

# Sri Lanka: The TNA and the program of “self determination”

Wije Dias  
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The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has issued a manifesto for the April 8 general election in Sri Lanka that fails to raise, let alone answer, the obvious question: how was it that, after 26 years of fighting, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was defeated by the Sri Lankan military last May?

For eight years, the TNA, formed in 2001 as an amalgam of several bourgeois Tamil parties, functioned as the LTTE’s loyal mouthpiece, accepting its false claim to be “the sole representative of the Tamil people”. Yet the TNA’s lengthy manifesto barely mentions the war that claimed more than 75,000 lives, transformed many more into permanent refugees and devastated large areas of the North and East. Its short description of the army’s final onslaught does not refer to the fact that the LTTE no longer exists as an organised political or military force in Sri Lanka.

What was the situation last May? Having been driven from its administration centre of Kilinochchi in January, the LTTE was pushed into a small pocket of land in the northeast of the island, which was pounded by artillery and from the air. Thousands of civilians were killed, the LTTE resistance disintegrated and the top LTTE leadership was slaughtered. The army herded nearly a quarter of a million civilians into detention camps where more than 100,000 still remain. Thousands of Tamil youth have been detained in undisclosed prisons as “terrorist suspects”.

The LTTE’s ignominious collapse was not primarily a military defeat, but was the result of its political bankruptcy. Trapped in a narrow coast strip, the LTTE had lost the active support of most of the island’s Tamil minority. Its leaders were organically incapable of making any appeal to the working people in Sri Lanka or neighbouring India, let alone to workers around the world. Instead, the LTTE was reduced to making pathetic calls to the “international community” to halt the fighting—that is, to the very Indian, European and American governments that had politically and materially backed President Mahinda Rajapakse’s renewed war.

This debacle flowed from the political logic of the LTTE’s program of “self determination”. Whether in the form of a separate Tamil capitalist state of Eelam or an autonomous Tamil region in the North and East within capitalist Sri Lanka, the LTTE’s basic demand always represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie,

not the Tamil masses. The TNA is unable to even address these issues because it continues with the same perspective that produced this disaster for working people.

When the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) first advocated a separate Eelam in 1976, the demand reflected the frustration of the Tamil elites after decades of official discrimination against Tamils. The LTTE and other groups emerged in response to the TULF’s abject failure to achieve its goal through parliamentary manoeuvring. While mouthing socialist phrases, all these groups based their guerrilla struggle on the TULF’s bourgeois program of a separate capitalist state for Tamils.

The TNA manifesto blandly declares: “Though initially there were several military outfits, since 1987 the LTTE emerged as the sole military outfit that fought for a separate homeland for the Tamils”. What the TNA omits to explain is that the LTTE emerged through the ruthless suppression of its rivals. Throughout its history, the LTTE enforced its claim to be the “sole representative of Tamils” through the intimidation and murder of its opponents. Increasingly its taxes, forced recruitment and repressive measures alienated large segments of the Tamil population in areas under its control.

Like the TNA, the LTTE insisted that the North and East form an historic homeland. It viewed the war in communal terms as a struggle by the Tamil people against the Sinhala people and blamed the ordinary Sinhalese for the crimes of successive Colombo governments. In 1990, the LTTE expelled the entire Muslim population from the Jaffna peninsula—most of whom are Tamil speakers—claiming that they were spies for the Sri Lankan military. Its indiscriminate attacks on Sinhalese civilians, including the bombing of the Central Bank and of railways and buses, only played into the hands of Sinhala extremists and further entrenched the island’s communal divisions.

The LTTE’s appeals to the “international community” in May 2009 underscore the fact that its project of a separate Eelam was always based on seeking the support of one or other major or regional power. The TNA makes passing reference to 1987, the year in which the Indo-Lanka Accord was signed and India sent so-called peacekeeping troops to occupy the North and East of the island.

India's intervention was not to defend the democratic rights of Tamils, but to put an end to a conflict that was threatening to destabilise the subcontinent. The LTTE, however, called on Tamils to put their faith in the Indo-Lanka Accord and welcomed the "peacekeepers," only to turn on the Indian troops when they tried to forcibly disarm the Tamil militias. To fight the Indian army, the LTTE relied on its arch-enemy—the Colombo government of President R. Premadasa, who supplied military aid for his own communal purposes.

The LTTE drew no political conclusions from this episode, but rather lashed out at the Indian government by assassinating Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. The murder, which the LTTE later identified as a blunder, only further weakened its position on the international arena. India formally banned the LTTE as a terrorist organisation and cracked down on its sympathisers in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

The LTTE was caught unprepared by the shift in international relations that followed the end of the Cold War. Like the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the Middle East and the African National Congress in South Africa, the LTTE responded by ditching its socialistic phrasemongering, openly embracing the ideology of the free market and seeking an accommodation with imperialism.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the LTTE manoeuvred to avoid becoming a target of the US "war on terrorism", signing a ceasefire in 2002 and abandoning its demand for an independent Eelam in a rush to join the "peace process" sponsored by the major imperialist powers. The talks, which the TNA fully backed, soon broke down when it became evident that the US and India would only allow the LTTE a relatively minor role in any settlement. The LTTE suffered a debilitating split in 2004 when its eastern military wing broke away, proclaiming its own "right to self-determination" of the East against the North.

When President Rajapakse plunged the island back to war in mid-2006, the entire "international community" turned a blind eye to his obvious breaches of the 2002 ceasefire and abuse of democratic rights. The US, China, Pakistan, Israel and India all provided material support to the Sri Lankan military. Washington strong-armed Canada and the European Union into declaring the LTTE a "terrorist organisation," cutting off vital financial and political support among the Tamil diaspora. As its support crumbled, the LTTE increasingly resorted to coercion, further alienating Tamil civilians in areas under its control. Its military defeat in 2009 was the end result of its political isolation.

In the wake of the LTTE's defeat, the TNA has been trying to re-enter the Colombo political establishment. Several parliamentarians split off to join the Rajapakse government. In the January presidential elections, the TNA backed the opposition candidate—retired general, Sarath Fonseka, who was responsible for conducting the brutal war against the LTTE between 2006 and

2009. Not surprisingly, the TNA manifesto leaves out this fact. Two factions have criticised and broken away from the TNA, but all of these various fragments continue to base themselves on the program of "self-determination".

The TNA has replaced the LTTE's armed struggle with the advocacy of peaceful protests and parliamentary manoeuvres. Its manifesto declares that it will directly take its concerns "to India and the international community urging them to take due cognisance of the genocidal program against the Tamil people". Its perspective for an autonomous North and East includes the power over direct investment decisions and an appeal for Tamil businessmen to return to Sri Lanka to assist economic development. In other words, the manifesto simply marks a tactical shift and a return to the TULF's program of the 1970s.

The Sri Lankan working class as a whole is confronting great dangers. As soon as the election is over, President Rajapakse will begin to impose the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund that will mean a devastating reduction of living standards. All the police-state measures with which he waged the war against the LTTE will be used to suppress the opposition of the working class. The elementary precondition for any counter-offensive by the working class is that it must be united—that is, workers must reject all forms of nationalism and communalism that only serve to divide and weaken them.

For Tamil workers and youth that means the decisive rejection of the bourgeois program of Tamil self-determination. More than six decades after independence, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie as a whole has proven incapable of carrying out elementary democratic tasks and has maintained its rule through communalism and violence. The struggle for democratic rights is a class question that faces all working people and can be won only through a unified fight to abolish the profit system itself. The SEP is the only party guided by that perspective and the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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