

Sri Lankan president's speech: another warning to working people

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The Sri Lankan government organised a huge military parade on Wednesday to mark the army's victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). President Mahinda Rajapakse heaped praise on the military in a jingoistic speech lasting 40 minutes that also contained a veiled threat to the working class.

The ceremony took place on Galle Face Green, a seaside promenade in central Colombo, as the "grand finale" of 16 days of celebrations since Rajapakse announced victory in parliament on May 19.

For two weeks, the government has been seeking to whip up popular enthusiasm over its military triumphs. The communal character of these celebrations is indicated by the billboards erected in every corner of Colombo and provincial cities with huge pictures of Rajapakse, portraying him as the incarnation of ancient Sinhala kings.

On May 24, at a ceremony held in Kandy, the top Buddhist prelates conferred their highest honour on Rajapakse—*Vishwakeerthi Shree Sinhaladheeswara* (Universally Glorious Overlord of Sinhalese). While Rajapakse insists he was waging a "war on terror," the Sinhalese ruling elite clearly understands the aim was to protect their own power and privileges.

Wednesday's parade was designed to show off the military's prowess. More than 20 government schools in the capital were closed for three days to accommodate soldiers and policemen brought in for the occasion. Rehearsals took place over two days, closing main roads for hours despite the public inconvenience.

The police carried out dragnet operations through Tamil areas of Colombo, supposedly to hunt down LTTE supporters. The purpose was clearly to intimidate the city's Tamil population. Several youth were arrested.

Security was tight, with searches of vehicles and people entering the city. Organisers invited the general public to gather at an assigned spot so they could be escorted into the venue. Only a few dozen responded, showing the general disinterest in the event.

As in his previous speeches, Rajapakse tried to inflate the LTTE as a massive force that most believed "invincible" and that required the "army of a world military power" to defeat. But, the president boasted, the armed forces led by him and the generals were able secure victory.

The firepower on parade demonstrated the reverse was the case. Per capita, Sri Lanka has one of the largest militaries in the world. A wide range of arms and equipment was deployed against the LTTE's relatively small guerrilla forces. The US, China, Britain, Russia, Israel, Pakistan and India all assisted in providing arms, equipment, training, intelligence and advice.

On display were large numbers of heavily-armed troops, artillery and Czechoslovakian-built mobile multiple rocket launchers, mobile Indian radar, Chinese- and Russian-built armoured vehicles and anti-aircraft guns from India and several other countries. Naval vessels off the coast included US Coast Guard vessels and Israeli and Chinese gunboats. Overflights included US Bell helicopters, Russian MiGs, and Chinese and Israeli fighter jets.

Rajapakse and the military top brass wanted to send a message to working people that the ruling elite had a huge armed machine to protect its interests. Far from scaling back the military after defeating the LTTE, army commander General Sarath Fonseka has announced plans to increase troop numbers by 50 percent to 300,000. Government spokesmen used the occasion to call on young people to join the army.

At the beginning of the ceremony, the heads of the three armed forces and the police presented *Sannas* or parchments to Rajapakse, declaring they accomplished the mission assigned to them in defeating “terrorism”. This gesture is reminiscent of the days of the Sinhalese kings and is symptomatic of Rajapakse’s increasingly autocratic rule.

In his speech, Rajapakse declared: “The war fought against the LTTE was not a war fought against the Tamil people.” He praised the “heroic troops” for sacrificing their lives to save innocent Tamil people from the clutches of the LTTE. In another hypocritical gesture, he spoke a few sentences in Tamil.

It is impossible, however, to disguise the communal nature of the government’s criminal war. Some 300,000 Tamil civilians “liberated” from the LTTE have been herded into detention centres and kept under appalling conditions. In the final months of the war, the army killed thousands of civilians and maimed many more through its indiscriminate bombardment of LTTE territory.

Rajapakse pointedly praised Asian and African governments for supporting the war. “We have honest, close, and friendly relations with our neighbouring countries in Asia. We have also been able to build genuine good relations with the Arab and African countries,” he said.

Rajapakse left out the US and Europe, which backed a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for an investigation into war crimes in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government defeated the move with the strong backing of China, Russia and India. The US and the EU, which had supported Rajapakse’s war, were not concerned about human rights, but sought to use the issue to pressure Rajapakse and assert their own interests in Colombo, against rivals such as China.

Rajapakse hailed the “nearly 24,000 brave children of our land [who] have fought for freedom and are resting forever in their motherland. Similarly, the nearly 5,000 children of Sri Lanka are wholly disabled.” He praised the mothers, fathers and wives who “sacrificed their children and loved ones for the nation, to save the lives of others.”

In reality, the dead and maimed soldiers, who were used as cannon fodder by the government and the military, were mainly economic conscripts from the country’s impoverished villages and town. The subdued public response to the army’s victory over the LTTE is in part a product of the terrible impact of 26 years of war on working

people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim.

The most sinister aspect of Rajapakse’s speech was when he came to the future. He had previously spoken of the need for an “economic war” to build the nation. With the economy in a deepening crisis, this has only one meaning: a major onslaught on the social position of workers, farmers and the urban and rural poor.

Rajapakse made clear the government would not tolerate opposition. “When development is undertaken there are many obstacles due to ideological differences and attitudes of vision. These lead to delay,” he said. “Ideology, political principles, issues of vision should be for the country.... It is not the [political] struggle that should go forward, but the country.”

These remarks are not directed primarily at the official opposition parties, which, in the wake of the LTTE’s defeat, have all hailed the victory of the army and the government. The comments were to put workers on notice, not to demand their rights, not to expect any improvement in their living standards and not to oppose the government’s “nation-building” plans.

Rajapakse said the government would not bow to populist pressure. “It is necessary to remember that carrying out higher education, providing electricity, doing urban development and many other matters on the basis of populist political decisions does a grave injury to the country,” he said.

The president declared that his government had realised the dream of defeating terrorism, then added: “With regard to the development of our country too, I have to say that it will be the same.” The remark is another warning to working people that the Rajapakse government intends to pursue its “economic war” with the same ruthlessness and police-state measures that were used in its war against the LTTE.



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