

Sri Lanka: the JHU-Rajapakse deal and the reactionary role of Buddhist supremacism

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Mahinda Rajapakse, Sri Lanka's prime minister and presidential candidate for the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), signed an election deal last week with the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala supremacist party under the leadership of right-wing Buddhist monks.

In return for JHU backing, the prime minister agreed to JHU demands for a more aggressive stance against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The 12-point agreement included the revision of the current government-LTTE ceasefire; the abrogation of a government-LTTE agreement for the joint administration of tsunami aid; and the rejection of federalism as the basis for a peace deal with the LTTE.

Like a similar deal with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the unmistakable logic of Rajapakse's agreement with the JHU is to set the course for renewed civil war. Despite protestations that he is for peace, the prime minister has effectively torn up the major planks of the so-called peace process that the current president Chandrika Kumaratunga and his own government have been claiming to revive. The deals, clearly signed for short-term electoral gain, have opened up sharp differences inside the SLFP.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) commented on the earlier Rajapakse-JVP agreement, the differences within the SLFP reflect broader divisions in the ruling class between those who want a negotiated deal with the LTTE and those who want a return to war. Neither faction has anything to offer the working class.

The proponents of the peace process want a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites to step up market reform, integrate the island into global production processes and intensify their mutual exploitation of workers. Their opponents are prepared to plunge the working class back into the nightmare of a war that has already cost at least 60,000 lives and led to widespread misery.

The Colombo press is full of speculation and commentary about the outcome of the rifts within the SLFP, their implications for the November 17 election and the political ramifications of the JHU deal. But one aspect of the Rajapakse-JHU agreement was passed over in complete silence—the ceremony itself.

The prime minister travelled to Kandy for the signing, which took place in front of the Temple of the Tooth, with the JHU monks decked out in their orange robes. All of this carried a heavy symbolism for Sinhala Buddhist supremacists. Kandy was the last capital of the decadent Sinhalese monarchy. The temple purportedly houses one of Buddha's teeth—a relic that has political as well as religious significance as a symbol of Sinhalese power.

Rajapakse knelt before the JHU's chief monk Ellawala Medananda to formally accept his copy of the agreement. Both then entered the temple to worship together before the tooth's container amid various Buddhist rituals. The document was finally placed before the relic in order to make it sacrosanct.

As far as the Sri Lankan press was concerned, none of this was in any way abnormal. Colombo politicians from all the major bourgeois parties

regularly make the pilgrimage to Kandy to receive the blessings of top Buddhist monks from one or other of the religious orders. Just days later, Rajapakse's main rival—the United National Party's Ranil Wickremesinghe—made his way to the Bellanwila Temple near Colombo to bow and scrape before the Buddhist hierarchy.

In other words, Rajapakse's prostration before the JHU's monks is just a particularly graphic example of the dependence of the entire political establishment on putrid communal politics.

The JHU's policies and program express, in an extreme form, the ideology of Buddhist supremacism that permeates every political party, the state apparatus, the armed forces and the media. It was enshrined in the country's constitution in 1972 in the clause that transforms Buddhism into a state religion, and in government policies that entrench anti-Tamil discrimination.

The JHU was formed prior to last year's general election by transforming the existing right-wing Sinhala Urumaya (SU) into a political vehicle for a section of the Buddhist hierarchy. Its reactionary outlook is little different from that of the right-wing Christian fundamentalists in the US, Hindu supremacist organisations like the RSS in India, or the Islamic extremists of Al Qaeda. Harking back to a mythical past of Sinhala Buddhist kings, the JHU asserts the "national right of the Sinhala nation" and calls for a state built "according to Buddhist principles".

The JHU speaks for elements of the state apparatus, the armed forces and business whose interests are bound up with the maintenance of the continuing dominance of the Sinhala ruling elites over their Tamil and Muslim counterparts. These social layers are deeply hostile to any power-sharing deal with the LTTE and regard the peace process as a betrayal of the Sinhala nation.

It is no accident that sections of the Buddhist hierarchy are bitterly opposed to any peace deal. Their power and privileges were greatly enhanced by the constitutional provision turning Buddhism into a state religion. The Department of Buddhist Affairs has a substantial budget—185 million rupees in 2004—much of which finds its way into the hands of the monasteries. Any dilution of these anti-democratic measures would impact on the position of the Buddhist clergy.

These social layers will stop at nothing to defend their interests. The JHU, and its predecessor the SU, have been involved in a series of violent confrontations and provocations. The SU was widely held to be responsible for a series of attacks on Christian churches. One of the JHU's main planks is the demand for an anti-conversion law that will ban Christian evangelicals from "unethical conversions"—that is, offering any aid to the Buddhist poor that might cause them to change their religion.

The JHU was in the forefront of the vicious communal campaign against the agreement under which the LTTE and government agreed to temporarily work together to distribute tsunami aid. JHU secretary Omalpe Sobhitha, an MP and monk, planted himself in front of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy and declared that he would fast until death to stop the deal, known as P-TOMS, being signed. Other monks in

Colombo joined him in branding the agreement as a national betrayal.

Reactionary communalism

All of this is well known to the Colombo media. Yet there is never a hint of criticism of the reactionary role of Buddhism and the Buddhist hierarchy in Sri Lankan politics. To comment on the disgusting spectacle of Rajapakse kneeling before the berobed JHU leader would be regarded as a public outrage to be denounced and condemned by all.

The reason behind this studied silence has nothing to do with any reverence for Buddhism. Rather it is a reflection of just how vital the ideology of Sinhala Buddhist supremacism is to the maintenance of bourgeois rule. Ever since national independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has fostered and whipped up Sinhala chauvinism as the means for justifying the creation of an artificial nation on this small island, for dividing the working class along communal lines and for securing a social base for its parties, the SLFP in particular.

The local ruling elite learnt from their former colonial masters. In signing the 1815 agreement with the remnants of the defeated Kandyan kingdom, the British agreed that “the religion of Buddhoo, its rites, ministers and places of worship are to be maintained and protected.” As historian K. M. de Silva commented: “They [the British governors of the island] valued Buddhism for its potential as a countervailing force against movements for change and reform which raised the prospect of disturbing the political balance which the British were seeking to maintain.”

Insofar as Buddhist monks later took an anti-colonial stance, it was, like the JHU, a reactionary attempt to restore the previous dominance of the Sinhala kings and the Buddhist priestly order. They inveighed against the immorality of British rule and denounced the local “whisky drinkers” who mimicked their colonial masters and did their bidding. They sought to divert the growing hostility to colonial rule into a temperance movement for the revival of Buddhist values.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution, it was the working class, particularly the Trotskyist leaders of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), who waged a determined struggle against British rule. Confronting a militant and organised working class after 1948, the newly “independent” ruling class did not hesitate to stir up anti-Tamil chauvinism as a means of setting working people against each other. The political consequences have been one disaster after another—communal violence, pogroms and ultimately war.

The crucial turning point was the LSSP’s decision to join the SLFP-led government of Sirama Bandaranaike in 1964. In doing so, the LSSP renounced the international socialist principles for which it had previously fought and embraced the ideology of Sinhala Buddhist supremacism on which the SLFP had been founded. In 1972, the LSSP minister Colvin R. de Silva was responsible for drafting the constitution that enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhala was the state language.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the LSSP betrayal led to the emergence and dominance of communally based parties among radicalised youth—the LTTE among the Tamils and the JVP among rural Sinhalese. The Bandaranaike government’s discriminatory measures against Tamils, maintained and extended by the UNP government of J.R. Jayawardene, were responsible for the outbreak of war in 1983. The inability of any section of the ruling class to end this disastrous conflict stems from the fact that it can no more relinquish communalism than it can give up its wealth and social privileges.

A socialist alternative

The SEP is standing in the presidential election to offer a socialist alternative to working people in Sri Lanka and throughout the region. We call on workers throughout the Indian subcontinent to reject the chauvinism, sectarianism and racism that the various representatives of the capitalist class have deliberately stirred up for the purpose of maintaining the oppressive profit system. The only way that the working class can liberate itself is by uniting its struggles, regardless of race, religion, language or caste, and building its own political movement, independent of all bourgeois factions, to reorganise society on the basis of the social need, not private profit.

The SEP and its candidate will not be joining the political pilgrimage to Kandy or to any other place of religious worship—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or Christian. We insist that the working class has to be guided in its struggles by Marxism, that is by scientific socialism. We reject all forms of religion and mysticism, which in the final analysis are based on a passive acceptance of the status quo. Whether it is the high priests of Kandy or the Christian clergy, they all call on the poor to accept their miserable lot in exchange for the false promise of a better life in heaven or the next reincarnation.

The working class must put an end to the communal violence and war that has plagued Sri Lanka. The SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdraw all security forces from the north and east of the island. The forcible maintenance of the unitary state has only resulted in the domination of militarism and attacks on basic democratic rights throughout the island. The SEP opposes every form of oppression and champions the rights of all, regardless of their ethnicity, language or religion.

Any resolution to the 20-year civil war requires the repudiation of the anti-democratic Sri Lankan constitution. The SEP advocates the establishment of a genuinely representative Constituent Assembly to enable ordinary working people, rather than cliques of capitalist politicians, to decide on all outstanding issues of democratic rights.

We call for the complete separation of the state and religion, which is the essential precondition for establishing the democratic right of all to freedom of religion. By making Buddhism the state religion, the constitution reduces other religions to a second-class status and discriminates against their adherents.

The struggle for democratic rights and socialist policies requires a broad offensive by the working class against the capitalist order. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the establishment of the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the wider struggle for the United Socialist States of South Asia and throughout the globe.

We call on WSWS readers and our supporters to join the SEP in the campaign for this perspective in the presidential elections.



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