

Sri Lankan Independence Day: a celebration of war and militarism

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse used the annual ceremony to mark the country's Independence Day on February 4 to make clear that his government was intent on escalating its deeply unpopular civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While paying lip service to the need for "peace," he declared his intention to carry out the "liberation of Tamils"—in other words, the seizure of all territory currently held by the LTTE.

The atmosphere at the Independence Day event was extremely tense, reflecting the situation throughout the country. The venue was Galle Face Green, just outside the main army headquarters in Colombo. Hundreds of extra military personnel were poured into the area to seal off all roads and tighten security arrangements, creating a mood of panic and fear over possible LTTE attacks. The Sri Lankan capital already had the appearance of a garrison town dominated by troops, checkpoints and roadblocks.

In the lead up to February 4, security forces rounded up hundreds of Tamils in Colombo city and its suburbs in a series of night raids. Anyone unable to prove their identity or establish the reason for being in Colombo was arrested and locked up in police cells. Most have now been transferred to the detention camp at Boossa in the southern district of Galle where they can be held indefinitely under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

The Independence Day events were dominated by the military and a distinct martial tone. Armoured cars, multi-barrel rocket launchers and artillery pieces were part of a long parade that included thousands of soldiers. Naval warships and gunboats engaged in manoeuvres just off the coast. Flying overhead were the jet fighters responsible for killing many civilians in extensive bombing raids on LTTE-held areas.

Despite Rajapakse's populist pretensions, there were no waving crowds and no public display of enthusiasm. Very

few people were permitted to attend the ceremonies, and then only after a thorough security screening. In the northern, military-occupied town of Jaffna, soldiers were seen hauling down the black flags hoisted over many buildings as a mark of protest against the war.

This is Rajapakse's second Independence Day since he narrowly won the presidency in November 2005. Having promised "peace" during his election campaign, he quickly returned the country to civil war. After letting the military and its allied paramilitary groups wage a dirty covert war of murder and provocation for months, Rajapakse ordered an open military offensive last July on the pretext of seizing the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate to provide water for Sinhala farmers.

Prior to the celebrations, Rajapakse, along with an entourage of top generals, toured the areas of Sampur and Vaharai which have recently been captured from the LTTE. He hailed the achievements of the soldiers involved in carrying out offensive operations in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement. In comments to the media, he bluntly warned that "we have to tame the Tigers (LTTE)," if they did not come to terms with the Colombo government.

Rajapakse's Independence Day speech was just as aggressive. "We are not ready to give into the bloodthirsty demands of the LTTE," he declared, adding: "I emphatically state before you my total commitment to ensuring the honour and prosperity of this blessed land by decisively defeating separatism."

In a lame attempt to justify his war, the president declared that he had not given in to the LTTE's "provocations until the closure of Mavil Aru anicut [sluice gate], violating the fundamental rights of more than 50,000 people". In fact, Rajapakse had been looking for a pretext for open war and seized on the closure of the sluice gate to posture as a humanitarian. He ordered the offensive despite the efforts of the LTTE and the

international Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission to resolve the issue.

In an extraordinary display of political doublespeak, Rajapakse claimed that the continuing military offensives in the East were a “massive commitment to peace... to liberate the innocent people”. In reality, the escalating military operations have brought nothing but misery. Hundreds of civilians have been killed over the past year and tens of thousands turned into refugees. Scores of people have been abducted or killed by death squads operating with the sanction of the security forces. As military spending has increased, the population as a whole has had to bear the burden of skyrocketing prices and declining living standards.

While the LTTE is notorious for its abuse of basic democratic rights, Rajapakse’s appeal to “liberate innocent Tamils” has nothing to do with ending the systematic anti-Tamil discrimination that provoked the war in the early 1980s. The Sri Lankan military have not been greeted in captured areas such as Sampur and Vaharai by wildly cheering crowds, but with long queues of sullen refugees wanting to find food and flee the war. Rajapakse’s “liberation” means nothing other than a bloody war to militarily crush the LTTE and regain government control of the whole island.

Rajapakse appealed to his audience to “be reasonable and honest enough to agree with Mr Anandasangaree or the Hon. Douglas Devananda”. These two Tamil supporters of the president’s war are both deeply hostile to the LTTE as well as being notorious opportunists. Devananda, a cabinet minister, is head of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which functions as an armed auxiliary to the security forces, harassing and intimidating government opponents in the North.

Rajapakse has resorted to war not from a position of strength but profound political weakness. Until a week before the Independence Day ceremony, he headed a minority government dependent on the parliamentary support of two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which openly advocate all-out war on the LTTE.

After weeks of manoeuvring, Rajapakse secured the defection of enough members from the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) to establish a parliamentary majority. The JHU has also formally joined the government. To hold the coalition together, he had to offer ministerial posts to virtually everyone, making his cabinet of 108 one of the largest in the world.

The government is riven with contradictions and conflicts. The incoming UNP members are known for their support of the so-called peace process which is bitterly opposed by the JHU. Two senior ministers from Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party—Mangala Samaraweera and Anura Bandaranaike—refused to even attend the Independence Day events because they were dissatisfied with their new ministerial posts. Two more ministers publicly declared they were “ashamed” to be part of the world’s biggest cabinet. In response, Rajapakse warned anyone not supporting the government, to “leave the party”.

Behind the political crisis lies widespread popular disgust with the entire corrupt political establishment that has plunged the country back to war. Rajapakse’s response to this broad discontent is to further stir up communal sentiment and to prepare to crack down on any political opposition.

In the course of his speech, the president appealed for everyone to rally around the “defence of the motherland”. He denounced his opponents as opportunists who were undermining the “struggle against terrorism,” his economic development schemes and the protection of “cultural values”.

In a menacing threat, Rajapakse declared: “I call upon you with the greatest responsibility not to resort to any course of action likely to challenge the stability of the country. I believe this is the most suitable platform to make a particular appeal to the working people of this country not to supply oxygen, consciously or not, to terrorism that is gasping for life. I also call on the media to also act with responsibility in this regard.”

The government has already resorted to the use of the security forces to crack down on striking workers and has imposed what amounts to de facto censorship of the war. Under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which has recently been strengthened and reimposed, the police and military can detain without charge anyone allegedly “supporting terrorism”. Rajapakse’s remarks make clear that he intends to use this anti-democratic legislation to suppress any political opposition, particularly from working people.



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