

Communalism and militarism on display at Sri Lanka's independence day celebrations

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Last Monday's official ceremony to mark Sri Lanka's independence was a bleak affair, lacking any popular support and dominated from start to finish by patriotic bluster and militarism. Sixty years after the end of British colonial rule, the government and the political establishment as a whole has nothing to offer working people but communalism, social misery and a 25-year civil war with no end in sight.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, who presided over the day's events, is directly responsible for destroying the 2002 ceasefire and restarting the conflict against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The ceremony took place amid ongoing fighting in the island's north and bomb blasts in the capital. Thousands of police and troops were deployed throughout Colombo and its suburbs on checkpoints and roadblocks. Security forces rounded up hundreds of Tamils on the pretext of checking for "Tiger terrorists".

Central Colombo was virtually deserted. Only invitees—foreign dignitaries, ministers, parliamentarians and the military top brass—were permitted to attend the "national celebration" at Galle Face Green, outside the army's headquarters. Military personnel and schoolchildren—all acting under orders—were virtually the only audience. Rajapakse was escorted to the podium by the service chiefs and the inspector general of police. A choir of schoolgirls sang the national anthem.

The military put its might on display. Thousands of troops and police marched past the official dais along with their tanks, multi-barrel rocket launchers and heavy artillery. Air force helicopter gunships and fighter jets flew overhead as naval vessels sailed past off Galle Face Green. The ceremony was a graphic demonstration of the government's isolation, its dependence on the military and the gulf between the political establishment and the majority of the population who do not want war.

The political bankruptcy of the ruling elites was

summed up in Rajapakse's speech. The president could not point to any great achievements since independence in 1948, nor address the issues that led to the eruption of war in 1983. Instead, he bragged that his government had "brought forth a very important and decisive factor to enrich the substance of freedom" and this is "none other than the patriotism".

There is nothing new, however, in Colombo politicians appealing to "patriotism". It is synonymous with Sinhala Buddhist supremacism and anti-Tamil discrimination that has been exploited repeatedly since 1948 to divide working people. Rajapakse is simply promising more of the reactionary communalism that led to the eruption of war in the first place.

As for enriching the "substance of freedom", the Rajapakse government rules under draconian emergency legislation, has imposed de facto censorship on the media and has repeatedly branded any dissent or opposition to its policies, particularly by workers or the rural poor, as tantamount to treason. In a none-too-subtle threat to the opposition parties, he declared that the challenge was to "maintain the true patriotic fervour of people without letting it be subjugated by political party differences and political interests".

The main opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—boycotted the official ceremony. Both parties support the war, with the Sinhala extremist JVP insisting on more aggressive military action, but they did not want to associate themselves with a deeply unpopular government and its policies. The pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance was also absent.

UNP general secretary Tissa Attanayake bemoaned the fact that the UNP achieved independence in 1948, but "all governments other than the UNP governments have undone our achievement of gaining independence". In fact, confronted with an insurgent working class, the

bourgeois politicians who grouped themselves into the UNP in 1948 did not want independence, but had it thrust upon them. From the outset, the UNP relied on Sinhala chauvinism to divide workers. Among the UNP's "achievements" was launching the war in 1983 and ruthlessly prosecuting it for the first 11 years.

Rajapakse is well aware of the widespread discontent over declining living standards. In his speech, he declared that "our people, as those in other countries, face the burdens of a high cost of living due to world food shortages and the rise in oil prices". No mention was made of the inflationary impact of huge increases in military spending, the government's cutbacks to subsidies on fuel and other basic items, or its massive borrowing on international financial markets at high rates of interest.

All the president could offer working people was the empty promise that the "difficulties are not permanent" and "short-term difficulties lead to long-term benefits". Rajapakse is no doubt hoping that a quick victory over the LTTE will improve the island's economic prospects. However, inflicting a military defeat on the LTTE will not end 25 years of communal conflict, nor will it necessarily lead to a sudden influx of foreign capital and an economic boom. It is far more likely that the looming US recession and international financial turmoil will deepen the chronic economic crisis in Sri Lanka, as the war drags on.

Rajapakse was at pains to portray the "liberation of the East" as a great victory. Since launching its first offensive in July 2006, the military has succeeded in capturing all the LTTE's major eastern strongholds. The president hailed the rate of economic development and the establishment of "democracy" in the Eastern Province. In fact, the government's offensives have displaced at least 200,000 people, whose land has been seized by the military for the establishment of free trade zones. In current local elections, Rajapakse's ruling coalition has formed an alliance with a Tamil paramilitary group—the Tamil Viduthalai Makkal Pulihaal (TVMP)—which is notorious for its thuggery and violence.

Despite Rajapakse's upbeat speech, a number of editorials in the Colombo press this week reflected a mood of gloom and despair among wide layers of the political elite. None could point with pride to any achievements over the past six decades. All are mired in communal politics and support the war, but held out no great hope of military victory or economic improvement and were scathing about the corruption and violence that is rife in ruling circles.

The *Sunday Times*, for instance, painted the following

grim picture: "What we are now confronted with is a nation in peril—at the mercy of foreign aid donors dictating good governance to what is, a sovereign state; borrowing relentlessly from commercial banks for unborn generations to pay in the future; public funds being pilfered and squandered; one in every 20 of her citizens working overseas to keep the home fires burning, often in pitiful conditions; unemployment; under-nourishment; skyrocketing prices; corrupt politicians; plunging human rights records; and an insurgency draining whatever is left and taking a terrible toll on life, limb, property and the economy."

The only glimmer of hope that the newspaper could find was a recent opinion poll, which showed that a majority of Sri Lankans, given the opportunity, would not leave the country. Referring to tribal wars, corruption and AIDS in some African countries, the editorial declared that "despite all our troubles, we must still count our blessings". But, the newspaper, added, "we cannot ignore the bitter reality that we are celebrating this independence... against the backdrop of a capital city under virtual siege".

The editorial called for a concerted effort to fight not only the "scourge of terrorism" but "the scourge of corruption in high places, the scourge of incompetence and total disregard for waste". Quoting Churchill, the writer continued by saying it was not too late: "We are still masters of our fate. We are still captain of our souls." But after rising to great rhetorical heights, the editorial abruptly ended without offering an explanation of, or solution to, the present disastrous situation.

This deep pessimism and paralysis in ruling circles is itself both a damning indictment of 60 years of bourgeois rule and a sign of profound political turbulence ahead. As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its statement on February 4, the only social force capable of ending the present impasse on a progressive basis is the working class, armed with a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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