

Sri Lankan Tamil party legitimises military occupation

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In a parliamentary speech last month, Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader R. Sambandan declared for the first time that his party would no longer insist on a full withdrawal of the military from the north and east of the island. His comments are a further indication that the TNA is seeking to completely integrate itself into the Colombo political establishment.

The TNA is a coalition of several bourgeois Tamil parties: Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation, the Eelam Peoples Liberation Organisation and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress. It functioned as the parliamentary mouthpiece for the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), from the TNA's formation in October 2001 until the LTTE's military defeat in the island's protracted civil war in May 2009.

Sambandan was speaking during the debate on the 2013 budget allocation for the military. The government announced another huge increase—of 26 percent to 290 billion rupees (\$US2.3 billion)—for the defence and urban development ministry. Most of the money will go to maintain and strengthen the armed forces.

Sambandan told parliament: “We are not demanding the total withdrawal of the armed forces [from the north and east]. They should be there as they are in any other part of the country. They can be confined to the places where they were before the war. They can maintain their intelligence and carry out surveillance. It is a legitimate duty.”

By declaring that the security forces have a “legitimate duty” to carry out spying and surveillance, the TNA is accepting the ongoing military occupation and all that it entails. In the course of decades of communal war, successive governments have built up a huge police-state apparatus to harass and terrorise the

country's Tamil minority in particular. The forces are concentrated in the former war zones in the north and east.

Sambandan's remarks indicate a further rightward shift by the TNA. Earlier, while posing as a defender of the democratic rights of Tamils, the TNA called, at times, for the withdrawal of security forces from the north and east.

The TNA leader's speech on December 7 coincided with growing opposition to the military occupation and its repressive methods. The army forcibly entered the Jaffna University on November 26 and 27 to prevent a group of students from commemorating the victims of the government's war against the LTTE. Soldiers physically attacked students and detained several. Students and university teachers are continuing a protest to demanding the release of the detainees.

Sambandan's own speech revealed the extent of the military occupation. There are 15 army regiments in the north, or 150,000 military personnel—equivalent to one soldier for every 3 people. Another two regiments are stationed in the east. The army continues to occupy the homes of 551 civilians on the Jaffna peninsula, and 308 army camps have been established on private land. In addition, the military confiscated hundreds of acres in the north for cultivation, along with 12,000 acres to build 10,000 houses for the army. The military directly controls the civil administration for the Northern Province.

While boosting the defence budget, the government has failed to provide even basic facilities such as housing and services for hundreds of thousands of Tamils who were displaced during the civil war and lost everything.

In his speech Sambandan also declared: “The LTTE was not created by Tamils but by successive

governments in the country. There were legitimate reasons for the LTTE to emerge. That was why it became a terrorist organisation and started killing Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese leaders and civilians.”

Certainly, the decades of official discrimination and oppression by successive Colombo governments were responsible for the hostility and anger among Tamil youth in particular, that led to the formation of the LTTE and other armed separatist groups.

However, the most significant aspect of Sambandan’s comment was its reference, for the first time, to the LTTE as a “terrorist organisation”. The LTTE was not a “terrorist organisation” but a petty bourgeois Tamil nationalist organisation that sought to establish a capitalist Tamil state in the north and east of the island. Its violent attacks on unarmed Muslim and Sinhala civilians were a product of its communal politics, which falsely blamed “Sinhala people” as a whole for the crimes of the Colombo government.

By adopting the “terrorist” terminology used by the Sri Lankan government and the major powers, such as the US, the TNA is deliberately trying to distance itself from the LTTE and prove it is politically reliable. In particular, the TNA is seeking international support for its demand for a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government that would devolve limited powers to provincial governments in the north and east.

To date, the US and India have continued to call for “a political solution” to end the conflict, but have given only lukewarm support to the TNA. At the same time, the US has exploited the “human rights” issue to put pressure on Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to distance his government from China. Both the US and India supported Rajapakse’s renewed war and remained silent on the military’s war crimes, right up until the LTTE’s defeat appeared imminent.

Sambandan’s speech demonstrates that there is nothing that the TNA will not do to secure the support of Washington and New Delhi for a power-sharing deal. By legitimising a continuing military occupation in the north, the TNA is offering its services to provide a facade of civilian rule for what will remain a virtual police state. This is under conditions in which hundreds of “LTTE suspects” are being detained without trial, and pro-government death squads continue their abductions and murders.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), like its forerunner

the Revolutionary Communist League, has been the only political party to consistently oppose the civil war and demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the armed forces from the north and east. The SEP has opposed all forms of nationalism—both the Sinhala communalism of the Colombo political establishment and the Tamil separatism of the LTTE—and politically fought to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The SEP calls on the working class to rally the support of the rural poor and oppressed masses for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the broader struggle for a United Socialist States of South Asia.



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