

Sri Lankan defence secretary initiates communal campaign over 13th amendment

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Sri Lanka's defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse last week called on the government to repeal the 13th amendment to the constitution, which was adopted in 1987 as part of the Indo-Lanka Accord and provided for devolution of powers to provincial councils.

The 13th amendment has always been a target for Sinhala communalists, who claim that the establishment of a council for the merged northern and eastern provinces was tantamount to conceding a separate state for the Tamil minority.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse's call for its repeal is aimed at deliberately stirring up anti-Tamil sentiment to sow divisions among working people amid seething discontent over the government's austerity policies. He claimed that "separatists"—a reference to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated militarily in 2009—were exploiting the amendment to re-emerge.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse is not an elected politician or a minister, but nevertheless heads the powerful defence ministry, which supervises the military, the police, and also has civilian responsibilities, including urban development. He is also the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, and is part of the presidential cabal that dominates every aspect of government.

The defence secretary told the *Island* that the ongoing efforts of the "Tamil National Alliance (TNA) to hinder the passage of the Divineguma [Development] Bill in parliament meant that in spite of Sri Lanka's battlefield victory over terrorism, separatist sentiments were strong." He urged the government to act "swiftly and decisively", saying it was "important to examine external and internal threats posed on the Sri Lankan state."

Under the Divineguma Bill, the central government would take back some of the economic powers previously devolved to provincial councils. But the TNA and other groups have obstructed its passage by filing Supreme Court cases, on the basis that the legislation is unconstitutional. The TNA is not seeking a separate Tamil state, but a power-sharing arrangement that would allow a limited say to the Tamil elites at the provincial level.

The 13th amendment was enacted as part of efforts by the Sri Lankan and Indian governments to stem the island's civil war that began in 1983 and which had created a deep crisis in Sri Lanka and threatened instability in India. New Delhi sent so-called peace-keeping troops to supervise the implementation of the Indo-Lanka Accord, including the disarming of the LTTE. The terms of the 13th amendment were never fully implemented—the first election for eight provincial councils took place in 1988, but as the war restarted in 1990, the north-east council was dissolved.

The defence secretary is the first figure associated with President Rajapakse's inner circle to call for the 13th amendment's repeal. The demand makes clear that the government is not prepared to make any compromise with the political representatives of the Tamil bourgeoisie, and that the "battlefield victory over terrorism" was to ensure the dominance of the Sinhala elites.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse was immediately supported by the openly chauvinist parties that are part of the ruling coalition. Jathika Hela Urumaya leader Champika Ranawaka attacked the TNA as "a communal clique" that was trying to send the country's "war heroes" to the International Criminal Court. National Freedom Front leader Wimal Weerawansa warned in a letter to the president that if a northern provincial council was elected,

“power will go into the hands of the enemies of the nation.” The Mahajana Eksath Peramuna reiterated that it had always opposed the 13th amendment.

The timing of this reactionary campaign is not accidental. It comes after a series of strikes and protests against falling real wages, cutbacks to essential social services and privatisations—the austerity agenda dictated by the International Monetary Fund and implemented by the Rajapakse government.

Public and private sector workers began picketing for higher wages in different parts of the country on Monday. On Wednesday, nearly 2,000 teachers held a protest march, also over pay. For three months, university teachers were on strike before their struggle was sold out this month by the trade union.

The government has relied on the unions to contain the growing opposition, but far sharper attacks on living standards have to be carried out as the budget and trade deficits blow out. Last week, the state water board announced plans for taxes on wells, which are the source of water for the majority of people, ranging from 7,500 to 15,000 rupees (\$US58-115).

Any move by the government to repeal the 13th amendment will compound its political difficulties. M. T. Hassen Ali, general secretary of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), a coalition partner, has declared that his party would “defend the 13th amendment”. The SLMC calls for the established of a separate administrative district for the Muslim elite in the eastern province.

The Indian government, which calls for “a political solution” to conclude the island’s civil war, is also likely to oppose the constitutional change. Its proposal has always been based on the implementation of the 13th amendment in some form that would allow limited powers to the Tamil elites in the North and East and open up opportunities for Indian businesses. Until now, President Rajapakse has paid lip service to India’s appeals.

The TNA is relying on India as well as the US and European powers to pressure the Rajapakse government to concede a power-sharing arrangement. Speaking to the *Sunday Times*, TNA leader, R. Sambandan warned that

any move to repeal the 13th amendment “will have consequences.”

The main opposition parties— the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the United National Party (UNP)—are both steeped in Sinhala communal politics. The JVP, which bitterly opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord and in 2007 pushed for the demerger of the northern and eastern provinces, has not uttered a word about Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s comments. The UNP, which started the communal war in 1983, has voiced limited opposition. UNP members on the Western Provincial Council made a half-hearted attempt to pass a resolution opposing the constitutional change.

The Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord on the basis that it divided the working class on communal lines. It vigorously opposed the JVP’s reactionary campaign to “defend the motherland”—three RCL members were murdered by JVP gunmen as a result.

The SEP warns that the latest communal campaign against the 13th amendment is aimed at dividing the working class along ethnic lines, strengthening the police-state apparatus and opening the door for deeper attacks on living conditions and social rights. This onslaught can only be defeated through a unified movement of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, mobilising the rural poor, in the fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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