

Sri Lankan all-party forum joins hands with Rajapakse regime

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All the Sri Lankan parliamentary parties last week attended a meeting called by President Mahinda Rajapakse to form an “All Party Committee on Development and Reconciliation”. Their participation signifies the complicity of the entire political establishment with the Rajapakse regime’s war crimes and mass detention of nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians.

The president’s office boasted in a statement after the meeting: “[L]eaders of 22 political parties from all communities met ... in a ground breaking move to create consensus among political parties for the task of development and reconciliation.” The participants decided to meet every month, underscoring their readiness to collaborate with the government.

The meeting was called amid continuing international calls for an investigation into the war crimes committed in the military offensive in the north, and growing opposition to the incarceration of Tamils in clear violation of the law and the constitution. In the final phase of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) the Sri Lankan military engaged in indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas, killing thousands and injuring thousands more.

The gathering included the 11 parties in the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance, notably Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party. Among the opposition parties participating were the right-wing United National Party (UNP), the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), a

Muslim communal party.

Rajapakse told the meeting: “The humanitarian operation to free the people from the terror is now over and it’s the time for a humanitarian mission.” Every party representative in attendance knew Rajapakse’s claim was false to the core. Having carried out a ruthless war against Tamils, the politico-military cabal that runs the government has called for a new economic “war” of “nation-building” which will involve an all-out assault on the living standards and basic rights of all working people.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) joined the meeting, a development that the government hailed as “a new step towards establishing national unity”. The pro-LTTE party was created in 2001 by a section of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Although it has quickly distanced itself from the LTTE in the wake of Rajapakse’s military victory, its agenda is a continuation of the LTTE’s perspective of seeking a privileged position for the Tamil elite in a power-sharing deal with the Colombo government.

Leading the TNA delegation to the all-party meeting, N. Srikanthan requested a “visible political solution”. According to the government statement, he said: “The TNA hopes to be a partner in the progress of the country based on the ideals of democracy.”

Rajapakse is interested in harnessing the TNA to defuse hostility among Tamils and also placate the Indian government, which has called for a “political solution” to prevent instability in Sri Lanka and southern India, which is home to some 70 million Tamils. Last week he told the *Hindu*, an Indian daily,

that he was willing to reach a “political solution” with the TNA.

The so-called “left” parties have also fallen in behind Rajapakse. Those in the ruling coalition, the LSSP and the Communist Party, openly displayed their backing for Rajapakse.

LSSP general secretary Vimalasiri de Mel, while saying that priority should be given to resettling detainees, declared: “We give full support to the president’s program. Some are trying to incite communalism but we should not give way.” The LSSP was once a Trotskyist party but broke from the Fourth International and after a protracted degeneration joined the Bandaranaike government in 1964. Today it is a bureaucratic shell reliant on privileges from the government.

The Communist Party leader, constitutional affairs minister Dew Gunasekera, similarly expressed loyalty to Rajapakse, while also paying lip service to the resettlement of the “displaced” Tamils locked away in the government’s military-run camps.

The “radical left” groups, the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party, which have no parliamentary seats and were not invited to the all-party forum, have remained silent on the significance of the line-up behind Rajapakse. During the war they echoed the position of the LTTE, calling for the major powers to push for peace talks and a power-sharing arrangement between the government and the LTTE.

The UNP, the traditional party of big business, sent a second-rung delegation headed by MP Kabir Hashim. While praising Rajapakse for seeking support from the other parties, Hashim declared that party would respond when the government presented proposals. Wracked by internal disputes and with several MPs having defected to the government over the past three years, the UNP’s leaders are hesitant to collaborate too closely with the government for fear of further undermining their position.

Ellawela Medhananda, the leader of the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a member of

the ruling coalition, said the government should continue to restrict the activities of non-government aid agencies that offered to help Tamil refugees, accusing them of pro-LTTE activities. The JHU has stepped up a campaign to oppose any concessions being given to the Tamil elite in the form of increased powers for provincial councils.

Anura Kumara Disanayake, representing the JVP, was more vociferous. He paid tribute to the armed forces for their war victory and declared that any decisions taken by the all-party forum “must be in line with the sovereignty, territorial integrity, national security and unitary nature of the state”.

While trying to wear a democratic face, the government is making intense preparations to strengthen the military occupation of the north. The military has created new command centres in the recently captured towns of Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu and is in the process of recruiting 50,000 soldiers.

It is already clear that the government’s plans for the “development” of the north and east of the island centre on the establishment of cheap labour platforms, including the establishment of free trade zones in Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu in the north and in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai in the east.

The war has ravaged the Sri Lankan economy and the huge military expenditure has left the government in a deep financial crisis, worsened by the impact of the global recession. By attending the all-party conference, Sri Lanka’s parliamentary parties have shown they are prepared to unite with the government in its new “nation building war” to impose the full burden of the war and the slump on the working class.



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