

Sri Lanka: “Heroes Day” speech a symptom of the LTTE’s political bankruptcy

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The annual “Heroes Day” speech delivered by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leader Velupillai Prabhakaran on November 27 revealed an organisation in considerable political crisis—under siege from the Sri Lankan military, pathetically appealing to the major powers for support, and lacking any solution to the needs and aspirations of the Tamil masses it claims to represent.

Over the past year, the Sri Lankan government has unleashed the military against the LTTE—firstly, in a dirty covert war of “disappearances” and assassination, and since July, in military offensives in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. The “international community”, far from rushing to shore up the “peace process”, has blamed the LTTE for the conflict and pressured it to make further concessions in talks.

Prabhakaran’s “Heroes Day” speeches have always been aimed at galvanising the LTTE’s support and providing a policy statement for the coming year. Since the ceasefire, these events have increasingly been turned into festive extravaganzas aimed at diverting the growing hostility of Tamils to the LTTE’s oppressive methods and failure to address pressing social needs. This year’s speech, broadcast live via LTTE television and amid elaborate celebrations, was no exception.

On the defensive, Prabhakaran, dressed in his military uniform, was desperate to strike a defiant pose. Blaming the Rajapakse government for the escalating war, he dramatically declared that the ceasefire was now “defunct”. While his statement is little more than a statement of fact, the Rajapakse government immediately seized upon it to “prove” the LTTE’s lack of good faith. Three days later, the LTTE underscored Prabhakaran’s point by attempting to kill Gotabaya Rajapakse, the defence secretary and the president’s brother. The government exploited the assassination attempt to impose draconian anti-terror laws and intensify the military action against the LTTE.

Far from being a sign of strength, the bombing and Prabhakaran’s posturing express the bankruptcy of the LTTE’s political program. Backed into a corner, the LTTE leader reasserted the demand for a separate capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam in the North and East of the Island. “The uncompromising stance of Sinhala chauvinism has left us with no other option but an independent state for the people of Tamil Eelam,” he said. It is a slogan that the LTTE formally abandoned in peace talks in 2002 under considerable international pressure and which, in all likelihood, even its own leadership no longer regards as viable.

The LTTE and its demand for a separate Tamil Eelam always represented the class interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not those of Tamil workers and the oppressed masses. Like other radical Tamil petty bourgeois groups, the LTTE emerged in the 1970s in response to the deepening systematic discrimination of the Sri Lankan government and state against the country’s Tamil minority. The LTTE’s response to Sinhala chauvinism was to develop its own brand of reactionary communal politics, which blamed Sinhalese workers and farmers for the crimes of the Sri Lankan government. It gained a following through its determined guerrilla tactics, particularly after the outbreak of war in 1983,

and ruthlessly eliminated its political rivals among the Tamil minority.

From the outset, the LTTE’s perspective was to enlist the support of one or other of the major powers to assist in establishing a Tamil Eelam and as a result has led the Tamil masses into one blind ally after another. The LTTE supported the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord, encouraging Tamils to put their faith in the Indian government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Fighting rapidly broke out after the Indian “peace-keeping” troops in northern Sri Lanka attempted to forcibly disarm the LTTE and suppress opposition to the Accord.

In his speech last week, Prabhakaran boasted that the LTTE entered the peace process in 2002 “from a position of strength”, but he was completely at a loss to explain why the LTTE now finds itself on the defensive. In the 1990s, the evolution of the LTTE followed the same general course as other armed bourgeois nationalist movements such as the PLO in the Middle East and the ANC in South Africa. The end of the Cold War restricted their ability to manoeuvre among the major powers, and the rise of globalised production undermined their project of establishing a new state based on national economic regulation. One after the other, these organisations abandoned their “anti-imperialist” phraseology, traipsed to the internationally-supervised negotiating table and exchanged their rifles for a place in the political establishment.

It is true that the LTTE came to the negotiating table after it inflicted a series of military defeats on the Sri Lankan military in 2000. Its seizure of the strategic Elephant Pass army base and significant portions of the Jaffna peninsula created panic in Colombo. The ceasefire and peace talks did not begin in 2000, however, but in 2002—following the September 11 attacks on the US. Significant sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite seized on the opportunity to force the LTTE to the negotiating table on their terms, or face being targetted in the Bush administration’s bogus “war on terrorism”.

The LTTE’s military gains did not alter the fact that the organisation entered the “peace process” from a position of political weakness. Acknowledging the situation in December 2001, LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham bitterly declared: “[A] madman called Bin Laden clashed with America and now some countries have included us in their list of terrorists.” Significantly, Prabhakaran had nothing to say in his latest speech about events outside Sri Lanka, in particular the criminal actions of the Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq. The LTTE has never opposed Bush’s “war on terrorism”, but has simply pleaded for its removal from Washington’s list of terrorist organisations.

Having signed up to the peace process, the LTTE rapidly ditched its demand for a separate Tamil Eelam and sought a role in a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil ruling elites for the mutual exploitation of the working class. Balasingham openly declared the LTTE’s willingness to work with the Colombo government to establish a “Tiger economy”—that is, the transformation of Sri Lanka into a cheap labour platform and regional investment gateway.

From the outset, however, neither the Sri Lankan government nor the

major powers were prepared to concede a major political role to the LTTE. The United National Party-led government was under continual pressure from President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the military and Sinhala extremist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which regarded the ceasefire and talks as a betrayal. Negotiations broke down in 2003, after a series of military and political provocations against the LTTE, without the terms of a final peace agreement ever having been concretely discussed.

Over the past three years, the LTTE has repeatedly appealed to “the international community” to pressure the Colombo government to reach a deal—with absolutely no success. Prabhakaran emphasised in his speech that the LTTE had bent over backwards to maintain the ceasefire and negotiate an agreement despite continual provocations. “We have postponed our plan to advance our freedom struggle to give even more chances to the peace efforts, once when the tsunami disaster struck and again when president Rajapakse was elected,” he declared.

In December 2004, when the tsunami devastated much of coastal Sri Lanka, ordinary working people—Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims—spontaneously helped each other out. Organically incapable of making any political appeal to this class sentiment, the LTTE tried instead to exploit the opportunity to press for a restarting of the peace process. A deal was reached with President Kumaratunga for a temporary joint body—the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (PTOMS)—for the administration of tsunami aid. But PTOMS never got off the ground amid a communal campaign waged by the JVP that escalated after the assassination of Foreign Minister Laksmir Kadirgamar in August 2005.

Presidential elections were called for November 2005, which Rajapakse, backed by the JVP, narrowly won. Even through Rajapakse’s election program was openly hostile to the ceasefire, the LTTE’s policy was an impotent election boycott, enforced by thuggery, to demonstrate its support among Tamils. Its anti-democratic methods were graphically exposed by its blocking of an election meeting of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Jaffna through threats of violence. In the wake of the election, Prabhakaran declared in his “Heroes Day” speech last year that the LTTE would “wait and observe” if Rajapakse “is going to handle the peace process and whether he will offer justice to our people”.

The answer was not long in coming. Unidentified gunmen gunned down prominent pro-LTTE MP Joseph Pararajasingham during a church service on Christmas Eve in Batticaloa—in all likelihood they were from the military or one of its allied paramilitaries. Prabhakaran devoted a considerable portion of his “Heroes Day” speech this year to cataloguing the sufferings of Tamils in the North and East. The LTTE had “dedicated” itself “to find a solution to the ethnic conflict through peace talks,” he declared, but received nothing in return. “Instead death and destruction were heaped on the Tamils who hoped that they would receive justice,” he said.

Prabhakaran blamed ordinary Sinhalese, rather than the Sri Lankan governments with which the LTTE had negotiated and encouraged working people to place their faith. “The Sinhala nation remains misled by the mythical ideology of Mahavamsa [historical myth] and remains trapped in the chauvinistic sentiments thus created... This, unfortunately, is preventing the Sinhala nation from undertaking a genuine attempt at resolving the Tamil national question in a civilised manner,” he declared.

All of this was said with a tone of regret. There is no doubt that Prabhakaran and the LTTE leaders would far rather be in the position of the Nepalese Maoists who just last month signed a deal with the government to put down their weapons in exchange for seats in parliament and places in a new interim cabinet. Prabhakaran’s declaration that the ceasefire is “defunct” and last week’s bombing in Colombo are little more than a desperate plea to the major powers to push the Colombo government back to meaningful talks. These threats, however, simply confirm that the LTTE has reached a complete political dead-end—the

outcome not of individual stupidity or betrayals, but of the exhaustion of the program of Tamil separatism.

The working class in Sri Lanka can place no confidence in an “international peace process” which is being overseen in the first place by the war criminals of the Bush administration. Any deal that emerges from such negotiations will only serve the interests of the major powers, which are increasingly looking to the Indian subcontinent as a large pool of cheap labour. There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of workers—Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala alike—want an end to the war but this cannot be achieved through the various parties and organisations of the ruling elites—including the LTTE.

A political movement must be built independent of all factions of the capitalist class to unite workers and the oppressed masses on the basis of a socialist program. The starting point of such a perspective is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and chauvinism—Sinhala supremacism and Tamil separatism alike. The natural allies of Tamil workers are not the LTTE and its bourgeois mouthpiece the Tamil National Alliance, but workers throughout the island and internationally. This includes the American working class, which demonstrated its overwhelming opposition to the Bush administration’s war in Iraq in recent Congressional elections.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan security forces from the North and East of the island, which have been under virtual military occupation for over two decades. The SEP fights for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as the means for mobilising workers and the oppressed masses in a political struggle against the existing social order, which is based on preserving the privileges and profits of the wealthy few, at the expense of the needs and aspirations of the vast majority. Such a struggle is necessarily part of the broader fight for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. We urge all workers to seriously consider the SEP’s perspective and program and to join and build it as the new mass working class party.



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