

# Sri Lankan talks for a “political solution” reach dead-end

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The talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) over a “political solution” to the “ethnic question” are on the brink of collapse following the government’s refusal to consider the TNA’s call for a timely response to its demands.

The term “political solution” refers to the efforts of the TNA to negotiate a power-sharing deal between the island’s Sinhala and Tamil elites after the May 2009 defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the country’s protracted civil war. The war itself was the product of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination by successive Colombo governments as they sought to divide working people and buttress capitalist rule.

For President Mahinda Rajapakse, the talks have always been a charade. Having defeated the LTTE militarily, his government has never been willing to make any significant concessions to the Tamil capitalist class. Rajapakse has strung along the talks that began in January as a means of deflecting calls from the US, India and the European powers for a political settlement to the war.

After the failure of the 10<sup>th</sup> round of talks on August 4, the TNA issued a cautious request for the government to “meaningfully define” its response to three issues within two weeks as a condition for further discussions. The three issues involved detailed proposals for a devolution of powers from the national government to provincial governments in the North and East of the island.

Far from considering the request in good faith, the government denounced it out of hand. Sajin Vas Gunawardane, secretary of the government’s delegation, accused the TNA of issuing an “ultimatum tantamount to the attitude portrayed by the LTTE.” The TNA, which functioned during the war as the LTTE’s de facto

parliamentary wing, has renounced the LTTE’s demand for a separate capitalist state of Eelam. Since the LTTE’s defeat, the TNA has been seeking to ingratiate itself with the Colombo establishment.

Neither side has announced the formal end to talks. Gunawardane’s statement, however, demonstrates that any significant TNA demand will be dismissed in the same manner—as tantamount to the methods of the “terrorist” LTTE.

Several cabinet ministers moved a resolution in parliament on August 9 to set up a parliamentary select committee to discuss the “ethnic issue.” Rajapakse first floated the call for such a body in July to counter demands by top Indian officials who were in Colombo pushing for a “political solution”.

By relegating the issue to a parliamentary committee, the government would effectively end the talks with the TNA. All parliamentary parties would be represented, making the TNA’s voice just one among many. Every major party in Colombo is based on Sinhala supremacism, supported the communal war against the LTTE and would be unwilling to make any compromises with the Tamil elites.

The government has used similar ploys before. In 2006, as he was plunging the island back into civil war, Rajapakse convened an “all party conference” to discuss the Tamil issue. Its report was handed to the government in May 2009 after the LTTE’s defeat. Rajapakse has not even bothered to make it public.

Prominent TNA leader M. A. Sumanthiran told the *Sunday Times* last weekend that his party would not attend the parliamentary select committee if the

government did not reply to its demands. But he left the door open, saying that a government response was not a precondition to further talks.

The government's position was spelled out bluntly by Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother. He told *Headlines Today*, an India-based website, on August 8: "The political solution talk is simply irrelevant... The existing constitution is more than enough for us to live together... Now the LTTE is gone, I don't think there is any requirement [for a political solution]."

The country's constitution institutionalises the Sinhala ruling elite's political domination of the island by making Sinhala the state language and Buddhism the state religion. The inclusion of these clauses in the 1972 constitution, which was modified in 1978, was a significant factor in fuelling separatist sentiment among the island's Tamil minority that eventually erupted in civil war in 1983.

For its part, the TNA is relying on support from India and the Western powers to pressure the Sri Lankan government to accept a power-sharing arrangement. Like the LTTE, the TNA is organically incapable of making any class appeal to working people in Sri Lanka or internationally to defend the rights of Tamils.

Addressing a Communist Party of India-Marxist meeting in India last month, TNA leader Suresh Premachandran told his audience: "The solution for the ethnic question in Sri Lanka is in the hands of India." An editorial in the Tamil newspaper *Virakesari* on August 7 declared: "We register here the repeated statement of the Tamil people that only the international and Indian midwives can help achieve a normal delivery."

The TNA, like the LTTE, does not represent the interests of working people but those of the Tamil bourgeoisie. Whether in the form of a separate capitalist state or a provincial government within a federated Sri Lankan state, the Tamil elites are seeking an arrangement with their Sinhala counterparts that will intensify their mutual exploitation of the working class—Sinhala and Tamil alike.

In appealing to the "international community," the TNA is fostering illusions in the major powers that backed Rajapakse's communal war and only began to raise

limited criticisms of his government's war crimes in the final months of the conflict. Washington's main concern was to pressure Rajapakse into distancing himself from closer ties with China.

The Indian government was more cautious in its support for the Sri Lankan government's war. New Delhi sought to contain opposition in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu where there was widespread sympathy for the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils. At the same time, it was deeply concerned that Beijing had gained influence in Colombo, which India has regarded as part of its backyard.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recently rejected calls from Tamil Nadu for India to cut trade ties with Sri Lanka. He warned that "any restrictions on economic ties with the island will only encourage China to displace India as Sri Lanka's strategic and trading partner."

The democratic rights of Tamil people cannot be achieved by appealing to the major powers, or by relying on the various bourgeois parties and talks with the government. The only way of ending decades of discrimination is by turning to the working class in the struggle to overthrow the capitalist system, which is the root cause of communalism.

This means forging the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers in opposition to all forms of nationalism and communalism, taking the leadership of the oppressed masses and establishing a workers' and peasants' government—in the form of a Sri Lanka Eelam Socialist Republic—as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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