

Sri Lankan president's salute to militarism

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse used the third anniversary of the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to stage an unprecedented show of military might. The parade only underscored the degree to which his government rests on the country's huge military apparatus.

In all, more than 13,500 members of the security forces paraded in Colombo: 398 army officers and 4,628 soldiers, 115 naval officers and 2,651 sailors, 78 air force officers and 1,383 airmen, together with the civil defence force and the police, including the notorious Special Task Force. The parade was accompanied by 148 vehicle columns, a fly-past of 33 war planes and a naval convoy of 72 warships off the coast.

The roads leading to the Galle Face Green were all closed for a week to allow for rehearsals, causing serious disruption to traffic to the central city area. On May 19, the day of the celebrations, ordinary people were totally absent. The event was an entirely military affair—even the children who were brought in to wave the national flag came from a school exclusively set up for the sons and daughters of servicemen.

The stench of militarism surrounded the entire affair. It was deliberately designed to intimidate working people and youth amid growing opposition to the Rajapakse government's austerity measures. The parade and speeches were broadcast at length on radio and television.

Rajapakse's speech again hailed the "victory" over the LTTE. Hundreds of thousands were killed in more than a quarter century of a criminal war to defend the power and privileges of the dominant Sinhala ruling elites. In the last months, the Sri Lankan military killed

tens of thousands of civilians. After the last pockets of LTTE resistance were crushed, the army herded nearly 300,000 men, women and children into detention camps. Three years later, there are still 17,000 languishing in the camps.

Rajapakse referred to "war heroes and veterans" more than 15 times in the first 10 minutes of his speech. He boasted of the benefits his government had given to veterans: the largest housing project in Sri Lanka, a separate school for "war heroes", care for disabled veterans, and grants for their children. "I do not think any other country in the world respects its heroes and veterans in such a manner," he declared.

In reality, the ranks of the military were filled out with economic conscripts, young people driven to join up by poverty and unemployment. They were used as cannon fodder in a ruthless war of attrition that left many dead or disabled, with their families subsequently struggling to survive.

Referring to the role of the military, Rajapakse declared that the "war heroes" who established peace now have "the task of rebuilding the country and adding to its beauty." Over the past three years, the government has extended the military's ambit into many areas of the economy. The Urban Development Authority (UDA) has been placed under the defence ministry. It is overseeing the eviction of more than 70,000 families from shanties in central Colombo as part of the government's plans to transform the city into a finance hub.

Rajapakse bragged that his government had ended the country's state of emergency, but most of its provisions remain in force in separate legislation. Thousands of Tamil youth are still being held without charge or trial

as “LTTE suspects” under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Abductions and “disappearances” by pro-government death squads colluding with the security forces continue unabated. The government-appointed Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka has reported 21 disappearances from the beginning of the year to April 18. No one has been arrested for these crimes, let alone punished.

Towards the end of his speech, Rajapakse rejected calls for an end to the military occupation of Sri Lanka’s North and East. “We must ask if we are in a position to remove the armed forces camps in the north and reduce our attention on national security,” he declared. “That is not possible. Armed services camps are not found in the north alone. They are seen throughout the country. They are seen in Colombo and Giruvapattu in the south.”

The continued heavy presence of the military, not just in predominantly Tamil areas but throughout the island, points to acute underlying social tensions. The Sri Lankan military has not been reduced in size since the end of the war and remains, per capita, one of the largest in the world.

Rajapakse declared that the war had “compelled us all to live in the midst of many restrictions and obstructions” but insisted that “today, the country that faced such restrictions has returned to normal.” For working people this merely sounds like a bad joke. Rajapakse hinted at the growing opposition to the government when he appealed for “patience to save the victory we have won.” Workers expected that the end of the war would bring an improvement in living standards, but conditions have only worsened.

The government is under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to slash social spending and implement pro-market restructuring. Rajapakse has reduced price subsidies on a range of basic items, including fuel and essential foods. A virtual wage freeze is in place, even as prices rise and the rupee has devalued by nearly 20 percent. Only the wealthy elite has profited from the Rajapakse government’s projects

to “rebuild the nation.”

The huge security forces and police state apparatus built up over nearly three decades of war is above all directed at defending the power and privileges of the ruling elite against the growing resistance of the working class. That was what was on parade at the “victory” celebrations.



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