

Indian politicians threaten to resign over Sri Lankan war

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The intensifying civil war in Sri Lanka is provoking widespread anger in the neighbouring southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu over the plight of the Tamil minority in the conflict and the Indian government's support for the Sri Lankan army. As a result, political parties in Tamil Nadu, many of which base themselves directly on Tamil communal politics, have been scrambling to posture as opponents of the war.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi convened an all-party meeting on the war on October 14, which issued a "warning" to the federal government in New Delhi. The main resolution declared that if the Indian government did not "come forward to halt the war in Sri Lanka within two weeks" the state's MPs in the national parliament would resign en masse.

A second resolution called on the government to "ensure the rights of the Sri Lankan Tamils" and to "halt all military assistance to the Sri Lankan government". The all-party meeting has also condemned "the frequent killing of Tamil Nadu fishermen by the Sri Lankan navy". In all, 23 Tamil Nadu based parties took part in the meeting.

To reinforce the "warning", all 15 parliamentarians from the ruling Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (DMK) have handed post-dated resignation letters to Karunanidhi. Their resignation would result in a significant loss of support for the Congress-led coalition in New Delhi, of which the DMK is a component. Another party at the meeting, the Pattali Makkal Kachchi (PMK), is also part of the central government.

The opposition All India Anna Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (AIADMK) did not attend the October 14 meeting, preferring to make its own independent protests in a bid to undercut the DMK, its longtime and bitter rival.

None of this posturing has anything to do with concern for the impact of the Sri Lankan war on working people. Rather, the various campaigns are aimed at diverting widespread antiwar sentiment into the channel of Tamil communalism and to shore up their own political base. All of the parties have an eye on national elections due by next May.

Offensives by the Sri Lankan army in the north of the island are now close to capturing Kilinochchi, the administrative centre of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and have driven hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. Many refugees are living in appalling conditions after the Sri Lankan government ordered all aid agencies out of the Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu districts last month.

A growing number of antiwar protests involving young people, students, lawyers, artists and workers, have taken place in Tamil Nadu in recent weeks. Last Friday hundreds of students from Madras University protested near Chepauk Stadium in Chennai to express sympathy towards the Sri Lankan war refugees. On Tuesday hundreds of university students staged a protest to demand an immediate halt to the war and urgent relief for displaced people.

On Sunday, Tamil film actors, producers and directors belonging to 25 associations staged protests in Rameshwaram, a town in southern Tamil Nadu close to northern Sri Lanka. Their placards demanded Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse respect "human rights" and international conventions. According to a report in the *Hindu*, speakers criticised the Indian government for secretly providing military assistance to Sri Lanka.

Indian government's stand

The mounting pressure from Tamil Nadu is creating political problems for the Indian and Sri Lankan governments. For Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the DMK and PMK with a total of 22 MPs are important coalition partners. That is all the more the case as the government faces growing discontent over the impact of the global economic turmoil on jobs, prices and living standards. With a national poll looming, the Congress-led coalition has already suffered a series of defeats in state elections.

Like previous Indian administrations, the Singh government is walking a fine political line. On the one hand, New Delhi is opposed to the LTTE's demands for a separate statelet in northern Sri Lanka, fearing it will encourage separatist movements within India. India has also been supplying military aid to Sri Lanka in order to prevent its regional rivals, particularly Pakistan and China, from gaining ground in Colombo. At the same time, the Indian government cannot completely ignore popular sentiment in Tamil Nadu.

In response to the latest protests in Tamil Nadu, the Indian government has been compelled to issue its own mild diplomatic rebukes. The Sri Lankan High Commissioner was recently summoned by India's national security advisor M.K. Narayanan and external affairs ministry secretary Shivshankar Menon to register India's "concern" over Tamil war refugees in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan President Rajapakse phoned Indian Prime Minister Singh in an attempt to defuse the issue. A press release noted that Singh had declared "that the rights and the welfare of the Tamil community... should not get enmeshed in the on-going hostilities against the LTTE." He had urged the president once again to move towards political settlement to the war within the framework of a united Sri Lanka.

Singh's comments are completely duplicitous. In plunging the country back to war from mid-2006, the Rajapakse government has had the tacit support of the US, the EU, India and China. India is openly supplying the Sri Lankan military with training, intelligence and equipment. In an effort to placate popular sentiment in Tamil Nadu, New Delhi insists that it is only supplying "non-lethal equipment".

The character of India's "non-lethal" aid was revealed when the LTTE attacked a Sri Lankan military camp and injured two Indian technicians operating new radar systems for the Sri Lankan air force. India has also supplied the Sri Lankan navy with key intelligence enabling it to locate and sink a number of LTTE supply ships. On October 13, the Colombo-based *Sunday Observer* reported the Sri Lankan president's brother and key advisor, Basil Rajapakse, as saying: "The support from our neighbour is very vital. India has been always with us. We got maximum support from India to crush the LTTE."

The Indian government has no intention of heeding last Friday's call by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi for an Indian intervention in Sri Lanka "to alleviate the sufferings of Tamil minorities there". Karunanidhi pointedly did not mention the previous dispatch of Indian troops to northern Sri Lanka in 1987 as so-called peacekeepers under the Indo-Lankan Accord. The intervention proved to be a

disaster as the Indian army clashed with the LTTE and was finally forced to withdraw with 1,200 casualties. All of the Tamil Nadu political parties including the DMK supported the Accord.

In Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu protests have been seized upon to further whip up communal tensions. When the Tamil Nadu political parties passed resolutions against the Sri Lankan war, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, another of the president's brothers, immediately accused the LTTE of orchestrating the protest.

The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is mired in Sinhala chauvinism, has ratcheted up its anti-Indian propaganda. JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva warned recently that the Rajapakse government would ultimately succumb to Indian pressure to end the fighting. New Delhi, he declared, was using Tamil Nadu to intervene in Sri Lanka.

The LTTE, which is under siege militarily, seized on the Tamil Nadu protests to issue its own demands to New Delhi. Political wing leader P. Nadesan told a Madras newspaper: "We expect India to lift the ban on the LTTE, which is the sole representative of Tamils, and recognise our liberation struggle... Helping the Tamil homeland is in fact safer for India rather than helping the Sinhala nation."

The very terms used reveal the LTTE's communal outlook. It is not Sinhala working people who are responsible for the war but successive Colombo governments that have whipped up communalism to divide the working class. The LTTE's appeal to New Delhi is a continuation of its longstanding perspective of seeking the support of major powers to establish a separate capitalist statelet for Tamils in Sri Lanka.

A quarter century of civil war has repeatedly demonstrated the incapacity of any section of the capitalist class in Sri Lanka or neighbouring India to end the communal conflict. All of the "solutions" being proposed are aimed at satisfying the interests of one or other layer of the ruling elite in Sri Lanka, at the expense of the working class—Tamil and Sinhala alike.



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