

Sri Lankan government's "peace" committee on point of collapse

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The All Party Representative Committee (APRC) initiated by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse last year to work out a constitutional plan to end the country's long-running civil war has all but collapsed. Far from being a surprise, the committee's failure simply confirms that the government's agenda was not a negotiated peace, but the renewal of war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Rajapakse adjourned the APRC indefinitely on August 14. His own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), together with the Sinhala extremist parties—the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—opposed the issuing of any final report. The JHU and MEP are partners of the ruling coalition, while JVP supports the government in parliament without being part of the cabinet.

The JHU and JVP denounced the APRC's chairman Tissa Vitharana for preparing to issue a "majority" report, representing the views of the other parties on the committee, in favour of a federal constitution involving a devolution of powers to the provinces. Sinhala chauvinist groups regard such a proposal—the basis of all peace talks over the past two decades—as anathema.

At a press conference on August 19, JHU leader Champika Ranawaka condemned Vitharana as a "conspirator" supporting the LTTE. "Today, we have gained a military victory in the East. Plans are in place to push northwards ... There is a conspiracy to reverse the military victories. We wonder whether Professor Vitarana is playing a part in this conspiracy," he declared.

Ranawaka's remarks make the government's agenda explicit. Having launched a series of offensives to seized LTTE territory in the East in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, the military is now preparing

to attack LTTE positions in the North. The aim is to crush the LTTE and any opposition from the country's Tamil minority in order to maintain the dominance of a Sinhala-Buddhist state. As far as the JHU is concerned, any talk of compromise is treasonous.

Rajapakse established the APRC in May 2006 amid preparations to go on the military offensive. All parliamentary parties, including the opposition United National Party (UNP), sent their representatives, except the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA). The committee's purpose was never to establish the basis for peace talks, but to blunt public opposition to the return to war.

The APRC was also a convenient device for deflecting international criticism. Rajapakse could claim to be preparing for negotiations, even as he ordered the security forces to attack. For the sponsors of the so-called international peace process, the committee provided a pretext for turning a blind eye to the government's tearing up of the 2002 ceasefire. The US, the EU, Japan and Norway could pretend that Rajapakse was seeking a political solution to the war.

The Colombo media hailed the APRC as a step toward peace despite growing signs that the military and its paramilitary allies were already engaged in a covert war to weaken the LTTE and goad it into retaliation. In late July 2006, the military launched its first open offensive in the East in the Mavilaru area. The government seized upon the closure of the Mavilaru sluice gate, claiming that the army operation was a purely "humanitarian" one to provide irrigation water to farmers downstream. In its subsequent offensives, the military dispensed with such pretexts.

As a result, the APRC was stillborn from the outset. The JVP and JHU, which had both backed Rajapakse's election in November 2005, were hostile to any

concessions to the LTTE or the country's Tamil minority. The JVP pulled out of the APRC last December, declaring that it opposed any arrangement for "federalism" that devolved power to the North and East, where the majority of Tamils live.

The SLFP's own proposals, presented to the APRC in May, also opposed any federal arrangement. The document insisted on retaining the "unitary" character of a Sinhala-Buddhist state and proposed the scrapping of the current provincial council system in favour of devolution on a far more limited scale at the district level. The plan effectively tore up not only the tentative proposals made in peace talks in 2002-03, but the provincial council arrangements put in place in 1987 under the Indo-Lanka Accord. By destroying any room for compromise, the document was in effect a declaration of war.

The APRC nevertheless continued to drag on, holding more than 40 rounds of meetings since it was formed. A phony "debate" has continued, with the SLFP, alongside the JHU and MEP, opposing attempts by other parties to replace "unitary state" with a compromise term and to retain provincial councils.

The so-called majority includes a number of parties that are part of the ruling coalition, in particular the leftist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party (CP). For these parties, the APRC has served as a useful political camouflage, enabling them to claim to be "for peace" while serving in a government that is aggressively prosecuting war. The opposition UNP joined the APRC last year, but quit on August 17, complaining that the government had failed to produce a final report.

In comments to the *Island* on April 15, APRC chairman Vitharana, who is also an LSSP parliamentarian, blurted out the committee's real purpose. In an appeal to the Sinhala extremist parties, he declared: "I would like to emphasise that the best way to defeat the LTTE is to isolate them by winning the Tamil people to the side of the government through the APRC proposals." In other words, the APRC was part of the government's propaganda effort to win the war.

Even after its adjournment on August 19, differences over the APRC have only deepened. At a press conference on August 22, JVP propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa warned that if the SLFP agreed to

federal-type devolution, "it would be the most irreparable mistake the government ever made". SLFP spokesman Jeyaraj Fernandopulle responded the following day by saying the government adhered to the unitary state, but was "agreeable to any solution based on devolution of power to the maximum within a unitary state".

This political formula is a rather thinly disguised attempt to keep the APRC alive by placating the JVP, but at the same time continuing discussions with other parties about the type of devolution. Rajapakse also assigned Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake to hold talks with all party leaders to maintain the pretense that the APRC discussions were continuing. This delicate balancing act is not simply aimed at retaining the APRC as window dressing but at shoring up the unstable ruling coalition.

Rajapakse's alliance not only includes the JHU and MEP, but also Tamil and Muslim-based parties whose social base is hostile to the government's renewed war. These include the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the National Unity Alliance (NUA) and the Up-country People's Front (UPF). The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) was part of the government, but recently quit and joined the opposition. The "left" parties—the LSSP and CP—form the linchpin in maintaining the charade that the APRC is preparing a peace plan to end the war.

The virtual collapse of the APRC is one more sign of the extreme tensions in the ruling coalition amid growing popular opposition to the war, the government's assault on democratic rights and the continuing decline of living standards.



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