

Sri Lanka: Tamil party to resume talks with government

W.A. Sunil
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The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main bourgeois coalition of Tamil parties in Sri Lanka, has indicated its readiness to resume talks with the Colombo government over “a political solution” to the island’s civil war that ended in May 2009.

The TNA functioned as a parliamentary mouthpiece for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) prior to its defeat. Since 2009, the TNA has been seeking to integrate itself back into the Colombo establishment. It has appealed to India, the US and the European powers to pressure the Sri Lankan government to grant a power-sharing arrangement in the form of a limited devolution of powers to the northern province.

The TNA made the offer of talks with the government after its leaders visited New Delhi for four days from October 10 and met with senior Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna and the leader of the opposition Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), Sushma Swaraj.

The TNA has clearly come under pressure from the Indian government, which regards the failure to resolve the Tamil question as an obstacle to its efforts to forge closer ties with Colombo. The Indian prime minister urged Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, who visited New Delhi earlier this month, to hold talks and reach a “speedy and genuine reconciliation” with the TNA.

Reflecting concerns in Indian ruling circles, Gautam Sen from the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses recently noted that relations between India and Sri

Lanka had reached “a phase of stagnation”. On the issue of “a political solution” in Sri Lanka, he said: “While bilateral relations are still cordial, Colombo does not seem to be interested in or solicitous of Indian advice and suggestions.”

Neither the Indian government nor the TNA is concerned about the democratic rights of the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils, who have suffered decades of discrimination, repression and war. New Delhi fears that unrest in Sri Lanka could destabilise the neighbouring southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. It is also concerned that rival China is exploiting the situation to boost its influence in Colombo.

The major political parties in Tamil Nadu, including the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), are exploiting local anger over the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils by posturing as their defenders.

For months, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalithaa has been demanding a ban on the training of Sri Lankan military personnel in India, a boycott of cultural events, action against the harassment of Indian fishermen by the Sri Lankan Navy, and control over the tiny island of Katchathivu, which was handed to Sri Lanka decades ago.

The whipping up of communalism has led to attacks by chauvinist groups on Sri Lankan pilgrims and other visitors to Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu parties have their eye on the 2014 general elections and are intensifying a communal campaign to divert attention from their record in attacking the living standards of working people.

The other crucial factor provoking concern in India, as in the US, is Beijing's growing relationship with Colombo. In March, India voted for a US-sponsored resolution at the UN Human Rights Council that called on Colombo to implement the limited recommendations of its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Committee (LLRC), on human rights violations during the final months of the war against the LTTE.

Like Washington, New Delhi is exploiting the human rights issue to pressure the Colombo government to distance itself from Beijing. Like China, India and the US both backed the Rajapakse government's renewed war against the LTTE and turned a blind eye to the military's war crimes until the final months of the conflict.

At the end of August, Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie visited Colombo. The Rajapakse government is seeking greater assistance from China to build military infrastructure in the North and East of the island. Liang declared that military ties between China and Sri Lanka were to "maintain regional security and stability", and were not targeted at any "third party".

Chinese investment and aid, mainly loans, to Sri Lanka amounted to \$US760 million last year, which was 55 percent of total aid. China has built a strategic port at Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka and is also building an airport there. Hambantota is strategically located, adjacent to key shipping routes between North East Asia and Africa and the Middle East.

India and China are competing for influence in Sri Lanka. New Delhi calculates that a power-sharing arrangement between the TNA and the Colombo government could enable a greater Indian presence and investment in the North of the island.

While agreeing to new talks, TNA appealed for an "assurance" from Colombo that it will not "be cheated again". Speaking to the *Island*, R. Sambandan said his party was ready for "a reasonable, workable and durable solution within the framework of a united Sri Lanka."

Previous talks broke down last year after 18 rounds, during which the Rajapakse government made clear it was not prepared to devolve significant powers to the North and East. The president declared that rather than bilateral talks, the TNA should join a parliamentary select committee, effectively negating its position as a negotiating party.

Since the end of the war, the Rajapakse government has consolidated its military occupation of the North and East. The security forces routinely harass Tamil residents and ride roughshod over basic democratic rights. Thousands of Tamils displaced by the war still lack proper shelter, jobs and basic amenities.

The UN Human Rights Council is scheduled to review Sri Lanka's human rights record in early November. A report on Sri Lanka will be prepared by three countries headed by India. Next March, the Human Rights Council will review the "progress" being made by Colombo in addressing the resolution adopted earlier this year.

Any resumption of talks will be used by the Colombo government to deflect international criticisms, and by the TNA to try to boost the power and privileges of the Tamil bourgeoisie. A deal will be at the expense of working people—Sinhala and Tamil—who are confronting a depending assault on their living standards and basic democratic rights.



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