

Reactionary musings from the Island on 60 years of Sri Lankan independence

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Anniversaries of “national independence” in former colonial countries are usually occasions for the ruling elites to indulge in grandiose self-praise of past achievements and glories. However, last month’s commentary in Colombo on 60 years of Sri Lankan independence, commemorated amid renewed civil war and deepening social and political tensions, was full of pessimism and self-doubt.

The editorial in the *Daily Mirror*, for instance, began: “The question that arises in the minds of the people in this country today is whether there is reason or justification for celebrating the 60th anniversary of the country’s independence from foreign rule. While the government has arranged the customary celebrations at Galle Face Green, most people, including sections of government supporters, do not see there is anything to crow about our independence.”

The newspaper bewailed the lack of unity, inept and corrupt administration, inflation, human rights abuses, the influence of major powers, and above all the war. It noted that the country’s leaders had continued the same communal “divide and rule” policies as the British. The editorial offered no solutions and concluded with nothing more than the forlorn hope that President Mahinda Rajapakse, who restarted the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), would appeal for “forging unity” and that “concerned parties” would respond positively.

The editorial in the right-wing *Island* contained a similar tale of woe but its message was rather more menacing. The newspaper’s appeal was to the frustrations of disaffected layers of small businessmen, farmers and the poor who have been hard hit economically. Its savage attack on corrupt parliamentary politics, its strident defence of the war and call for a leadership to save the nation all had a strong fascistic smell.

The editorial began by bemoaning the lack of independence and the continuing role of the major powers in Sri Lankan affairs. “Sri Lanka still cannot decide what is good for her. The Western powers masquerading as the international community is (sic) running a parallel government of sorts with the help of constricting conditions attached to their aid, which has become more of an instrument of economic oppression than a contribution to development,” it stated.

While posturing as a standard bearer for “independence”, the *Island* has no criticisms of the predatory actions of the imperialist powers in Sri Lanka or anywhere else. In fact, the newspaper fully supports the Bush administration’s “war on terror” and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Its main objection is that the Sri Lankan government should be able to conduct its own “war on terror” free from any, even slight, international disapproval. “[T]he country has come to such a pass that she cannot even defend herself against terrorism without the concurrence of her aid donors and big neighbour [India],” the editorial stated.

It must be noted that the “international community” led by the US has turned a blind eye to the Rajapakse government’s open breaches of the 2002 ceasefire since July 2006. The major powers reacted to the Sri Lankan president’s tearing up of the ceasefire in January with nothing more than vague appeals for peace. The *Island*, however, has repeatedly commented with heavy sarcasm on the hypocrisy of Washington and its allies in mildly disapproving of the Sri Lankan military use of arbitrary detention, torture, “disappearances” and indiscriminate bombing, when the US armed forces are doing exactly the same in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The newspaper is seeking to whip up the most backward, communal elements of the Sinhala majority on behalf of layers of the Sinhala elite who view any concessions to the country’s Tamil minority as tantamount to treason. Inveighing against the “ambassadorial oligarchy... trying to take over the reins of government” goes hand in hand with a denunciation of democracy and empty posturing as the defender of local businesses, farmers and the “common man”.

“Democracy to successive rulers has meant a government of politicians by politicians for politicians. The public interest has rarely figured on their agenda. Many local industries have gone six feet underground and existing ones are on the verge of collapse. The state is virtually left without any more assets to be disposed of (for a song). The economic liberalisation has come to mean mere buying and selling. Women keep the economy ticking through slavery in garment factories, on tea and rubber estates and in foreign countries... While those real heroines are suffering in silence, the so-called leaders are living in clover with no compunction, bellowing rhetoric and helping

themselves to public funds,” the editorial declared.

The *Island*’s criticism of democracy is the stock-in-trade of all right-wing populists. They seek to exploit widespread disaffection, alienation and anger with bourgeois politicians to justify the overturning of parliamentary rule and the existing limited democratic rights of working people.

The display of concern for the working class is also completely cynical. The newspaper would be the first to denounce garment workers if they decided to end their silent suffering and strike for better pay and conditions. Rather the editorial is appealing to layers of small merchants, farmers, businessmen and professionals who are unable to compete with foreign capital and larger local corporations, whose livelihood is being eaten away by inflation and who live in fear of even greater economic uncertainty. The newspaper offers no alternative, denouncing both those who “strangled it [the economy] by closing it” and those that “blundered by opening an economic Pandora’s Box” through economic liberalisation.

In a populist appeal to downtrodden farmers, the *Island* declared: “Many are the leaders who boast of a glorious past and try to live in it but they have neglected the building block of the civilisation they adore—the grain of rice. Today heavy emphasis is being laid on national security—quite rightly so given the grave danger the country is faced with. But, what the leaders have failed to realise is that food security is an integral part of national security.” The newspaper attacked the “powerful cartel of rice mill owners” and “importers’ Mafia” who “hold the country to ransom”, lamenting the fact that “the government has had to fight separatist terror in the North and economic terrorism in the South simultaneously”.

The *Island*’s condemnation of the rice mafia as “economic terrorists” who are undermining the war effort, betrays the real content of its protestations of concern for the “common man”. The editorial is seeking to turn the frustrations and fears of failing businessmen and stricken farmers in a right-wing direction that regards the communal war as the “biggest challenge before the country” and anyone who weakens the military effort—striking workers, critical journalists, demonstrating students and protesting farmers—as traitors who must be crushed. It encourages the suffering Sinhalese petty bourgeoisie to see their salvation in strengthening a state apparatus that discriminates against their Tamil counterparts.

“We have lost the way,” the editorial declared. “The time has come for us to stop and reflect. True independence of a nation consists in economic development, democratic governance and national integration to be achieved under a truly national leadership.” It concludes by questioning whether Rajapakse is “up to the task”. Having denounced parliamentary democracy, offered nothing in the way of economic panaceas and insisted on a war to the bitter end against the LTTE, the call for “a truly national leadership” takes on a sinister meaning. If the elected president is not up to the task, then where one is to find such a leader?

The obvious answer is that a strongman must be brought forward from the ranks of the military, the state apparatus or Sinhala extremist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Such a figure must unite the [Sinhala] nation, strengthen the state, stamp out the traitorous opposition, defy the “ambassadorial oligarchy” and destroy the “Tiger terrorists” in order to establish a future of peace, harmony and prosperity. This reactionary fantasy is nothing less than the recipe for a military dictatorship or fascistic rule resting on disoriented and unstable layers of the middle class.

The *Island* editorial is a sharp warning to workers. To prosecute its war, the Rajapakse administration has already taken steps down the path to autocratic forms of rule. The JVP and layers of the military top brass have strong sympathies with the *Island*’s agenda and, in the current political and economic impasse, sections of the ruling class are undoubtedly weighing up their options. They are completely incapable, however, of ending communal conflict or providing economic relief even to those to whom they appeal.

The working class cannot afford to passively wait on events, but must intervene independently with its own solutions to the war and the deepening social crisis confronting broad layers of the population based on socialist internationalism. A program must be advanced to unite the Tamil and Sinhala masses in opposition to war and all forms of communalism and nationalism to put an end to a social and economic order that has brought nothing but misery and hardship for working people for the past 60 years. Such a struggle is necessarily part of the broader fight for socialism throughout the region and internationally.



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