

Sri Lankan president postpones “political solution” with Tamil elite

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In a lengthy interview with the all-India English newspaper, the *Hindu*, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse declared that his so-called political solution—a promised deal with sections of the Tamil elite after his government’s war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—would not be announced, let alone implemented, until after he was elected for a second presidential term.

Rajapakse’s interview, published in three parts concluding on July 9, was a bid to mend fences with the Indian political establishment, which has repeatedly pushed for a “political solution” in order to pacify the 80 million-strong Tamil population in India’s southern Tamil Nadu province and strengthen the regional interests of Indian capitalism.

In the wake of his military victory over the LTTE, however, Rajapakse has postponed any political package, claiming that he must first obtain a “mandate”. His first presidential term is not due to end until November 2011, although there is speculation that he could call an election early next year to try to exploit the chauvinist atmosphere that his regime has whipped up since defeating the LTTE in May.

Calls for a political solution have never been concerned with the democratic rights of the ordinary Tamil masses but with securing an arrangement between the Colombo government and the Tamil elite as a means to gain the political stability needed to make the island attractive to foreign investors. India and the main Western powers urged Rajapakse to pursue such a “solution” even as they backed the brutal military offensive against the LTTE, which killed and maimed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.

As a concession to this pressure, Rajapakse convened an All Party Representative Committee (APRC) in June 2006 to work out proposals to meet “the aspirations of Tamil-speaking people, especially in the North and East” of the island. At the same time Rajapakse intensified preparations to resume the 25-year civil war, in violation of the 2002 ceasefire agreement.

The APRC was a thoroughly fraudulent exercise, which met 46 times, even while the military offensive continued, without producing any concluding report. Its purposes were to blunt popular opposition over the war and its economic impact, appease India and the major powers and boost the standing of

anti-LTTE Tamil parties, including the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which is a coalition partner, and the rump Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).

In his interview, Rajapakse cynically blamed the delay on the main parliamentary Tamil party, the formerly pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which he excluded from the APRC to satisfy his Sinhala chauvinist backers. “The TNA representatives must come and participate in the discussions [on the political solution],” he declared.

Rajapakse also reiterated his position, first expressed in his victory speech to parliament on May 19, that “there are no minorities in Sri Lanka, there are only those who love the country and those who don’t.” This stance elevates to an unprecedented height the protracted discriminative denial of democratic rights to the Tamil minority, which has been the policy of Colombo governments ever since independence in 1948. According to this view, any mention of minority grievances, or for that matter, of the basic rights of any section of the population, is treasonous and unpatriotic.

Soon after independence, the Sinhala elite began attacking the democratic rights of Tamils in order to whip up chauvinism and divide the working class along communal lines. The civil and franchise rights of more than one million Tamil-speaking plantation workers were abolished through the Citizenship Bill in 1948, categorising them as non-citizens due to their Indian origin. This discrimination was extended to cover the whole Tamil community with the passing of the Official Language Act of 1956, which made Sinhala the only official language, forcing Tamils to learn it to retain government jobs and pursue higher education.

Fearful of developing working class struggles and rural unrest, the government introduced a new constitution in 1972, bringing the anti-Tamil and anti-Hindu policy to a climax by making Buddhism the state religion. This act, perpetrated by the second coalition government in which the former Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party partnered with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), marked a turning point in communal relations, triggering the emergence of Tamil separatist movements.

Basking in his military victory, Rajapakse now denies even the existence of minorities and dictates that they must accept

his “solution”. Shedding all democratic pretences, he stressed: “I know what to give and I know what not to give. The people have given me the mandate, so I’m going to use it. But I must get these people [the TNA representatives] to agree to this. They must also know that they can’t get what they want.”

Rajapakse depends heavily on the support of the Sinhala chauvinists of his own party, as well as its coalition partner, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Freedom Front), and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which currently campaigns for Sinhala supremacy from outside the government. His remarks are designed to placate these reactionary sections while boosting his own authority in preparation for dealing with social unrest.

The president’s contempt for democratic rights was evident in his comments on the detention of nearly 300,000 Tamil war refugees. Brushing aside reports by UN agencies, the Red Cross, Amnesty International and other international groups on the conditions in these camps, Rajapakse said: “I would say the condition in our camps is the best any country has.”

Rajapakse’s remark was made as aid agencies reported, via the international media, that about 1,400 people were dying each week in the internment camps due to the spread of infectious diseases. Referring to the lack of adequate lavatories in the camps, he wiped his hands of responsibility, blaming the UN and aid agencies for being “very slow” in disbursing funds supplied by the European Union.

Asked why the refugees could not be sent to safe places, Rajapakse claimed that resettlement had to wait for the UN to certify that areas had been cleared of land mines. He made no mention of, nor was asked about, his previous declared “target” of re-settling the refugees within 180 days.

In the final part of the interview, Rajapakse unintentionally exposed the lies that he peddled to re-launch the war. He dismissed the negotiations that were supposed to take place under the ceasefire pact. “[F]rom the start, I was getting ready for that [the military operations]. I knew—because I had the experience, you see. We knew that they [the LTTE] would never lay down arms and start negotiating.”

Rajapakse was asked about the July 2006 Mavilaru incident, in which the LTTE blocked an irrigation sluice gate in order to press for the implementation of a drinking water project. The president replied: “That was the time they [the LTTE] gave me the green light.” In other words, Rajapakse used the LTTE’s minor protest action as the pretext to wage all-out war under the label of “defensive operations”.

During the interview, Rajapakse’s secretary intervened to relate an anecdote regarding a March 2006 meeting between Rajapakse and Eric Solheim, the Norwegian politician who helped negotiate the 2002 ceasefire. “Solheim ... said, in the midst of other things: ‘[LTTE leader] Prabhakaran is a military genius. I have seen him in action,’ and this and that. The President said: ‘He is from the jungles of the North. I am from the jungles of the South. Let’s see who will win!’ It was very

prophetic.”

These statements confirm the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Party after Rajapakse’s presidential election in November 2005 that he would be a president of war. Rajapakse and his SLFP express in the extreme the historic inability of the capitalist class in the former colonial countries to resolve the democratic tasks, including those of the oppressed minorities.

The interview sought to plaster over the cracked relations between the political establishments of Sri Lanka and India because of the close ties that Rajapakse has developed with India’s traditional rival China. Beijing supplied military aid to help win the war, while India was constrained in openly supporting the war because of the discontent in Tamil Nadu.

N. Ram, the *Hindu* editor, put a leading question to Rajapakse: “You are happy overall with India’s response to the recent developments?” Rajapakse replied: “Yes, India was very helpful, first by understanding what was happening.” He added: “We bought the weapons we wanted from China. It was a commercial deal. China helped us and when somebody helps you, you appreciate it, don’t you? But we paid them on international terms. We were very clear about this.”

Seeking to balance between the two powers, Rajapakse recalled an instance where he helped India. “I canvassed for India during the process of choosing a secretary-general for the [British] Commonwealth. I think no other country’s leader would have been doing that openly. There were people in Sri Lanka who were interested in the job. But I said I wanted an Indian candidate,” he said. To reassure Delhi, he added: “In this region, we must have a leader.”

Whatever the intentions of Rajapakse, however, the conflicts between India and China, and between other world powers, will only intensify, making it increasingly difficult for the Colombo establishment to manoeuvre.

The same applies to the domestic social and class tensions, which have been exacerbated by the suppression of the Tamil population and the government’s efforts to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working people.



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