

Sri Lankan president invents an “international conspiracy”

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The Sri Lankan army captured the last area held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May, slaughtering most of its top leadership in the process. The fighting has concluded, but none of the underlying political reasons for the conflict have been addressed, let alone resolved. Successive Colombo governments have exploited the anti-Tamil war for 26 years to divert, divide and suppress opposition from working people over their pressing problems.

Now lacking a war, President Mahinda Rajapakse has invented an “international conspiracy” to fill the ideological gap. With the backing of the Colombo media, the government regularly denounces unnamed powers and their local co-conspirators for smearing the name of the Sri Lankan military and undermining its “victory” against the “Tiger terrorists”. The “conspiracy” is woven into the government’s tub-thumping jingoism and used to denounce any critic of its war crimes and anti-democratic methods.

The theme was prominent in the government’s campaign for the Southern Provincial Council elections held last Saturday. Speaking at an election meeting on October 7, Rajapakse declared: “A section of the international community backed by a few locals with vested interests are conspiring to tarnish the image of the country and its war heroes using false and malicious allegations... Although we have strong and friendly relationships with other nations we are not ready to bow down in front of injustice and unreasonable conditions. We would never betray the honour of our motherland. It comes before everything else.”

The “conspiracy” being referred to began in May when several European powers, backed by the US, attempted to pass a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council calling for a limited investigation into war crimes in Sri Lanka and greater access to detention camps into which more than 250,000 Tamil civilians have been herded. In the final weeks of the war, the military was responsible for killing thousands

of civilians through indiscriminate bombardment of the remaining LTTE-held territory.

The resolution was completely hypocritical, given the murderous neo-colonial wars waged by the US and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its purpose was to pressure the Rajapakse government to accept US and European calls for a “political solution” to the war and to enhance Washington’s influence in Colombo against its rivals, particularly China. The Sri Lankan government, with the backing of China, Russia and India, blocked the resolution and passed a cynical counter-resolution praising its victory in the “war on terrorism”.

Ongoing pressure by the US and European powers on Sri Lanka has kept the “conspiracy” alive. Having failed at the UN Human Rights Council, the US held up a much-needed IMF loan for months as the Sri Lankan economy slid deeper into crisis. The European Commission has threatened to end its General System of Preference (GSP) concessions for Sri Lankan exports unless an investigation is carried out into human rights abuses. The loss of the concessions on garments and other exports could cost Sri Lanka around \$US150 million in exports.

Limited criticisms from US and European officials have added further fuel. On September 30, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in the UN Security Council that, “[W]e’ve seen rape used as a tactic of war before in Bosnia, Burma and Sri Lanka and elsewhere.” The comments produced uproar in the Colombo media and protests from the Sri Lankan government. A US State Department spokeswoman noted that while there were no reports of the Sri Lankan military using rape as a weapon, Colombo nevertheless “must focus to the future and move forward on the promotion of peace and the protection of human rights.”

Rajapakse’s posturing as an opponent of the major powers is absurd. He is unable to even name the “Western

conspirators” because his government is desperately seeking to patch up its differences with the US and Europe. The president has sent his brother and advisor Basil Rajapakse to Europe to explain the Sri Lankan government’s case and to argue for the maintenance of GSP concessions, while refusing any investigation of its human rights record.

Nevertheless, Rajapakse is clinging to his “Western conspiracy” like the proverbial drowning man. While the government has easily won a series of provincial council elections, the results are deceptive. The main opposition parties—the United National Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—offer no alternative for working people. They backed the war, joined in the triumphal victory celebrations and vigorously deny being part of a conspiracy to tarnish the country’s reputation. Neither party has any solution to the economic and social problems facing workers and the rural poor.

Popular discontent and anger are, however, rising. Five months after the end of the war, Rajapakse’s claims that it would usher in a new period of peace and prosperity are wearing thin. The government is confronting a deepening economic crisis produced by its huge military spending and compounded by the global recession. Unemployment jumped to 6.3 percent in the second quarter, up from 5.2 percent in the first quarter. According to government statistics, 155,000 industrial jobs were lost in the second quarter of 2009. Having finally received the IMF loan, the government is preparing to make savage cutbacks to social spending and price subsidies as well as accelerating privatisation and holding down wages.

Fearful of the eruption of social discontent, the government has maintained the huge police state security apparatus built up in the course of the war. With the backing of the opposition parties, the parliament continues to approve ongoing emergency regulations that give the president sweeping, anti-democratic powers. Far from being demobilising, the army is being expanded and preparations made for the permanent occupation of the North and East of the island. Throughout the country, roadblocks and checkpoints manned by heavily armed police and soldiers have been maintained. Security sweeps through residential neighbourhoods, arbitrary detentions without trial and “disappearances” by pro-government death squads continue.

The government is compelled to invent justifications for these draconian measures. Along with the “international conspiracy”, the government couches everything in the language of militarism. Shortly after the defeat of the LTTE,

Rajapakse announced an “economic war” to “build the nation”—that is, to demand new sacrifices from working people to defend corporate profits. He has also declared a “war on the underworld” to justify the ex-judicial murder of alleged criminals.

At the same time, the defence ministry, military and police keep up a steady barrage of scare stories to maintain the poisonous communal atmosphere in the country. Daily announcements are made of the arrest of LTTE “terrorists” and the discovery of suicide bomber jackets, and massive hauls of arms and ammunitions. If one relied on the Colombo media, it is as if the war had not ended.

A few recent headlines give the flavour: “Thirty kilos of explosives found at Puthukkudiyiruppu”; “A doctor who helped Tigers captured”; and “A van loaded with Tigers’ explosives captured, they were to bring to Colombo.” Arguing for a further extension of the emergency powers last week, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake declared that although the “terrorists were defeated”, threats still remain.

The real conspiracy against working people in Sri Lanka is by the government and the Colombo political establishment as a whole. Utterly incapable of meeting the aspirations of workers and the poor for democratic rights and decent living standards, it is continuing a campaign of anti-Tamil communalism, conspiracy theories, half-truths and lies as it prepares to use police state measures to suppress any opposition by the working class to the ongoing assault on its jobs, conditions and living standards.



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