

Sri Lanka: Tamil parties hold talks with government

K. Ratnayake
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Talks have taken place between the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Sri Lankan government over the past two months. While it claims to represent the interests of the island's Tamil minority, the TNA is seeking a deal that will secure the privileges of the Tamil bourgeoisie through a limited devolution of powers to the northern and eastern provinces.

The Colombo government initiated the talks more than 18 months after the military crushed the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in operations that killed thousands of civilians and led to the detention of 250,000 men, women and children. The LTTE's defeat followed a quarter century of war to secure the domination of the Sinhala elites at the expense of working people—both Sinhala and Tamil.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, who has ruled out any significant concessions to the Tamil elite, started the discussions as a means of deflecting international pressure, particularly from India, the US and European powers, for a "political solution" to formally end the civil war. He is also counting on the TNA to defuse criticism by pro-LTTE groupings among the substantial Tamil diaspora abroad. Two rounds of talks were held in February and a third on March 18.

Rajapakse has appointed senior ministers, including foreign minister G.L. Peiris, to take part in the talks, but has not formally set out any negotiating position. The president has previously ruled out any significant devolution of power, either at the provincial or district level. In 2002-03, his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) bitterly opposed peace talks between the United National Party (UNP) government and the LTTE over a federal framework for Sri Lanka.

The TNA's involvement in the talks is another demonstration of the venal character of the Tamil bourgeoisie. Having functioned as the parliamentary mouthpiece for the LTTE up until its defeat, the TNA is desperately seeking to reintegrate itself into the Colombo political establishment.

Following the LTTE's military collapse, the Sri Lankan military herded Tamil civilians into detention centres. Most have now been "resettled" into squalid temporary accommodation under what amounts to a permanent military occupation of the North and East of the island. Thousands of young Tamils have been detained without trial as "LTTE suspects" and are undergoing "re-education".

The TNA postured during the March 17 local elections as a defender of the democratic rights of Tamils and won control of all but two of the councils in the predominantly-Tamil northern province. Its manifesto called for the dismantling of High Security Zones, the resettlement of people removed from these areas, improved living standards and the release of detained young people.

The TNA has waged no public campaign on any of these issues, however, let alone raised the issue of the war crimes carried out by the Rajapakse government and the Sri Lankan military. Instead, it has been pleading with the government for pitiful concessions. At the latest round of talks, the government representatives agreed to provide some details to the families of detainees. Previously many parents had watched their sons and daughters dragged away and had not even been told where they were being taken.

The TNA claims to be concerned about the poverty and hardship facing working people. However, in order to

cultivate closer relations with the government, TNA did not vote against the 2011 budget last November. The budget was drawn up in line with the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund and will lead to a further deterioration in living standards.

The TNA's main preoccupation is the so-called political solution, which was apparently discussed at the last round of talks. No details have been provided. The TNA is due to present its proposals in time for negotiations due to take place next month.

To press ahead with the talks, the TNA has formed a common front with other Tamil parties, including the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the Democratic Peoples Liberation Front (DPLF). The TULF supported Rajapakse's war while the DPLF's paramilitary groups worked closely with the security forces to help defeat the LTTE.

During the presidential election in January 2010, the TNA supported opposition candidate Sarath Fonseka. As army commander under President Rajapakse, he was directly responsible for many of the war crimes in the final months of the war. Yet, the TNA had no hesitation in supporting Fonseka, who was also backed by the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The TNA and its allies came together to contest the local elections. Former parliamentarian M.K. Shivajilingam, who broke from the TNA during elections last year, also came back into the fold. Last year he accused the TNA of functioning as a puppet of India and declared he was continuing the fight for a separate state of Eelam. Now he has abruptly dropped his criticisms.

TNA leader R. Sambandan urged people to vote for TNA candidates to strengthen its hand in talks with the government. While the TNA won most local councils, the turnout was just over 50 percent, reflecting deep hostility among broad layers of voters to its opportunist manoeuvres.

TNA parliamentarian Suresh Premachandran told the media that the impetus for a closer alliance of Tamil parties came from "international community," particularly India. New Delhi's primary interest in pushing for a "political solution" to the Sri Lankan civil war is to enhance its own position on the island at the

expense of China and Pakistan, which provided significant assistance to the Rajapakse government to defeat the LTTE.

The Indian government is also facing several state elections, including in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where large protests took place in 2009 over New Delhi's support for the Rajapakse government's war.

For its part, the TNA is seeking to use international support to leverage minor concessions from the Colombo government and carve out a junior role for the Tamil bourgeoisie in administering the North and East of the island. This is the same communal perspective that led to the defeat of the LTTE.

Organically incapable of making any class appeal to Tamil working people, let alone workers in other parts of the island or internationally, the LTTE continued its futile appeals to the "international community" in the final months of the war. India, China and all the major powers, however, were backing the Rajapakse government.

The entire history of Sri Lanka since formal independence in 1948, and particularly the quarter century of civil war, demonstrates the inability of any section of the ruling class to meet the democratic aspirations of the Tamil minority or working people as a whole. Only a united struggle by the working class, at the head of the rural masses, for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, can guarantee democratic rights and decent living standards for all.



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