

Sri Lanka: Victory speech signals new assault on working people

Wije Dias
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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse delivered a speech in parliament yesterday to proclaim the army's victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While he cynically declared that the military had "liberated" the Tamil people from the "terrorist" LTTE, Rajapakse has inflicted nothing but death, destruction and misery on working people—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim.

Rajapakse spoke about caring for civilians and "respecting even the enemy that has surrendered," but the army's final push against the remaining pocket of LTTE fighters on Monday was a cold-blooded slaughter. The government was determined to annihilate the top LTTE leadership despite its announced readiness to silence its guns.

The LTTE's offer on Sunday to end combat to protect civilian lives, conveyed through Norway, was simply ignored. Foreign ministry secretary Palitha Kohona told the media: "The government's stance is clear. Norway is no longer the facilitators. The LTTE wanted to surrender their arms a little too late." On Monday morning, the army killed more than 300 people, including the LTTE's top leaders.

With all the country's military chiefs present in parliament, much of Rajapakse's speech was devoted to hailing the armed forces, covering up his government's war crimes and justifying his war as a "war on terrorism". Boasting of the army's victory, he declared its heroism to be exemplary to the "whole world that is engaged in a struggle to eradicate terrorism".

Inflating the LTTE to "a massive international organisation," Rajapakse claimed: "There was no school of war in the world that could face up to the savage military strategies used by the terrorists of the LTTE. The world had not seen military sciences able to face a combination of land mines, claymore mines, small suicide vessels, light aircraft that can evade radar, and suicide killer jackets."

In reality, the 26-year war was not to eradicate "terrorism" but to defend the power and privileges of the Sinhala elites. The LTTE's separatist program, attacks on Sinhalese civilians and ruthless suppression of Tamil opponents certainly deepened the communal

divide and played into the hands of the most reactionary elements of the Colombo establishment. But responsibility for the war rests squarely on successive Sri Lankan governments, which exploited anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide workers and prop up their rule.

The victory over what was no more than a guerrilla army was achieved through the cold-blooded use of the military's overwhelming superiority in numbers and equipment to terrorise the country's Tamil minority and grind down the LTTE's fighters. Rajapakse hailed the soldiers as "heroes" and praised the sacrifice of their mothers, fathers and wives, but the government and the army chiefs had no compunction in sacrificing young economic conscripts in their thousands in frontal assaults on entrenched LTTE positions.

Rajapakse's speech was clearly pitched at stirring up chauvinist sentiment. He referred to island's mythical past of 2,500 years of Buddhism and the glorious rule of 182 Sinhalese kings. Even before the speech began, national television was presenting him as the modern-day conqueror who had unified the country. The portrayal contains one element of truth: backed by a military-political cabal, Rajapakse functions increasingly as an autocrat who treats the rule of law and parliament with contempt.

Every effort was made to create the illusion of popular jubilation. The Department of Education instructed all schools island-wide to provide facilities for students to watch the president's speech. Going one step further, some principals encouraged students to parade on the school grounds with national flags in hand. The Department of Public Administration issued a circular allowing workers to watch the speech in their workplaces. A public holiday was proclaimed for today.

In fact, with the exception of demonstrations by Sinhala extremists, broad layers of working people have shown no elation over a war that has cost more than 70,000 lives and blighted an entire generation. Many people are relieved and hope that the end of the war will improve their lives, but have little faith in the government. Among Tamils, there is a justified fear that the military triumph will only lead to intensified harassment and persecution.

Rajapakse's promises to help the "liberated" Tamil people and

create a “Northern Spring” are completely cynical. Vast swathes of the northern Wanni region have been depopulated and turned into wastelands. Nearly 300,000 Tamils are being treated as prisoners of war and held in squalid, overcrowded detention camps. Since the beginning of the year, an estimated 8,000 civilians have been killed and many more injured, mainly by the military’s indiscriminate bombardment.

The Sri Lankan government is under international pressure for a “political solution” to the war that would offer some minimal concessions to the Tamil minority. But he dismissed “the many proposals from various countries and institutions... that ask us to look after our own Tamil people well” saying that Sri Lanka was “a country with unique precedents” that took care of the vanquished.

While accepting that a military solution was not the final solution, Rajapakse pointedly added that “we can realise that a document offered on a tray as a political solution could also not be the final solution.” By ruling out any formal document, the president is indicating that there will be no changes to the country’s constitution, which entrenches Buddhism as the state religion, or to the many forms of anti-Tamil bias built into the administrative system.

Rajapakse is completely beholden to Sinhala extremist layers of the political establishment and the state apparatus, particularly the military. The president established an All Party Representative Conference two and a half years ago, supposedly to propose constitutional reforms to address the grievances of the minorities. It has sat for 144 sessions without reaching any agreement, mainly because Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party and his chauvinist allies—the Jathika Hela Urumaya and the National Freedom Front—vehemently oppose any democratic concessions to Tamils.

The most ominous aspect of Rajapakse’s speech was his declaration that the end of the war would begin a new era of “nation building”. “Time is now raising a new challenge before us,” he said. “It is the challenge of building the motherland. From now all, everyone should change in keeping with the needs of facing up to that challenge, too. Just as I accepted the earlier challenge, I accept this new challenge too.”

The government and big business are acutely aware that the costs of the war, compounded by the impact of the global recession, have created a deepening economic crisis in Sri Lanka. “Nation building” simply means that drastic new economic burdens have to be imposed on working people. Already the government has frozen wage increases and new recruitments to the public sector and cut subsidies in its bid to obtain a \$US1.9 billion IMF loan.

Having demanded that workers sacrifice for the war, Rajapakse is now insisting that working people “face up” to the new “nation building” challenge. The same militaristic ethos will be applied to this new task. He declared that the victory belonged to those people who had rallied behind the National Flag, sacrificed their

sons to the war and “thought not of their stomachs but of their country”.

Announcing that the war had now “removed the word ‘minorities’ from our vocabulary,” Rajapakse declared: “There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth. Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group.”

These words have only one meaning. Anyone who complains about not having enough food to fill their stomach or protests against the demands for further sacrifice in the name of “nation building” will be treated as traitors. Rajapakse’s remarks highlight the fact that the “two peoples” about which he is speaking are the wealthy elites he represents, who never have to worry about the basic necessities of life, and the vast majority of the population, who are struggling to get by from day to day.

The Socialist Equality Party warns that the Rajapakse government will pursue its “economic war” no less ruthlessly than it has waged its offensives against the LTTE and Tamil civilians. Over the past three years, those who have criticised Rajapakse or his conduct of the war have been subjected to threats, arbitrary detention or “disappearance” by pro-government death squads. With the complicity of the trade union bureaucracies and “left” parties, Rajapakse and his ministers denounced striking workers as aiding the “Tiger terrorists”.

Workers, youth, students and intellectuals must reject this new “economic war” in the interests of the business elite and organise a political counteroffensive to fight for their own essential rights, needs and aspirations. That can only be done on the basis of the program of socialist internationalism, to unite working people in Sri Lanka and throughout the region against the predatory demands of the capitalist class. The SEP is the only party that fights for this perspective.



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