Wickremasinghe is a result of a mass uprising against the racist, dictatorial government of Mahinda Rajapakse. It was a robbery of the wish of the people by one section of capitalists.

The 100 day *yahapalana* ('good governance') government fulfilled only a very few promises they have agreed. President Sirisena's attempt to get the majority of parliamentarians, from his own party, to vote for the 20th amendment to the Constitution for electoral reform ended in vain. Finally he was compelled to dissolve the parliament without fulfilling many promises including the Right to Information Act; the Audit Act; independent Commissions etc.

The chauvinist forces which were defeated by the non-racist pro-democracy forces on 8th of January raised its head thereafter. They are contesting the general election under the leadership of Mahinda Rajapakse. We can see some elements of the pro-Sirisena campaign, now supporting Rajapakse at this election; while others have left the SLFP to join with the UNP in its United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG).

The three main forces – the UNP-led United National Front for Good Governance; the SLFP-led United Peoples Freedom Alliance; and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has received the support of some progressive sections of civil society especially intellectuals and artistes – have put forward their election manifestos to the public. There is not much difference between the UNFGG and UPFA in particular, while the JVP has adapted to capitalism and proclaims itself to be business-friendly.

Ranil Wickremasinghe says he will continue the neo-liberal policies that were followed by Rajapakse in the past 10 years, but efficiently and without corruption. The UNP leader says that development will be based on foreign investments and follow an export-oriented economic policy. The mega-city development projects; establishment of tourist zones; new industries financed by foreign capital; and cluster villages are the centre-piece of Wickremasinghe's policies. The promises made to strengthen democracy and proposals for social welfare are just the icing to camouflage this capitalist economic policy.

Mahinda Rajapakse recycles the same economic policy he implemented in government: infrastructure projects and hand-outs for political patronage. However, to differentiate himself and capture the Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian vote, he has liberally laced his campaign with racism against an imaginary Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam resurgence and pseudo-patriotism against Western imperialism. Scare-mongering and beating the Sinhala nationalist drum; once more, he promotes himself as the 'King of the Sinhalese'. While president, even while attacking the foreign policy of those countries towards Sri Lanka and cosying up to China and Chinese capital, he

faithfully implemented the neoliberal policies of Western imperialism.

The economic, social and political crisis in Sri Lanka does not depend on the personality or incorruptibility of the two contenders for prime minister. It is an unavoidable result of neo-liberalism. In this situation, there is no difference between the UNFGG and the UPFA on economic policies; while on the national question, the JVP also parrots its opposition to state reform and power-sharing with Tamils and other minorities.

In the past, the JVP claimed to be the only genuine force for socialism in Sri Lanka. A new dream has taken hold: to civilise capitalism, through harnessing the market economy to social justice. Under the leadership of Anura Kumara Disسانayake, the JVP has traded its previous mish-mash of state socialism and Sinhala nationalism, for the capitalist aspirations of the petit-bourgeoisie. The capitalist system will not be challenged, the JVP assures the business community and the elite; but the JVP will clean its muck, in the interests of all classes in society. All should understand that capitalism in the neoliberal epoch cannot be reconciled with social democracy. It cannot be humanised or rehabilitated. Those who talk of such foolish things will end up only serving the capitalist system, as they reward themselves with its spoils.

In this situation, the election on 17th August does not solve the problems of the masses. When the capitalist forces take forward the next phase of neo-liberalism, the class struggle may intensify. We expect further attacks on workers' rights and reduction in real wages in relation to the cost-of-living and inflation. Permanent employment will be replaced with temporary, short-term and precarious work. The income and wealth gap between those at the top of society and the impoverished sections at the bottom. Daily-waged workers, peasants, fisher-folk, small-scale producers and students will be increasingly excluded from the market economy.

Left Voice (Vame Handa) is not contesting in the upcoming election. This is not because we are against elections, even in a contest that is always rigged in favour of the rich and powerful. Under present conditions, the Left does not have the social power to implement an agenda for social transformation. Our left programme is not one that can be taken forward by pressurising capitalist governments. We put it forward it as an agenda for an anti-capitalist Left:

1. Implement an economic policy that breaks with neo-liberalism and stops burdening the poor. Stop taking loans from the international financial institutions and money-markets, increase public welfare, protect small producers, and control the banking and finance system.

2. Introduce reforms to domestic economic policy that strengthen the living standards and capacities of workers, farmers, fishers, and small producers.

3. Create a constituent assembly which comprises representatives of oppressed sections to change the structure of the state completely. Empower the people to call back those elected representatives who work against their wishes. Remove the privileges and perks granted to them.

4. The Tamil-speaking people are entitled to their right to self determination. This decision should be taken by a referendum of the people of the North and East only.

5. There should be genuine devolution of power which fulfils the aspirations of national minorities. We support full-implementation of the 13th Amendment, including police and land powers to the North and East, even while rejecting the current provincial council system as the limit of autonomy rights for the oppressed nationalities.

6. Immediate resettlement of all internally displaced persons, removal of army camps from the North

and East, release of political prisoners, justice for the disappeared and those who lost their lives in the war.

7. There are only three parties contesting in this election which share some of the above perspective. They are the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP). Left Voice has its points of agreement and disagreement in the policies and practices of these groups. However, we appreciate that by contesting the election, they are defending the principle of class independence and raising the profile of the Left. We appeal to you to cast your vote for any one of them. We believe that had these three parties combined in a joint left front, swelled by the support of other radical groups and sections, we could begin to renew the Left and its identity in society.

Vame Handa

P.S.

Vame Handa (Left Voice) is a group advocating Left unity and publishing a monthly newspaper of the same name. It comprises leading members of the Commercial and Industrial Workers Union, United General Employees Union, Federation of Media Employees Trade Union, social movement and democratic rights activists.