

India manoeuvres over UNHRC resolution on Sri Lanka

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The Indian government is in a predicament over its stand on a US-sponsored resolution on Sri Lanka that is scheduled to be tabled on March 21 in the current session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva.

Political parties in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu have launched a campaign over the past three weeks, demanding New Delhi back the US resolution and take a tough stand against Sri Lanka. The campaign is aimed at exploiting and diverting public anger in Tamil Nadu over the Colombo government's repression of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority.

M. Karunanidhi, leader of the Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (DMK), the second largest partner in the ruling coalition in New Delhi, has threatened to withdraw from the Congress-led government if it does not move amendments to strengthen the US resolution.

Yesterday, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress leader Sonia Gandhi sent a high level delegation, including finance minister P. Chidambaram and defence minister A.K. Antony to meet with Karunanidhi. Nothing was revealed about their discussions but Chidambaram hinted that the Indian government would vote for the US resolution.

Not to be outdone, Tamil Nadu chief minister and All India Anna Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam (AIADMK) leader Jayalalithaa Jayaram wrote to Prime Minister Singh, also demanding that India move amendments to sharpen the UNHRC resolution.

The AIADMK and DMK both supported the Sri Lankan government's civil war that ended with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. They only began to raise criticisms of Colombo in the final months of the conflict. Both parties are posturing over the UNHRC resolution as they seek to shore up support before

elections due next year.

At the same time, the main Indian opposition parties have seized on the issue. The Hindu supremacist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) has backed the US-sponsored UNHRC resolution while also demanding the government put its own separate resolution. Both of the main Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India-Marxist—have also joined the chorus for a strong stand against Sri Lanka at the UNHRC meeting.

In a bid to placate the Tamil Nadu parties, New Delhi has cancelled a “defence dialogue” with Sri Lanka that had been scheduled for March 25. However, the Indian government will continue with military exercises with Sri Lanka.

The entire debate surrounding the UNHRC is utterly hypocritical. The US has sponsored the resolution not because of concerns over human rights abuses in Sri Lanka. Washington backed the communal war that was renewed by the Colombo government in 2006. Now the US is exploiting the issue to exert pressure on the Rajapakse government to distance itself from China.

The US-backed resolution is largely a rerun of a similar one passed last year. It again calls on Colombo to implement the limited recommendations of its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC). Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse set up the body to deflect criticism of his government's human rights record. The LLRC was a whitewash, but the Rajapakse government nevertheless opposed last year's UNHRC resolution.

The latest draft resolution was circulated to diplomats in Geneva on Wednesday. It “urges” the Sri Lankan government to provide “unfettered access to the [UN's] Special Rapporteurs” on human right issues, but stops short of suggesting any formal international

inquiry into war crimes in Sri Lanka.

A UN expert panel report released in December 2011 found “credible evidence” that the military had killed at least 40,000 civilians in the final months of the war, including by deliberately shelling hospitals and aid centres. Yet the report and its recommendations have remained a dead letter.

India’s stance has been determined not by any concern for democratic rights but by internal political considerations and its external economic and strategic interests. New Delhi also supported Rajapakse’s war, including with military assistance.

India has always regarded Sri Lanka as part of its South Asian sphere of influence. Like the US, it is hostile to the growth of Chinese influence in the island. The Rajapakse government became heavily dependent on Chinese economic and military aid after it plunged the country back to war in 2006 and launched a series of offensives against the LTTE.

New Delhi is angered by the fact that Colombo has stalled India’s investment projects while giving China favourable treatment. The Rajapakse government has just shelved a proposed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with India, after more than a decade of discussions. The state-owned National Thermal Power Corporation of India still does not have a green light to build a coal-fired power station, despite five years of talks.

For New Delhi, the UNHRC resolution is a useful tool to pressure Colombo for concessions in return for Indian diplomatic support. To curry favour with Rajapakse, the Indian government opposed a UNHRC resolution in 2009 that called for an international inquiry into Sri Lankan human rights abuses. Last year New Delhi supported a more limited US-sponsored resolution and claimed credit for watering it down.

During the current UNHRC session, India has been engaged in behind-the-scenes manoeuvres to modify the resolution on Sri Lanka. It has sought to weaken the call in the resolution for “unfettered access” by UN officials to Sri Lanka, both for the sake of Colombo, and out of concern that it could set a precedent for a similar intervention in India. The Indian security forces have been involved in the brutal suppression of separatist groups in the Indian-controlled state of Jammu and Kashmir, and in other areas of the country.

At the same time, New Delhi does not want to

alienate Washington by openly opposing the UNHRC resolution. India wants to maintain its strategic partnership with US, which has been useful as it pursues its geo-political ambitions in South Asia and internationally against its regional rivals, especially China.

As far as New Delhi is concerned, the best solution to the dilemmas it confronts over the UNHRC resolution would be for Sri Lanka to accede to US demands. Indian foreign minister Salman Kurshid said as much when he told the media that he had called on his Sri Lankan counterpart to “engage the US” and “arrive at a consensual draft which is acceptable to everybody”.

Within Sri Lanka, the Indian government has pushed for a deal between the Rajapakse government and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), involving a limited power-sharing arrangement. New Delhi hopes that an agreement between the Tamil and Sinhala ruling elites would ease tensions on the island and thus in Tamil Nadu, while providing greater opportunities for Indian investors.

The working class in Sri Lanka and India must reject the machinations of the Indian government and the various parties in Tamil Nadu. Their communal posturing in defence of “Tamil rights” is simply the other side of the Sinhala chauvinism of the Rajapakse government in Colombo.

The democratic rights of the Tamil masses can only be achieved as part of the broader struggle by the working class in Sri Lanka and India to unite across ethnic, religious and linguistic lines and fight for a socialist perspective in South Asia and internationally.



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