

Sri Lanka's "peace" party backs the government's war on the LTTE

Vilani Peiris

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The support of the opposition United National Party (UNP) for the Sri Lankan government's approach to the "national question" is a clear indication of the consensus in Colombo ruling circles for the prosecution of an aggressive war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In 2002, the UNP-led government signed a formal ceasefire with the LTTE and pledged to resolve the country's 20-year civil war through a negotiated power-sharing arrangement. Four years later, the ceasefire is void in all but name after President Mahinda Rajapakse ordered a military offensive in late July to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory. Far from condemning Rajapakse's actions, the UNP has fallen into line.

After UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe met Rajapakse for talks on Monday, party spokesman Johnston Fernando declared the UNP's "fullest commitment" to a "bipartisan approach" to solving the national question. While critical of Rajapakse's failure to solve the worsening ethnic conflict, Fernando declared the UNP had entered discussions with the government "in a spirit of responsibility and optimism".

The "national question" is the contrived term used in the Colombo political establishment to describe the war and the entrenched anti-Tamil discrimination that produced it. The UNP is well aware that Rajapakse has effectively torn up the basis for its own attempts to end the war. The UNP had offered to grant some autonomy to an LTTE administration in the northeast of the island within a federated state.

During last November's presidential elections, Rajapakse signed an electoral agreement with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) rejecting any form of federalism, as well as calling for a

revised ceasefire and a bolstering of the army. This provocative stance set the stage for the current return to open warfare. Even as Wickremesinghe met the president this week, Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was in the process of negotiating a formal coalition with the JVP, which is openly advocating war.

While retaining muted criticisms of Rajapakse's failure to end the "ethnic conflict," the UNP has effectively thrown its lot in with the war. Over the past two months, UNP leaders have repeatedly defended the government's actions and the military's atrocities.

On August 15, a UNP delegation headed by deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya was briefed by the president on the "security situation". Rajapakse claimed the military's continuing operations were "defensive actions" and justified the killing of up to 61 school children in an air force bombing raid the previous day. Two days later UNP spokesman G.L. Peiris told the *Daily Mirror*: "Of course the state has a duty to defend the country that requires resorting to military action when necessary."

On August 24, Rajapakse wrote to Jayasuriya requesting the UNP's "full cooperation," adding: "I earnestly request you and your party to join my government in facing the challenge of protecting our motherland." While the UNP ruled out joining a "national government" after Wickremesinghe's meeting this week with Rajapakse, it is clear that the party has extended its "full cooperation" for the war.

After the military captured the key town of Sampur last week, in blatant breach of the 2002 ceasefire, the UNP "welcomed" the achievement. Speaking in parliament on September 6, UNP MP John Amaratunga declared: "We salute our armed forces for their recent victories and [extend] our condolences to those who died in action." On the same day, UNP deputy general

secretary Tissa Attanayake told the *Daily Mirror*: “The party is always ready to sacrifice any party policy for the sake of national security and the sovereignty of the country.”

The UNP’s support for the war is no surprise. Like the SLFP, the conservative UNP is thoroughly steeped in Sinhala chauvinism and was directly responsible for unleashing the anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 that marked the start of the civil war. Successive UNP governments prosecuted the brutal war for more than a decade before losing power in 1994.

The UNP’s turn to peace talks in 2002 was not out of any concern for the war’s devastating impact on working people, but reflected the frustrations of layers of the corporate elite over the economic consequences of the conflict. The prospect of any immediate military victory had been dealt a stunning blow when the LTTE inflicted a series of defeats on the military in 2000. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the US, the ruling elites saw the opportunity of enlisting international support to force the “terrorist LTTE” to the negotiating table on their terms.

The collapse of the so-called peace process and now the UNP’s support for renewed war underscores the inability of the political establishment as a whole to end the conflict. As soon as it signed the 2002 ceasefire, the Wickremesinghe government came under fire from Sinhala extremists for making too many concessions to the LTTE. As talks with the LTTE proceeded, the JVP denounced the government for preparing to divide the country, even though LTTE had formally abandoned its demand for a separate statelet of Tamil Eelam.

Previous president and SLFP leader Chandrika Kumaratunga increasingly became the focus for the opposition of the JVP and the military to the entire peace process. The navy, with Kumaratunga’s tacit support, undermined the ongoing negotiations by provocatively sinking several LTTE vessels. The LTTE finally pulled out of talks in April 2003. In November 2003, as the UNP government and the LTTE were seeking to resurrect negotiations, Kumaratunga, under pressure from the JVP, used her extensive presidential powers to sack three key ministers in the name of defending “national security”.

The inability of the UNP to respond to Kumaratunga’s extraordinary move reflected the fact that the party was mired in the same communal politics.

Throughout the entire negotiating process, there had been no discussion of any final political settlement with the LTTE as the UNP was acutely sensitive to the barrage of opposition criticisms that it was selling out the country. The “peace process” never revived. In February 2004, Kumaratunga formed an electoral bloc with the JVP, arbitrarily sacked the government and called fresh elections.

The UNP lost the 2004 election, not because voters wanted war, but because its peace plans were tied to a program of savage economic restructuring. The UNP wanted to end the conflict to attract foreign investment and transform the island into the “Hong Kong of South Asia”. Its privatisations and cutbacks to essential services led to job cuts and a marked decline in living standards. For similar reasons, Wickremesinghe narrowly lost to Rajapakse in last November’s presidential elections.

The election loss generated deep frustrations within the UNP, which has not held the powerful presidency since 1994. Six MPs crossed the floor and joined the Rajapakse government. Another party faction is pushing for the deputy leader Jayasuriya to take over as party leader in order to more aggressively push communal politics. Whatever the outcome of the UNP’s inner party disputes, it is clear the party is not going to oppose Rajapakse’s decision to plunge the island back into a disastrous civil war.



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