

Sri Lankan election: Tamil politicians line up behind warmongers

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In what amounts to a damning indictment of its own politics, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—the party that functioned as the political mouthpiece for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—is supporting General Sarath Fonseka in the country's January 26 presidential election.

As the country's top general, Fonseka was responsible for ruthlessly prosecuting the civil war that was restarted by President Mahinda Rajapakse in July 2006 and ended with the LTTE's defeat last May.

TNA leader R. Sambandan announced last week that the party's majority had decided to back Fonseka—the “common candidate” of the opposition parties, the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). According to media reports, some dissenting TNA parliamentarians are supporting Rajapakse.

The TNA is now split over which of the two men to back. Both Rajapakse and Fonseka waged the criminal war, and are responsible for war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights. According to the UN, more than 7,000 civilians were killed by indiscriminate military attacks on LTTE territory in the final months of the war. The president and his general then presided over the incarceration of around 280,000 war refugees simply on the basis that they were Tamil and had been living in LTTE-held areas.

In its two-page statement justifying its support for Fonseka, the TNA made no direct reference to the war or its previous support for the LTTE. It mentioned the murder of three of its parliamentarians—Joseph Pararajasingham, N. Raviraj, and K. Sivanesan—but not to the fact that they were killed by death squads acting with the complicity of the military for which Fonseka and Rajapakse are responsible. Hundreds of people, including journalists and politicians, have been murdered or “disappeared” in such fashion over the past four years.

TNA leader Sambandan focussed on what he described as “matters of immediate concern” to the Tamil people, in particular the need for “a durable political solution”. By a

“political solution”, the TNA means a deal with the Colombo political establishment that will meet the needs of the Tamil elites. It has nothing to do with addressing the pressing social needs of the Tamil masses, whose lives have been uprooted by 26 years of war, or the entrenched official discrimination that led to the conflict in the first place.

Sambandan explained defensively that some TNA parliamentarians had not wanted to support either of the two main candidates, but the majority had decided that “the only meaningful way to thwart Rajapakse is voting Fonseka”. He attempted to paint Fonseka as the “lesser evil” to Rajapakse, who had made no progress toward a political solution. He also criticised government plans for Sinhala colonies in captured LTTE territory—a move that will exacerbate communal tensions by pitting poor Sinhala and Tamil peasants against each other.

On the other hand, according to Sambandan, Fonseka “understands the ground situation” and “has acknowledged the need for a political solution to restore normalcy and permanent peace in the country”. In his bid to woo the Tamil vote, Fonseka visited Jaffna last week and promised to limit the military's high security zones, bring economic development, and resettle Tamil civilians.

These promises are no more credible than Rajapakse's efforts to appease the Tamil minority, including the easing of travel restrictions and curfews. In the run-up to the election, the president announced that civilians held in detention centres would be “free” to leave. The released detainees were provided with little assistance and remain under constant scrutiny. The North and East of the island are under permanent military occupation. Moreover, around 100,000 people are still in the camps as they lack resources and have nothing to return to.

To claim that Fonseka represents a “lesser evil” is grotesque. The general is well-known for his ruthlessness and communal views. He told a Canadian newspaper in 2008: “I strongly believe that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalese, but there are minority-communities and we treat them like our people... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under

the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things”. He now claims he was misquoted.

More fundamentally, all the promises seek to disguise the fact that a massive assault on the living standards of working people will be launched as soon as the election is over—whether Fonseka or Rajapakse wins. The International Monetary Fund is insisting that far-reaching restructuring, including privatisations and deep cuts to public spending, must take place to address the country’s worsening economic crisis. Sections of the ruling elite are backing Fonseka as they view him as more able to wield the state apparatus to suppress any political opposition to this anti-working class agenda.

The TNA’s line-up behind Fonseka—or in the case of a minority with Rajapakse—underscores the dead end of its own politics and that of the LTTE. The LTTE’s demand for a separate capitalist state in the North and East of the island always represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not those of the Tamil masses. In the wake of the September 11 attacks in the US, the LTTE, under intense international pressure, dropped its demand for a separate Eelam, signed a ceasefire in early 2002 and entered internationally-sponsored peace talks.

A number of bourgeois Tamil parties came together to form the TNA in 2001 to take advantage of the economic and political opportunities they saw were opening up. If the so-called peace talks had succeeded, significant powers would have been devolved to the North and East. Tamil politicians and businessmen would have been powerbrokers and deal makers as the Colombo government sought to transform the island into an investment hub for South Asia. In other words, the Sinhala and Tamil elites were looking for a power-sharing arrangement for their mutual exploitation of the working class.

The so-called peace process foundered on the communal politics that has been the stock-in-trade of Colombo politicians since independence in 1948. In a clear sign of the slide toward renewed war, the LTTE ordered a boycott of the 2005 presidential elections, effectively helping Rajapakse to narrowly win. As Rajapakse increasingly blatantly prepared for war, the LTTE appealed to the “international community” for renewed peace talks, but the US, the EU and India all backed Rajapakse.

The LTTE’s military defeat flowed from its organic incapacity to make any appeal to the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. As its support among Tamils waned, it ruthlessly suppressed all political opposition in territory under its control. The TNA, of course, has made no analysis of the LTTE’s collapse, but has been preoccupied with integrating itself back into the Colombo political establishment. TNA

leaders hobnobbed with Rajapakse and the government, seeking to secure the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie through a “political solution” rather than a separate state or a devolution deal.

While most TNA leaders are backing Fonseka or Rajapakse, a dissident TNA parliamentarian, K. Sivajilingam, is standing as a presidential candidate with the backing of the ex-radicals of the Nava Samaja Party (NSSP). His program is not fundamentally different from that of the TNA—a political solution that would involve power-sharing within a federal framework. Sivajilingam is simply seeking to capitalise on the intense hostility among Tamils to Rajapakse and Fonseka in order to better negotiate with the next government—whoever wins.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party fighting in this election for the independent class interests of working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike. SEP candidate Wije Dias has warned that a temporary peace achieved through war crimes and the oppression of the Tamil minority will lead only to future communal tension and conflict. While successive Colombo governments are responsible for starting and continuing the war, the LTTE’s communal politics and methods assisted in dividing the working class.

The 26-year war is an indictment of the entire Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. It is organically incapable of guaranteeing basic democratic and social rights to working people. The SEP calls on workers and youth to reject all forms of nationalism and communalism, and unite to fight for their common class interests. The working class is the only social force that is capable of assuring democratic rights for all as part of the broader struggle for a workers’ and farmers’ government and a socialist program. The SEP demands an immediate and unconditional end to the military occupation of the North and East, the abolition of discriminatory and repressive legislation and regulations, and the allocation of billions of rupees to assist workers and farmers in the war zones to rebuild their shattered lives.

The SEP calls on working people and youth to support our candidate Wije Dias and to actively participate in the party’s campaigns.



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