

Sri Lankan government proposes phony solution to communal conflict

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse announced another proposal on January 23 for a “political solution” to the country’s “ethnic problem”. Anyone not used to interpreting political codewords in Colombo might be forgiven for believing that Rajapakse was advancing a plan to end systematic discrimination against the island’s Tamil minority and for negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the country’s brutal 25-year war. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Rajapakse has repeatedly made clear that he has no intention of negotiating with the LTTE. In early January, his government formally withdrew from the 2002 ceasefire, which it had been observing in name only. Over the past 18 months, the military has seized all the main LTTE strongholds in the East and has begun operations against its northern positions. Even as the president was announcing his “political solution”, the army was escalating the fighting.

The purpose of Rajapakse’s announcement is not an end to the war, but to provide camouflage for the government’s plans to militarily destroy the LTTE. It is the outcome of protracted wrangling over more than a year on the All Party Representative Committee (APRC), which includes all government and opposition parties in parliament, except the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA). Significantly, the APRC was established just prior to the military’s first eastern offensive into the Mavilaru area in July 2006.

The content of the “political solution” makes its purpose even clearer. At Rajapakse’s direction, the parties represented on the APRC hurriedly drew up the proposal. It has been presented as an “action plan” for the president to “fully implement” the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution to enable “maximum and effective devolution of powers” to the North and East where the majority of Tamils live.

In effect, the APRC plan represents a partial return to the first failed attempt to end the war in 1987—the Indo-Lankan Accord. Under that deal, signed by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardene, the northern and eastern provinces were amalgamated as a

concession to demands for a “Tamil homeland”. The Thirteenth Amendment also devolved a limited degree of autonomy to the provincial level. Indian “peace-keeping” troops were sent to the North and East to enforce the accord and disarm the LTTE guerrillas.

Provincial council elections were held in September 1988. But in the wake of a communal campaign by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), denouncing the accord as a betrayal of the nation, the government dissolved the Northeast Provincial Council. Although Rajapakse is now calling for the implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment, he was among the leaders of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that supported the JVP’s agitation. For the past 20 years, the merged North and East have effectively been under military rule. The accord itself rapidly broke down as fighting erupted between Indian “peacekeepers” and LTTE fighters.

The latest plan is not a return to the East-North merger proposal. A Supreme Court ruling last year, instigated by the JVP and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), demerged the northern and eastern provinces, in contravention of the constitution’s Thirteenth Amendment. The Rajapakse government did not mount a case against the JVP-JHU move or oppose the court’s decision. Provincial elections are currently underway in the East.

Nevertheless, the latest “political solution” is a step back from a proposal advanced by the SLFP last May for devolution on an even more limited level, which would have meant tearing down the existing provincial councils and setting up smaller district councils. The district council system first brought in by President Jayawardene in 1981, prior to the outbreak of war in 1983, was totally rejected by Tamil parties at the time.

The SLFP’s district council proposal was designed to appeal to the JVP and JHU, which is a partner in Rajapakse’s ruling coalition. Both parties are deeply hostile to any concessions to the Tamil minority that would undermine the political supremacy of the Sinhala Buddhist elites. In the name of defending the “unitary state”, they

oppose any but the most limited devolution of the central government's powers to the local level.

Rajapakse's decision to announce the "full implementation" of the Thirteenth Amendment, however, has nothing to do with meeting the "aspirations of Tamil speaking people, especially in the North and East", as the proposal claims. Rather it is designed to address unease among the major powers over the return to open warfare in Sri Lanka, and to blunt growing popular opposition over the war and its economic impact.

The measure is addressed in particular to the Indian government, which is tacitly backing the renewed war against the LTTE, but faces opposition especially in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where there is widespread outrage over the injustices suffered by Sri Lankan Tamils. New Delhi has repeatedly called on the Sri Lankan government to map out a "political package" to address anti-Tamil discrimination. After the APRC plan was announced, India's external affairs ministry praised the move as a "welcome first step".

Rajapakse is also trying to isolate the LTTE politically and garner the support of other Tamil parties. He invited various Tamil politicians, including representatives of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which is a coalition partner, and V. Anandasangaree, the leader of the rump Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), to a meeting to discuss the package. Only the EPDP supported the proposal.

Anandasangaree, who backs the government, openly criticised the plan in front of Rajapakse saying it was not "reasonable". Later Anandasangaree told the media he could not become a "government rubber stamp" by agreeing to the proposals. Anandasangaree, who is already deeply compromised in the eyes of many Tamils, is simply not in a position to support a plan that represents a watering down of the failed 1987 accord. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Tamil-based Western Province Peoples Front (WPF) have also distanced themselves from the government's proposals and demanded a more extensive devolution package.

Rajapakse has announced his intention to appoint an advisory council for the northern province headed by the provincial governor. The package also provides for the recruitment of Tamil-speaking policemen and other staff to enable Tamils to access government and state institutions. But the limited and belated character of the proposals simply underscores the depth of longstanding official discrimination against the country's Tamil-speaking minority.

The services of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) have been called upon to provide a "left" face for the proposals. The LSSP, which betrayed the principles of the Trotskyist movement by joining an SLFP government more than four

decades ago, has degenerated into a bureaucratic shell that is virtually indistinguishable from the SLFP itself. The LSSP's sole MP, Tissa Vitharana, was nevertheless drafted as APRC chairman to dress the body up as "working for peace".

The United National Party (UNP) pulled out of the committee in September 2007, accusing the government parties of baiting its MPs. The UNP dismissed the latest proposal as a step back 20 years, but has advanced no plan of its own. The UNP, which was responsible for starting the war in 1983, is just as mired in Sinhala supremacist politics as the SLFP. General secretary Tissa Attanayake declared that the party was for "any solution without dividing the country"—a political nod in the JVP's direction.

The JVP has bitterly opposed any provincial devolution and withdrew from the APRC in December 2006 in protest against its discussion. Following Rajapakse's announcement, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe immediately called a press conference and declared the party would fight "tooth and nail" against the proposals.

At a later press conference, Amarasinghe backed off somewhat, declaring that the military "annihilation of the LTTE comes first". At the same time, the JVP is already stirring up a provocative anti-Indian campaign. At a public meeting on January 30, JVP parliamentarian K.D. Lal Kantha accused India of "forcing Sri Lanka to accept a political power-sharing arrangement with the minority Tamils now, only to thwart the Sri Lankan Army's successful campaign to crush the Tigers".

The comments recall the JVP's fascist campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord in the late 1980s when its leaders demanded that all parties rally to the defence of the unitary nation and denounced India's "imperialist" intervention into Sri Lanka. JVP thugs killed hundreds of political opponents, workers, trade union leaders and intellectuals who refused to back its campaign. The JVP is capable of resorting to similar methods again, particularly amid growing opposition to its demand that working people sacrifice for the war effort.

Far from being a step toward peace, Rajapakse's "political solution" demonstrates just how intractable are the communal politics of the entire Colombo establishment. Even if the Sri Lankan military achieved its objective of destroying the LTTE, none of the major parties are capable of resolving the underlying communal conflict, which would inevitably erupt in another form.



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