SEP opposes Sri Lankan government's ban on LTTE

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
24 January 2009

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that the Sri Lankan government's ban on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is the preparation for a crackdown on political opponents and more broadly the working class, young people and the oppressed.

Far from the army's recent advances against the LTTE paving the way for peace and prosperity, President Mahinda Rajapakse is preparing to use the methods of militarism to deal with the opposition being generated by the island's mounting economic and social problems.

The ban issued on January 7 has no direct bearing on the LTTE—the government is already waging war against the Tamil separatist organisation. Moreover, hundreds of people are being held without trial as "LTTE suspects" under emergency powers already in place.

Under the guise of fighting "terrorism," the new decree gives sweeping powers to the state. It provides for the proscription of "other organisations that are connected with or which are representing or acting on behalf of the LTTE... which have therefore become prejudicial to the interests of public security, the preservation of public order and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community".

The regulations could immediately be used against the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a parliamentary political party that supports the LTTE. Such broad definitions, however, could be applied to any organisations, including political parties, trade unions or student bodies, that are regarded as opponents of the government. Among the penalties are jail terms of up to 20 years for individuals, and seizure of the property and funds of organisations.

The Rajapakse government is notorious for branding critics, striking workers, protesting students and farmers as "Tiger sympathisers". Hundreds of people have been "disappeared" or brazenly murdered by military-aligned death squads over the past three years, including leading TNA politicians, journalists and young Tamils. Earlier this month, the editor of *Sunday Leader*, Lasantha Wickrematunge, who had been critical of the government, was shot dead in broad daylight as he drove to work.

Rajapakse and his ministers have specifically denounced strikers for undermining the war effort. Last July, as hundreds of thousands took part in a one-day stoppage for higher pay, defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared that if the wage demands were granted, military spending would have to be curtailed, which was what the LTTE wanted. "So there could be some connection between the two [the unions and the LTTE]".

Sinhala chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) leader Udaya Gammanpila underlined the sweeping scope of the ban, saying it was to curtail pro-LTTE activities "that are indirectly and directly supporting their cause ... It is crucial that we defeat those elements which help the terrorists financially and ideologically." The JHU is part of Rajapakse's ruling coalition.

To justify its communal war and associated anti-democratic measures, Rajapakse is using the same phoney pretext as the Bush administration offered for its neo-colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The official proclamation proscribed the LTTE for "acts of terrorism and other acts of violence" to establish a separate state in the North and East, illegal armed conflict with armed forces and its failure "to lay down arms, surrender and participate in the democratic process".

The government's claims to be defending democracy are completely bogus. The war erupted in 1983 precisely because of the systematic discrimination by successive governments against the country's Tamil minority.

Rajapakse relaunched the war against the LTTE in mid-2006 to ensure the dominant economic and political position of the elites of the island's Sinhala majority.

The LTTE is not a terrorist organisation. Its demand for a separate capitalist statelet for Tamils in the North and East represents the interests of sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie. "Terrorism" is simply a term used by the Rajapakse government to obscure the reactionary communal aims of its war. The same government that denounces the LTTE as terrorist is responsible for terrorising the Tamil minority through arbitrary arrests, death squads and the indiscriminate shelling and bombing of civilian areas.

In his proscription order, Rajapakse invoked Washington's "war on terror," declaring that to "eliminate the scourge of terrorism from the world, it is necessary for all sovereign states to criminalise terrorism and proscribe without exception organisations engaged in the perpetration of terrorism".

The ban was imposed just days after the Sri Lankan army seized control of Kilinochchi, the LTTE's administrative centre. The US signalled its open support for the war with a statement issued by the US embassy in Colombo on January 7 declaring that it did not "advocate negotiations with the LTTE". Previously the US, along with the EU, Norway and Japan, constituted the international sponsors of "peace talks" and the 2002 ceasefire.

The US statement gave the green light for the Sri Lankan government to institute its ban, effectively ruling out any possibility of future negotiations. The Sri Lankan Security Council—the president, defence secretary, presidential secretary and armed forces chiefs—met and decided on the ban, which was pushed through cabinet later that day.

Rajapakse is now seeking to impose an international ban on the LTTE under UN Security Council resolution 1373, adopted after the September 11 attacks in the US. The *Daily Mirror* reported on January 12 that the government is lobbying UN member states to list the LTTE as a terrorist organisation. Such a move would be used to tighten the screws on any support for the LTTE in the sizeable Tamil diaspora around the world.

Ominously, the government has warned of a "conspiracy" to undermine the army's victory at Kilinochchi. Its efforts to organise patriotic celebrations and whip up communal tensions have largely fallen flat. While there may be hopes among working people that the war will finally end, they are acutely aware of the enormous hardships they have been forced to bear as a result of the 25-year conflict.

In contesting two provincial elections on February 14, the Socialist Equality Party is the only party that unequivocally opposes the government's communal war and defends the democratic rights of all working people—Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala. The two main opposition parties—the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have both supported the outlawing of the LTTE. In fact, the JVP has been pressing the government to impose the ban.

We call on workers, young people and intellectuals to take a stand against the autocratic methods employed by the government against all forms of opposition. Rather than defending even the limited forms of parliamentary "democracy" in Sri Lanka, Rajapakse has reduced its institutions to a hollow shell and is erecting the framework for a police state.

In opposing the ban, the SEP gives no political support to the LTTE, whose program of Tamil separatism reflects the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not Tamil workers and farmers. The LTTE's violent attacks on ordinary Sinhalese serve the same reactionary purpose as the government's Sinhala supremacism—to divide the working class on the basis of religion, ethnicity and language—and play directly into the hands of the Sinhala extremists in Colombo.

Based on the program of socialist internationalism, the SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan armed forces from the North and East. This demand is the essential precondition for the unity of the Tamil and Sinhala working class against the government and the LTTE for the establishment of workers' and farmers' government in the form of the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia.

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