

Sri Lankan government threatens Tamil parliamentarians

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The Sri Lankan government last week threatened to strip four Tamil parliamentarians of their seats by turning down their request for leave. Coming in the wake of the army's defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the threat is a further sign that President Mahinda Rajapakse intends to stamp out any political opposition.

The issue arose when the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) forwarded leave applications of four of its MPs—Selvam Adaikalanathan, Selvarajah Gajendran, S. Jeyanandamoorthy and P. Sithamparanathan—to parliament on June 10. The four MPs had been on leave for three months and wanted an extension for another three months.

The TNA was formed in 2001, prior to the 2002 ceasefire, from existing Tamil parliamentary parties that accepted the LTTE's bogus claim to be the “sole representative of the Tamil people”. As a result, the TNA functioned as a proxy for the LTTE. Since the LTTE's military defeat, the TNA has stated only that it will continue to advance self-determination for Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Parliamentary leave applications are usually a straightforward formal procedure. In this case, however, the Rajapakse government seized the opportunity to threaten the four TNA representatives. If leave is not granted, MPs lose their seats, according to the provisions of the Sri Lankan constitution.

When the leave request was made, the chief government whip, Dinesh Gunawardena, declared that the government would oppose the application. While

acknowledging that granting leave was unquestionably a parliamentary tradition, he accused the four TNA MPs of “having acted against Sri Lankan constitution” and going abroad on diplomatic passports to “give false statements to the foreign media”.

Two government ministers Hemakumara Nanayakkara and Jagath Pushpakumara also lashed the TNA. They were joined by Wimal Weerawansa, leader of the Sinhala chauvinist National Freedom Front (NFF), a breakaway from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). “These persons are carrying out false propaganda internationally using diplomatic passports and parliamentary privileges,” Weerawansa said.

The government is determined to stifle any criticism of the army, its atrocities against Tamil civilians or the detention camps into which nearly 300,000 people have been herded. Any opposition to these war crimes and abuses of democratic rights is regarded by the Rajapakse regime as tantamount to treason and support for “terrorism”.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, foreshadowed the move against the TNA shortly after the LTTE's defeat. Speaking on state-controlled ITN television on May 21, he declared: “They [the TNA MPs] have lived most of the time abroad and propagated [the claim] that a genocide of Tamils was taking place. Legal action should be taken against them. They have no right to representation in parliament.”

Under Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the defence ministry has been in the forefront of attacks on basic democratic rights. Pro-government death squads operating with the

tacit support of the security forces have killed or abducted hundreds of people over the past three years, including politicians and journalists. Since the end of the war, the government and the army have made further threats against journalists and other “traitors” accused of being “on the LTTE’s payroll”.

Significantly the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), remained silent in response to the government’s move against the TNA MPs, indicating its support for the war and the government’s subsequent campaign of communal triumphalism. The opposition JVP also quietly supported the government benches, having previously denounced the TNA as supporters of “LTTE terrorism”.

The parliamentary speaker, W. J. M. Lokubanda, deferred the leave applications. Last Friday, he informed parliament that the MPs would provide medical certificates and formally granted their leave. While not carrying out its threat, the government has put the TNA on notice that it could use various pretexts to remove them from parliament.

More broadly the parliamentary manoeuvre was aimed at intimidating and disciplining the Tamil elites. The main component of the TNA is the bourgeois Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), previously the Federal Party, formed shortly after independence in 1948. The LTTE and other armed separatist groups gathered support in the 1970s among layers of youth who concluded that the TULF’s parliamentary perspective had failed.

The government’s threat to oust the TNA parliamentarians and disenfranchise significant layers of the Tamil minority underscores the communal character of the war against the LTTE. Far from being a “war on terrorism”, the conflict erupted in 1983 in response to decades of anti-Tamil discrimination by successive Colombo governments.

In July 1983 Sinhala racist thugs acting with the blessing of the then UNP government carried out a vicious pogrom against Tamils in which thousands were killed and many more homes and businesses burned down. Within days, President J. R. Jayawardene

rammed the Sixth Amendment to the constitution through parliament.

The Sixth Amendment prohibited any political campaigning for a separate Tamil state and was backed up with laws to enforce it. All parliamentarians and public servants were required to take an oath of allegiance to abide by the constitution. After the TULF refused, its 16 MPs were expelled from parliament. The amendment amounted to a virtual declaration of war, making clear that the government had no intention of compromising with the Tamil elites.

The government’s threat to remove the TNA MPs from parliament is aimed not only at the country’s Tamil minority, but more broadly against any political opposition from working people. Facing a deepening economic crisis, President Rajapakse has already called for workers and youth to sacrifice for “nation building”. Behind the campaign of communalism being whipped up to celebrate the LTTE’s defeat, the government is preparing a major onslaught on the working class which can only be imposed through further trampling over democratic rights.



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