

# Sri Lankan constitutional changes raise tensions with India

**Wasantha Rupasinghe**  
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In the face of opposition from India, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has shelved, at least for now, proposed changes to the 13th amendment to the constitution aimed at reducing the powers of the country's provincial councils.

The amendment was introduced in November 1987 under the Indo-Lanka Accord signed between the two governments, as a means of disarming the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The devolution of limited powers at the provincial level was to establish a power-sharing arrangement between the island's Sinhala and Tamil elites.

Having defeated the LTTE in 2009, the Sri Lankan government is attempting to wind back the powers granted to the provincial councils, including over police, land and the merger of adjoining councils. At the same time, Rajapakse is exploiting the issue to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism as he seeks to ram through International Monetary Fund demands for austerity.

The Indian government, which is facing widespread hostility in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu to the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka, objected to the mooted changes. Visits by Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse to New Delhi on July 4, following a two-day trip by Indian Defence Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon to Colombo on July 8–9 failed to resolve the standoff.

After discussions with Basil Rajapakse, V. Narayanasamy, minister of state in the Indian Prime Minister's Office, told the BBC that as the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord was signed between two sovereign governments, both were bound to implement it. "One government cannot unilaterally cancel the agreement," he declared.

In Colombo, Shiv Shankar Menon held discussions with President Rajapakse, Basil Rajapakse and defence

secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse. He insisted that the Sri Lankan government had to adhere to its commitments to India and other powers for a political settlement to the protracted civil war in Sri Lanka. Menon also met with leaders of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which oppose any reduction of provincial council powers.

Following the visits, President Rajapakse effectively put the constitutional changes on hold, saying that he would wait for a report on the issue from a parliamentary select committee, due in six months. Without naming India, Rajapakse declared that he would not promise anything to the "international community."

The Indo-Lanka Accord was signed amid an intensifying war between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Fearing the crisis would create instability in India, New Delhi dispatched Indian "peace-keeping" troops to disarm the LTTE and impose the provincial devolution package in a merged North and East province. The Accord enabled the Sri Lankan government to shift its military forces to the south to suppress unrest among the working class and rural youth. Pro-government death squads working with the security forces killed an estimated 60,000 rural youth.

Now as then, India's concern is not the democratic rights of the Tamil people, but that Colombo's continued military occupation of the North and East of the island will trigger unrest in Tamil Nadu. Above all, India fears the diminution of its influence in Colombo and its standing as a regional power if Rajapakse were to ignore the Indo-Lanka Accord.

New Delhi is uneasy about the growing ties between Sri Lanka and China, which India regards as a regional rival. Along with the US and European powers, India

fully backed Rajapakse's war against the LTTE, but is now exploiting the Sri Lankan military's gross human rights abuses to pressure Colombo to distance itself from Beijing.

The Sri Lankan government is attempting to balance between the US and India, on the one hand, and China on the other. At the same time, Rajapakse is seeking to concentrate political power in Colombo as part of his drive to carry out extensive pro-market restructuring in order to boost foreign investment.

Like previous Colombo administrations, the Rajapakse government is bitterly opposed to any concessions to the Tamil elite and has been whipping up anti-Tamil and anti-Indian sentiment over India's demand to implement the 13th amendment.

Rajapakse is stirring up communal hostilities to divide the working class as his government's austerity measures provoke resistance among workers and youth. Two weeks ago, sections of railway workers went on strike, halting rail transport for two days. Last week, nurses stopped work demanding higher pay. Thousands of university students are continuing their protests in opposition to government plans to further privatise education.

Sinhala extremist groups in Rajapakse's ruling coalition, including Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and the National Freedom Front, have been engaged in a vociferous communal campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord. The JHU has joined other groups, such as the Buddhist Power Force, to form a so-called "national collective" to intensify the campaign.

The opposition JVP has joined the communal band wagon, demanding the repeal of the 13th amendment and denouncing the government for "bowing to India."

The right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP) and its pseudo-left allies—the Nava Sama Samaja Party and United Socialist Party—have held several rallies demanding the full implementation of the 13th amendment.

These protests have nothing to do ending anti-Tamil discrimination or defending democratic rights. The UNP is lining up with US imperialism, as well as India and the European powers, as the best means for defending the interests of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

The working class must reject this reactionary campaign that backs the major powers and their pursuit of their own strategic interests in South Asia. They also

must reject Rajapakse government's vicious communal appeals to divide the working class.

There is only one progressive path to fight for the democratic rights of the Tamil masses. The Sinhala and Tamil workers must unite with their class brothers and sisters throughout South Asia, including India, to fight for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic, as part of struggle to establish a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia.



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