

Sri Lankan government whips up communal hysteria as war reaches climax

Wije Dias
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As Sri Lanka's protracted war reaches its final stages, the communal propaganda being whipped up in Colombo by the entire political and media establishment has reached fever pitch. Its purpose is to suppress any criticism or opposition to the government's crimes against the Tamil people as it prepares for an economic offensive against working people as a whole.

President Mahinda Rajapakse justifies his communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) under the phoney banner of "the war against terrorism". On the pretext of fighting terrorism, the country has been placed on a war footing. The government routinely denounces criticism of its policies, no matter how mild, as "supporting the Tiger terrorists"—a charge that can bring harassment, imprisonment without charge and in some cases, summary execution at the hands of pro-government death squads.

The "war against terrorism" is used to treat all Tamils as "terrorist suspects". Some 200,000 civilians who have fled the fighting in the north of the island have been interned in squalid detention camps guarded by troops. Borrowing from American and Israeli propaganda, all civilian casualties are blamed on the LTTE's use of civilians as "human shields". The military's refusal to allow food and medicine to reach an estimated 50,000 civilians trapped in the remaining small pocket of LTTE-held territory is justified by declaring that it would "aid the terrorists".

The "war against terrorism" has become the official platform of the ruling elite—government and opposition parties alike, all sections of the media as well as the military and state bureaucracy. The humanitarian disaster unfolding in the north is rejected as "Tiger propaganda" and barely reported in the press. All parties hail the military as heroes and deny evidence of its crimes. The aim of this ferocious campaign is to intimidate, deaden critical faculties and above all suppress any expression of political opposition.

The real roots of the war are to be found in the decades of anti-Tamil discrimination exploited by successive Colombo governments to divide the working class and secure a social base for bourgeois rule. The war to destroy the LTTE is not to wipe out "terrorism" but to consolidate the power and privileges of the

Sinhala ruling elites. This is the history that the powers-that-be in Colombo do not want discussed. For its part, the LTTE's demand for a separate capitalist state and its attacks on Sinhala civilians only deepened the communal divide.

Rajapakse's "war against terrorism" has taken a rather bizarre turn in recent weeks as the Western powers have called for a ceasefire. Foreign secretaries and top officials from the US, Britain, France, Canada, Denmark and Japan, not to mention the UN and India, have either directly spoken to the president or paid visits to the island. The Sri Lankan government has flatly rejected all calls for a ceasefire to allow civilians to be rescued.

The same communal logic is being applied to the US and its allies and given an "anti-imperialist" twist. Following the visit of British Foreign Secretary David Miliband and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner last week, Rajapakse declared that he would not be "lectured" by Western powers.

Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, told the *Daily Telegraph* that the ceasefire call by Miliband and Kouchner was a joke. "We have proved we can save these civilians by rescuing 200,000. So why are so many foreign ministers in this indecent hurry? We're just wasting our time with these dignitaries and VIPs coming to this country over and over again because of their internal problems to satisfy the Tamil diaspora in their countries," he added.

In its editorial last weekend, the right-wing *Sunday Island* praised the government, declaring: "Sri Lanka has stood up to the pressure exerted by many world powers in recent days and this should be a matter of pride to all Sri Lankans." Last month the same newspaper lashed out at the French government for its treatment of Tamils protesting in Paris against the war. "Why the French police arrested just only 200 terror activists defies comprehension. All those demonstrators publicly supporting terrorism deserve to be thrown behind bars," its editorial declared.

Sinhala extremist outfits such as the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—a partner in the ruling coalition—openly accuse the US and the European Union of trying to "save the terrorists". The JHU-aligned National Movement Against Terrorism has put up "wanted" posters around Colombo with pictures of Miliband, US

Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and Norwegian diplomat Erik Solheim—charging them with “aiding and abetting terrorism”.

Not to be outdone, the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) last week denounced the government’s announcement of “an end of combat operations and the use of heavy weapons”. The declaration was always a lie, but that did not stop the JVP from accusing Rajapakse of caving in to international pressure.

The Sri Lankan Defence Ministry, which exerts enormous political influence in Colombo, issued a statement on May 5 declaring: “So-called human rights champs put a number of ridiculous demands on the Sri Lankan government, such as offering amnesty to the terrorists, allowing a third party to rescue the terrorist leaders, go for a ceasefire, etc. Never did history unmask the hypocrisy and the sanctimony of the Western powers [more] than this behaviour towards Sri Lanka during recent times.”

The imperialist powers, each of which backed Rajapakse’s war, are undoubtedly guilty of hypocrisy and sanctimony. Their calls for a ceasefire are not driven by any concern for Tamil civilians but by the need to protect their economic and strategic interests in the aftermath of the war.

However, the “anti-imperialism” of the Colombo establishment is completely bogus. The government and opposition parties have all backed the neo-colonial wars of the US and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq. If they now allege hypocrisy and obliquely refer to the crimes of imperialism in these countries, it is only to demand an end to any international interference in their own criminal war in Sri Lanka.

The defence ministry statement singled out a number of countries for favourable mention—India, Pakistan and the rest of South Asian countries, China, Russia, Japan, Iran, Libya, Vietnam, Mid-East African and Southeast Asian countries. “But for their understanding on our plight and the trust they placed on us, we would never be able to come this far in our battle against terrorism,” it declared. “It seems the international community has become more independent and therefore safer for poor countries like Sri Lanka to stand up for their rights.”

The Sri Lankan government has rested on China in particular as an increasingly important backer. In the UN Security Council, China and Russia have opposed calls for a formal debate on the war in Sri Lanka, declaring it to be an “internal matter”. China is Sri Lanka’s leading provider of financial aid, surpassing Japan, and also its largest source of military equipment, including fighter jets. In return, China has acquired the rights to build a port at Hambantota on the southern tip of the island, strategically positioned adjacent to the main sea routes from the Middle East to North East Asia.

The uncritical support of China, Russia and Pakistan, as well as the covert backing of India, for Rajapakse’s war has clearly

emboldened the Sinhala chauvinist parties and militarist factions within the Sri Lankan establishment. The defence ministry statement contains an implied warning to the US and its allies that Sri Lanka could lean more toward China in the future. With the destruction of the LTTE as a conventional military force, the Sri Lankan government will continue its manoeuvring between the major powers as it seeks to bolster its fragile hold on power.

The communal campaign underway in Colombo is not primarily directed at the “Western powers” but against the working class and oppressed masses. Despite the relentless barrage of propaganda, there is no widespread popular support for a war that has lasted a quarter of century, cost more than 75,000 lives and blighted an entire generation. The conflict has generated anger and opposition over the countless human tragedies and hardships that ordinary people have been forced to endure.

As the full cost of the war, compounded by the impact of the global recession, is imposed on the backs of the masses, the Rajapakse government is well aware that the bureaucratic apparatuses of the trade unions and the so-called left parties are not sufficient to stem the mass anger and class struggles that are bound to erupt.

The current hysteria is a sharp warning of the methods that will be used to wage a new economic offensive against the working class. The new “terrorists” will be striking workers, protesting students and demonstrating farmers. The police-state measures previously used against Tamils will be turned on working people as a whole. Only by building a new mass party based on socialist internationalism will working people be able to defend their basic democratic and social rights.



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