

Indian Elections:

Tamil Nadu parties posture over plight of Sri Lankan Tamils

Arun Kumar
2 May 2009

The plight of the Tamils of Sri Lanka has emerged as a major issue in India's election campaign, particularly in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where the Tamil-speaking population has centuries' old cultural and family ties with the island Tamils.

In recent days, the leaders of the dominant parties in the state, the Tamil ethnically-based DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) have sought to outdo each other in posturing as defenders of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Their aim is transparent: to garner votes—Tamil Nadu goes to the polls May 13 in the fifth and final phase of India's month-long election—by cynically appealing to popular anger over the humanitarian crisis that has been produced by the Sinhalese elite's bloody campaign to reestablish its hegemony over the entire island.

In recent months, hundreds of thousands have joined demonstrations and other protest actions in Chennai and across Tamil Nadu to oppose the Sri Lankan military offensive in the island's north and northeast. Tragically more than a dozen people have immolated themselves.

Many of the protests were called by the Sri Lankan Tamil Protection Movement, an alliance that includes smaller Tamil-based parties that have long supported the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and their demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam—the VCK, MDMK and PMK—and the Stalinist Communist Party of India or CPI. The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has also associated itself with the movement and has been invited onto its platforms.

Whilst the outrage of the people of Tamil Nadu is genuine, the leadership of the Sri Lankan Tamil Protection Movement has sought to impart to the protests a regressive Tamil nationalist orientation. This is exemplified by comments by Pandian, the leader of the state unit of the CPI. Declared Pandian, "[Sri Lankan President] Rajapakse says the Tigers have to lay down arms. A Tamil will die standing on his feet, and never by begging on his knees."

In recent weeks the movement has agitated for intervention by the great powers and the UN to "save Eelam Tamils"—no matter that the US, Britain, and the other major imperialist powers all supported the Sri Lankan government in relaunching the racist war against the Tamil minority and more recently in the mounting of its "final offensive."

With the approach of the elections, the DMK and AIADMK have found it politic to seize "the lead" on the Tamil issue from their electoral allies. The DMK and AIADMK have previously allied with the BJP, but in this election the DMK is the regional ally of the Congress Party and the AIADMK has formed an electoral bloc that includes the MDMK and PMK and the two major Stalinist parties, the CPI and the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

DMK leader and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi called a state-wide *bandh*, a general strike and shutdown of business, for April 23 to press New Delhi to demand a ceasefire in Sri Lanka. In a clear expression of the popular sympathy for the plight of Tamil civilians in northern Sri Lanka, the dawn-to-dusk shutdown virtually crippled daily life in Tamil Nadu and the neighboring state of Pondicherry. Almost all public and private vehicles were off the roads in Chennai and other major cities and most shops and businesses were shut.

The Congress Party leadership, which had taken vehement exception to Karunanidhi's recent description of LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran as "my good friend," initially tried to distance itself from the *bandh*. But the party's state unit strongly endorsed it.

This past Monday (April 27), Karunanidhi staged an "indefinite fast" to demand an immediate ceasefire in Sri Lanka, then declared victory six-and-a-half hours later when he learned from Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram that Colombo had announced it would not use heavy weapons in trying to capture the tiny enclave still under LTTE control and where more than 50,000 civilians are congregated.

Predictably, the Sri Lankan military soon reneged on its own pledge, thus ensuring further horrific civilian casualties.

In launching his fast, which ultimately lasted no more than a single meal, the 85 year-old Karunanidhi claimed to be acting "On behalf of the people of Tamil Nadu ... to protect the Tamils in Sri Lanka."

The reality is the DMK is a partner in India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, a government that has provided crucial political and military support for Colombo since it resumed all-out war against the LTTE in 2006.

"[I]n recent years," observed the *Times of India* in a March 2 editorial, the Indian government "has covertly given, and continues to provide, military assistance to Colombo, including radar surveillance, logistical support, armaments and helicopters. Without India's support, the SLAF [Sri Lankan Air Force] couldn't have scored major military victories."

New Delhi welcomed the Sri Lankan military's overrunning of the LTTE stronghold in the Wanni last January, reiterating its call for LTTE leader Prabhakaran to be extradited, upon his capture, to India for his role in the 1991 assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

In recent weeks, India has joined the US and other imperialist powers in pressing Colombo to suspend its drive to annihilate the LTTE irrespective of civilian casualties. Electoral considerations, pressure from the DMK and concern about the role the war is playing in fueling Tamil nationalism within India are important factors. So, too, is the fear that the bloodbath in Sri Lanka and Colombo's cavalier refusal to make any meaningful accommodation to the Tamil elite in the form of a "political solution" will perpetuate political instability in Sri Lanka and southern India for years to

come.

The AIADMK and its ex-movie star leader, the mercurial Jayalalithaa Jayaram, have hitherto not been known, as the *Asian Tribune* put it, for “excessive concern for the Sri Lankan Tamils.” Jayalalithaa, in contradistinction to most Tamil Nadu politicians, has routinely called for strong action against the “terrorist” LTTE.

But with an eye to the coming elections, Jayalalithaa has made a series of increasingly strident demands and promises in respect to the war in Sri Lanka, while ridiculing Karunanidhi’s purported actions in support of the Sri Lankan Tamils as “farce and drama.”

The AIADMK’s election manifesto promoted the “devolution of administrative power” to the Tamil-dominated provinces of Sri Lanka as the best solution to the civil war. But on April 26, Jayalalithaa told an election rally that CDs and photographs of the atrocities committed against the Tamils of Sri Lanka had caused her heart to boil. “If this pathetic situation of the Tamil people ... has to come to an end, an independent Eelam is the only solution.”

“Till today,” she continued, “I have never said that separate Eelam is the only solution. I have spoken about political solution, this and that. But, now I emphatically say, a separate Eelam is the only permanent solution to the Lankan conflict.”

On Thursday, Jayalalithaa went still further. She urged voters to give the AIADMK-led electoral alliance all 40 Lok Sabha seats from Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry so that her party can have a decisive say in the formation of India’s next government and use that power to force the dispatching of the Indian army to Sri Lanka to establish a separate state of Tamil Eelam.

In championing Indian military action in Sri Lanka, Jayalalithaa claimed merely to be emulating the role that Indira Gandhi and her Congress government played in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. “We will respect international laws and norms just as Indira Gandhi did. Like her son Rajiv Gandhi did by sending IPKF [India Peacekeeping Force to Sri Lanka in 1987.]”

Jayalalithaa’s call for Indian military intervention in Sri Lanka—Karunanidhi made a similar call a few months back—is both demagogic and reactionary.

Demagogic because she knows full well that no matter what the post-election parliamentary arithmetic, there is no way the Indian political and military establishment is going to wage war to carve out a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka.

The Indian elite is vehemently opposed to any changes to the borders of the capitalist nation-states of South Asia, because it fears recognition of a “right to national self-determination” could stimulate, and provide international legitimacy to, the demands of the myriad national-separatist movements currently active within India.

In her speech Jayalalithaa sought to rebut this position by arguing that advocating the splitting of another country did not represent a threat to the territorial integrity of the Indian state.

The call for Indian military intervention is reactionary, because, as is demonstrated in both the cases of the Bangladesh War and the subsequent intervention in Sri Lanka, the Indian government’s foreign and military policies, no less than its domestic ones, serve the interests of the country’s rapacious capitalist elite. In Bangladesh in 1971 and Sri Lanka’s majority Tamil north and east in 1987, India intervened not to bring freedom to an oppressed people, but to uphold the reactionary class interests of the Indian bourgeoisie.

In 1971, the Indian bourgeoisie saw the struggle of the Bangladeshi people against their inferior status and, ultimately, military subjugation to which they were subjected within Pakistan, as the opportunity to deliver a knockout punch to their arch-rivals, the Pakistani elite. A second factor, no less decisive, was the Indian ruling class’ fear that the Bangladeshi national struggle was intersecting with worker-peasant unrest in the Indian

state of West Bengal, raising the potential of a mass movement from below in opposition to the 1947 partition of Bengal and the entire, imperialist-sponsored postwar settlement in South Asia.

Thus the Indian intervention in Bangladesh was aimed not at winning the freedom of the Bangladeshi people, but at securing Indian dominance over South Asia and the creation of a capitalist Bangladesh.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the Indian elite has cruelly abused the Tamil people, providing and withdrawing support for the LTTE based on cynical calculations as how best to advance its interests in South Asia.

In the early and mid-1980s, under Indira and then Rajiv Gandhi, India provided military support to the LTTE, seeing it as a useful tool to pressure Sri Lanka, which was closely aligned with the United States at a time when India was a Cold War ally of the Soviet Union. But with the LTTE having gained control over most of the north and east, New Delhi, in 1987, sought to impose a “peace” settlement on Colombo and the LTTE that upheld the nation-state system in South Asia and would, it hoped, underpin India’s regional dominance.

As it turned out, both the Sinhalese bourgeoisie and the LTTE rebelled against the Indian imposed “settlement,” albeit for opposite reasons, and the IPKF was forced to unilaterally withdraw in 1990 after suffering significant casualties in its campaign to disarm the LTTE.

In the 1990s, the Cold War having come to an end and the Indian bourgeoisie’s foreign policy having undergone a dramatic shift in correspondence with its new orientation toward full integration in the world capitalist economy, New Delhi re-established close relations with Colombo and later secured a free trade agreement with Sri Lanka that it views as a model for other countries in the region.

India’s aim in recent years has been to bring the civil war in Sri Lanka to an end to promote political stability in the region. In furtherance of that goal, it has provided increased military support to Colombo, while intermittently urging it, albeit not too forcefully, to cede to one or more Tamil-majority provinces’ powers, akin to those wielded by India’s states. Its principal concern however has been to block China, Pakistan, and to a lesser extent the US, from gaining too much influence in Colombo, by ensuring that they do not get the upper hand as the Sri Lankan state’s principal political and military ally. This is part and parcel of the Indian bourgeoisie’s drive to secure its position as the dominant regional power in South Asia and from that base vie for influence as a nuclear-armed, “world power.”

Workers in India cannot oppose Colombo’s communal war and support the oppressed people of Sri Lanka—the Tamil minority, but also the Sinhalese workers and peasants who are likewise the victims of the war—through the reactionary Indian capitalist state and the various parties of the Indian and regional Tamil bourgeoisie.

To do so requires building an independent political movement of the working class in India and across South Asia, advancing, in opposition to imperialism and the various rival national bourgeoisies, the fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for a Federation of Socialist States of South Asia.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact