

World Socialist Web Site Review editorial

The historical roots of Sri Lanka's civil war

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In recent weeks the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has inflicted a series of heavy military defeats on the Sri Lankan army in the north of the island. Fierce fighting has been underway on the outskirts of the LTTE's main strategic objective, Jaffna, Sri Lanka's second largest city. An estimated 35,000-40,000 government forces, having lost several key bases, remain trapped, with no land route out. Lacking morale and equipment, the army is on the brink of a military disaster.

In the face of widespread opposition to the war among Sinhala and Tamil workers alike, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has placed the entire country on a war footing. Sweeping emergency regulations have been introduced, including the prohibition of demonstrations and strikes, political censorship of the media and draconian economic measures, designed to place the burden of the escalating military crisis directly onto the shoulders of the working class.

Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance (PA) government—deeply unpopular and facing mounting social unrest—has only been able to survive through the continuing support of the so-called “left” political parties, most of which, like the Communist Party and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), form part of the government coalition. Along with the trade unions, they have suppressed industrial action over wages and working conditions and pledged to police Kumaratunga's anti-democratic decrees.

In today's generally uninformed political environment, the debacle of the Sri Lankan government is for the most part seen simply as another headline story with no particular international relevance. The international media, to the extent that it covers the Sri Lankan events at all, avoids any reference to their historical background.

Yet the current state of affairs is the inevitable byproduct of a half-century of tortured political development. Sri Lanka's tragic journey from post-war independence to bloody civil war, a conflict that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands, carries exceptional political significance for the international working class.

Sri Lanka (or Ceylon, as it was known) was granted independence from Britain in the aftermath of World War II. What was unique about Ceylon, however, was that it was home to the most politically advanced workers' movement in the world.

In marked distinction to the situation in other backward countries striving for independence, a genuine revolutionary socialist party

had been forged. Established as a radical anti-imperialist organisation in 1935, the LSSP moved steadily to the left, expelling the Stalinists, who allied themselves with British imperialism in the Second World War, and embracing an internationalist perspective.

In 1940, the LSSP entered the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) on the understanding that the Ceylonese socialist movement could develop only as a component part of an all-India revolutionary movement. Having affiliated to the Trotskyist Fourth International, the LSSP wrested the leadership of the mass anti-imperialist struggle in Ceylon from the Stalinists and won the best elements of the working class and intelligentsia to socialist internationalism.

A unique and powerful tradition was established. The working class movement was taught to base the struggle against imperialism on the international class struggle and educated to see through the democratic pretensions of the national bourgeoisie. Against the aspirations of both the Sinhala and Tamil ruling elite, it opposed all forms of communalism and separatism.

In 1948 the Ceylonese bourgeoisie set about entrenching divisions within the working class—between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority—by grounding their new state on communalism. A citizenship law was enacted disenfranchising the large numbers of highland Tamil plantation workers brought over from India by the British as indentured labour. While the Tamil leadership in the north and east of the country acquiesced, LSSP leader Colvin R de Silva denounced “the principle of descent as the primary principle of citizenship,” warning that making the nation “coeval with race” could only serve reaction.

The Sri Lankan Trotskyists became a powerful political force among the working class and oppressed masses of the island, leading important struggles and winning a number of parliamentary seats. But within only a few years they were to follow the tragic path taken by their predecessors in the German Social Democracy at the turn of the century. Having initially opposed the reactionary state structure set up by the British and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, the LSSP began to adapt themselves to it.

The LSSP's political degeneration was bound up with definite international conditions that became highly unfavourable to the growth and consolidation of an internationalist tendency. The domination of Stalinism in the USSR and the bureaucracy's ability to perpetuate the lie that it represented the Russian Revolution and socialism served to isolate the Trotskyist movement. Moreover, the onset of the post-war capitalist stabilisation, due in no small

measure to the betrayals of Stalinism worldwide, saw the revolutionary upsurge of the working class and oppressed masses begin to recede.

It was within this context that a deepening political and theoretical crisis emerged within the Fourth International. An opportunist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, leading figures in the Fourth International in Europe, began to adapt itself to the apparent successes of Stalinism, social democracy and bourgeois nationalism, repudiating the fundamental premises of Marxian internationalism: the revolutionary role of the working class, the necessity of establishing its political independence from the parties of the bourgeoisie and the middle class, and the indispensable role of the revolutionary party, based on the programmatic principles and historical lessons of the struggle against Stalinism and Social Democracy.

The LSSP's nationalist decay set in motion the terrible events that were to follow. In 1964, it carried out its great betrayal, consummating its break with Trotskyism by entering a bourgeois coalition government with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Madame Bandaranaike.

In 1971, as a member of the second coalition government, it participated in the violent suppression of a youth uprising led by the Janatha Vimukti Peramuma (JVP), a Maoist breakaway from the Stalinist Communist Party that rested on radicalised layers of unemployed and peasant youth. Some 10,000 young people were slaughtered.

But perhaps the most shameful chapter in the LSSP's degeneration occurred in 1972, when it collaborated with the SLFP in drawing up an amended constitution that enshrined Sinhala chauvinism. The constitution affirmed Sinhalese as the state language and Buddhism as the state religion.

While the passage of time may have rendered the lessons of these experiences less well known, they remain no less acute.

In the period of their ascent, the Trotskyists fought to unify the Sinhala and Tamil masses in a common struggle against imperialism, basing themselves on the strategic lessons fought for by Leon Trotsky in his theory of Permanent Revolution. The LSSP's repudiation of this perspective coincided with an ever-more pronounced adaptation to the national bourgeoisie. As a consequence, Tamil workers and sections of the middle class became profoundly disillusioned, facilitating the growth among them of bourgeois nationalist tendencies.

Confidence in the viability of a socialist program based on the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil workers and rural masses began to be replaced with the perspective of a Tamil-only movement and the creation of a separate Tamil state. This was part of a trend that was becoming increasingly fashionable all over the world—the identification of the struggle against national oppression with the struggle to establish nominally independent nation states based upon ethnic separatism. It was out of this process that the LTTE arose, styling itself after various movements such as the PLO and the Sandinistas that were achieving a certain success and popularity in the 60s, 70s and 80s.

All the elements that were to lead to the brutal 17-year civil war had been set in place. First and foremost, responsibility rested with

the Sinhala bourgeoisie and its creation of the Sri Lankan state on the basis of racist principles. At the same time, grotesque opportunism in the workers' movement played a critical role. Together, they rendered the development of a secessionist movement inevitable.

The past 17 years constitute a grim testament to the entirely rotten foundations of the Sri Lankan state and a tragic confirmation, in the negative, of the perspective championed by the BLPI and LSSP in the 1940s. The socialist movement stands utterly opposed to any attempt to preserve the unity of the Sri Lankan state on the basis of the political oppression of the Tamil people, and demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all government forces from the north and east of the island.

At the same time, the vast experiences of the twentieth century demonstrate that the LTTE's perspective of an independent Tamil state offers no solution to the historical predicament of the Tamil masses.

Such “independence” has come to mean, in reality, subordination to the economic and strategic interests of one or another bourgeois power. All the countries of South Asia have become the target of competing regional appetites—from India to Pakistan to China—not to speak of the major imperialist powers in North America and Europe. Any “independent” Eelam would suffer the same fate as Bangladesh, becoming yet another cruel trap for the oppressed masses. The most LTTE leader Prabakaran can aspire to, on the basis of the LTTE's political orientation, is to follow PLO leader Yassir Arafat as a supplicant to US imperialism on the White House lawn.

Any resolution to the problems of the masses of South Asia can only be secured on the basis of a thoroughly worked out international perspective. The Sri Lankan working class—Sinhala and Tamil alike—must rediscover and embrace the revolutionary principles for which the Trotskyist movement fought in the aftermath of World War Two.

It is these internationalist principles that lie at the heart of the struggle waged by the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, for the United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam.

In the midst of the military catastrophe engulfing the island, the Sri Lankan working class must extract the lessons of the bitter experiences of the past half century. It must begin to intervene as an independent force, fighting to unify the working class and oppressed masses of the entire Indian sub-continent on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. Only in this way can it begin to grapple with the complex political problems of today.



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