

# Sri Lankan election: Tamil party splits in four

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3 March 2010

The April 8 parliamentary election in Sri Lanka has accelerated the break-up of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which functioned as the political mouthpiece of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) prior to its military defeat last May. None of the four competing factions represents the interests of the Tamil masses. Rather what is taking place is a sordid scramble by sections of the Tamil elite to reestablish positions and privileges in the Colombo political establishment.

The TNA was formed in 2001 as an alliance of Tamil bourgeois parties before the start of a ceasefire and internationally sponsored peace talks the following year between the LTTE and the then United National Party (UNP)-led government. The TNA accepted the LTTE's bogus claim that it was the "sole representative of the Tamil people," functioned as its voice in the Colombo parliament and expected a political role in any peace deal.

The peace talks collapsed in 2003, and in mid-2006, President Mahinda Rajapakse plunged the island back to war with the tacit backing of the US, the EU, India and other powers. The military waged a ruthless war of attrition that resulted in thousands of civilian casualties. After the LTTE's defeat, the army herded 280,000 Tamil civilians into detention camps where over 100,000 still remain.

The TNA began distancing itself from the LTTE almost immediately. Divisions opened up in its ranks before the January 26 presidential election. While the TNA backed General Sarath Fonseka, the common candidate of the UNP and other opposition parties, several TNA leaders supported Rajapakse, while M.K. Sivajilingam stood as an independent candidate. In the war-torn north, 74 percent of voters—hostile to both Rajapakse and Fonseka, who had led the military during the war—did not cast a ballot.

Since then, the TNA has fractured further. Originally, the alliance comprised the Ilankai Tamil Arusu Kachtchi (ITAK), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) and the Eelam People Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). Two factions have formally broken away—ACTC and a section of TELO headed by Sivajilingam. In addition, three TNA MPs have joined

Rajapakse's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) to contest the parliamentary election.

The TNA's leader, R. Sambandan, spelled out its orientation in an interview with the *Sunday Times*. He said the party was "open to dialogue with any government" formed after the election "to find a political solution" for the problems of the island's Tamil minority. In the context of Sri Lanka's communal politics, "a political solution" refers to some sort of power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites, involving a devolution of powers to the North and East.

Rajapakse, a proponent of Sinhala supremacism, has all but rejected any significant devolution, at least at the provincial level. Former TNA parliamentarian Thangeswari Kathirman, who has shamelessly joined the UPFA camp, does not speak of a "political solution," but of the hope that "President Rajapakse will do his best to fulfill the political aspirations of the minorities in the country".

India, with the support of the US and EU, has been pressing the Colombo government for a political solution. While it backed Rajapakse's renewed war, New Delhi is fearful of the destabilising impact of continuing communal conflict in Sri Lanka on the southern state of Tamil Nadu. India is also concerned to counter the influence of regional rivals—China and Pakistan—in Colombo.

Speaking in eastern Trincomalee on Sunday, Sambandan made clear that the party had been in discussions with New Delhi and was relying on Indian assistance. He explained that India's message to the TNA was: "You should obtain a huge mandate from your people in the forthcoming election and come to us. We are ready to stand behind you. We will make a path for you to live in self-respect. We will not fail in this task."

The TNA's appeals to India underscore not only its own political bankruptcy, but that of the LTTE. The LTTE emerged in opposition to decades of anti-Tamil discrimination by successive Colombo governments, but its demand for a separate Tamil state in the North and East represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie. Organically incapable of making any

appeal to the working class, the LTTE always relied on the “international community” to realise its project.

During the final months of the war, the LTTE was reduced to making pathetic pleas for international pressure to halt the military offensives—appealing to the very powers, including India, that were providing diplomatic support and assistance, including military aid, to the Rajapakse government. Now the TNA is again turning to New Delhi, which is not interested in the rights of Tamils, but in using them as a lever to boost India’s influence in Colombo.

In his speech on Sunday, Sambandan did not utter a word about the war crimes of the Sri Lankan military, the continued detention of Tamil civilians, or India’s support for Rajapakse’s war. Last May, India joined Sri Lanka, China and Russia in defeating a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council calling for an investigation into Sri Lankan war crimes.

The TELO faction headed by M.K. Sivajilingam, which has renamed itself the Tamil National Liberation Alliance (TNLA), is accusing the TNA of abandoning any fight to defend the rights of Tamils. At a press conference last week, Sivajilingam charged the TNA with acting as an Indian “puppet”.

Sivajilingam, however, has no fundamental differences with the TNA. His “political solution” is also for some form of federalism. As he explained to the media: “Without dividing the country, we hope for self-determination in a united country: one country, two nations.”

While condemning the TNA’s relations with New Delhi, Sivajilingam has ties with the right-wing, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). He was accused of actively participating in the BJP’s campaign in last year’s general election in India. He also has links to several parties in Tamil Nadu, which base themselves on Tamil communalism.

The ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) have latched onto the TNLA, in yet another opportunist alliance. Having supported Sivajilingam in the presidential election, the NSSP has signed a memorandum of understanding with the TNLA in which both sides promise to uphold the “self-determination of Tamils”.

The ACTC has a similar stance. Its leader, Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, told a press briefing on Sunday in Jaffna that he would continue with the “TNA’s founding principles of self-determination, autonomy and the motherland”. He pledged to work in a friendly manner “with India and the international community to achieve our demands”. He added: “The international community is exerting pressure on the Rajapakse government and we have to use it.”

Appeals to “self-determination” of Tamils have nothing to do with defending the rights of the Tamil masses. The aim of the TNLA and the ACTC is to carve out a niche in the North and East for sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie to intensify their exploitation of the working class. This program has proven to be a dangerous dead end.

Tamil workers and youth should draw the necessary lessons from the LTTE’s defeat, which was primarily political, rather than military. Incapable of making a class appeal to working people, the LTTE increasingly resorted to anti-democratic methods to suppress any opposition. Its reactionary attacks on Sinhalese civilians played into the hands of the Colombo regime and deepened the island’s communal divisions.

The Socialist Equality Party bases its perspective on the only social force that is capable of waging a consistent struggle for democratic rights—the working class. Its election campaign is based on unifying workers regardless of race, language and religion in the struggle for their common class interests and the establishment of a workers’ and farmers’ government. The SEP calls on all workers to defend the rights of Tamils, and demand the withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East and the release of all Tamil detainees and political prisoners.

The SEP insists that the struggle for democratic rights is part of the broader struggle for the socialist transformation of society to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. We fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

*The author also recommends:*

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[2 March 2010]



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