

Sri Lankan defence secretary backs chauvinist campaign against provincial election

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Sri Lanka's defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, has publicly opposed the election planned for the northern provincial council, highlighting the dilemma confronting the government.

After dragging his feet for years, President Mahinda Rajapakse, under pressure from India and Western powers including the US, promised to hold the election in September. At the same time, his government rests on the military and Sinhala chauvinist forces deeply opposed to any, even minor concessions, to the Tamil elites.

In an interview in the *Island* on May 23, Gotabhaya Rajapakse warned the government of "dire consequences" if the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) won the provincial council election. This would lead, he claimed, to the establishment of a separate Tamil state of Eelam.

The defence secretary's comments are a flagrant attempt to whip up communal antagonisms in order to justify the continued de-facto military occupation and rule over the Northern Province since the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009.

The TNA, which functioned as the LTTE's mouthpiece during the island's protracted civil war, dropped its call for a separate state and instead is seeking a power-sharing arrangement based on a limited devolution of powers.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, is an unelected official—the top defence ministry bureaucrat—and not formally part of the government. His open intervention into politics, directly contradicting the government's spokesman Anura Priyadarshana Yapa, speaks volumes for the powerful

role of the military in the island's political life.

In his cabinet press briefing on May 23, Yapa announced that the government had decided to hold the northern provincial council election, in accordance with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. His comments followed concerns raised by Indian external affairs minister Salman Khurshid over calls for changes to the 13th amendment, under which the provincial councils were formed.

Two Sinhala chauvinist parties in the ruling coalition have been campaigning against the 13th amendment. The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) demands the abolition of the provincial council system, while the National Freedom Front (NFF) wants the removal of police and land powers from provincial councils. The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), another Sinhala extremist party, is also calling for provincial councils to be eliminated.

These political forces bitterly opposed the 13th amendment when it was implemented as part of Indo-Lanka Accord reached between New Delhi and Colombo in July 1987. The Accord's purpose was to disarm the LTTE, impose an Indian peace-keeping force in the North, and devolve limited powers to the Tamil elite in a merged North and East province.

The JVP carried out fascistic attacks on workers, trade unionists and political opponents of its reactionary patriotic campaign, including on the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). The RCL was the only party to oppose the Accord not from the standpoint of the unity of the Sri Lanka capitalist state, but on the internationalist and socialist basis of unifying Sinhala and Tamil workers against the

machinations of Colombo and New Delhi to prop up bourgeois rule on the island.

The north-east provincial council was established in 1988 but was quickly dissolved after the Accord collapsed and the war resumed. The JVP and other Sinhala extremists never accepted the 13th amendment. On the basis of a case filed by the JVP, the Supreme Court issued what was a political ruling, de-merging the North and East provinces.

Since the LTTE's defeat, India and the Western powers, each for their own purposes, have promoted the election of a northern provincial council under the 13th amendment as a "political solution" to the war. India is falsely presenting itself as a defender of Tamil rights in order to deflect ongoing anger in its southern state of Tamil Nadu over the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka. The US is exploiting the issue to pressure President Rajapakse to end his close relations with China.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, however, is openly contemptuous of bowing to this pressure. In an interview with the Tamil-language *Sudar Oli* on May 26, he was asked whether his opposition to the provincial devolution of power would anger India. "Just because India or some other country will get angry, we cannot stop doing what is good for our country," he declared.

Arguing for no dilution of the government's autocratic powers, the defence secretary opposed those "forces trying to weaken Lanka's Central Executive by divesting it of the powers of land and the police; demanding independent commissions to make official appointments; and promoting an independent judiciary."

In line with the government's propaganda, Gotabhaya Rajapakse again claimed that Sri Lanka was facing an international conspiracy, saying "powerful external elements are trying to undermine peace and stability here through local pawns." He insisted that "the positioning of armed forces shouldn't be a political issue or a topic for discussions with any external players."

Neither President Rajapakse nor any other government leader has said anything about the defence secretary's remarks, showing there is no fundamental disagreement with him.

The government is manoeuvring. It is preparing to hold the provincial election knowing there is only a

remote possibility that its allies will win, given the widespread hostility to the continued military occupation and anti-Tamil discrimination and repression. A voter registration bill is being drawn up that will allow votes from people who fled the North years or decades ago. Undoubtedly, the ruling parties are also preparing vote rigging and intimidation in the event of an election.

At the same time, the Sinhala chauvinist campaign against the election, with which the government obviously sympathises, may provide the pretext to delay or call off the poll. The defence secretary's statements have emboldened communal extremists. The JHU announced last week that it would introduce a constitutional change to abolish the 13th Amendment. A new chauvinist organisation, Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force), has also initiated a virulent campaign, saying it will not allow the northern provincial election to take place.

The defence secretary's political intervention has broader implications, however. His insistence that the military occupation of the North remain in force and his defence of the government's centralised and autocratic powers are a warning to the working class. The police-state measures developed during the island's 30-year civil war are being strengthened in order to suppress the inevitable struggles of workers and youth that will erupt against the Rajapakse government's imposition of harsh austerity measures.



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