Indian foreign minister's unproductive visit to Sri Lanka

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Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid left Colombo virtually empty-handed after his two-day visit to Sri Lanka last week. Although India gained an economic concession—an investment opportunity for a coal-powered electricity plant in eastern Sri Lanka—its call for a "political solution," i.e., a power-sharing arrangement, between the island's dominant Sinhala elite and its Tamil and Muslim counterparts, received a cold response.

Khurshid met with his Sri Lankan counterpart G.L. Peiris and had talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse before flying to Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka to meet with C.V. Wigneswaran, the newly-elected chief minister of Northern Province. Wigneswaran represents the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil bourgeois party, whose primary perspective is to appeal to India and the Western powers to push Rajapakse into a power-sharing compact.

Khurshid insisted on "full implementation" of the Sri Lankan Constitution's 13th Amendment, which devolved powers to the provinces. But Rajapakse replied that "parliament is the best forum to address the issue." A Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) established by the government in June to review the 13th Amendment would come up with "a solution that is in line with what the people want."

In effect, Rajapakse rebuffed Khurshid's demand. His government's PSC is a fraud. It was appointed to pursue the government's plans to significantly weaken the ability of provincial councils to block legislation affecting their powers, while seeking to defuse pressure from India and the US and other Western powers. The TNA is boycotting the PSC, along with the United National Party (UNP), the main opposition party.

The 13th Amendment, which established provincial councils and devolved limited powers to them, was part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord signed between Colombo and New Delhi in a bid to disarm the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, successive Colombo governments have refused to hand land and police powers to the provincial councils, despite repeated demands from the Tamil and Muslim elites.

New Delhi has long demanded "full implementation of the 13th amendment." But the Sinhala extremist allies of Rajapakse's ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and powerful figures in his administration, like his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, vehemently oppose any concessions to the Tamil and Muslim elites.

New Delhi calculates that a power-sharing arrangement will boost its influence in Sri Lanka's affairs. The Indian ruling class has concerns about China's growing political and economic clout in the island, via Rajapakse's ties with Beijing.

The Congress-led Indian government also wants to contain the popular opposition among Tamils in southern India toward the fate of the island's Tamils. In the short term, Congress faces national elections next April-May in which Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, another Tamil-populated territory, will elect 40 members to the national parliament, and is desperately putting on a pretense of concern about the plight of Sri Lanka's Tamils.

In Jaffna, Khurshid insisted on a "dialogue between the elected provincial representatives and the central government"—i.e., talks between the Colombo government and leaders of the TNA's Northern Provincial administration. Even if Rajapakse eventually agrees to negotiations with the TNA leadership, he strongly opposes any substantial devolution of powers to provincial councils.

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Agreements for a 500-MW coal power project, a joint venture between India's National Thermal Power Corporation and Sri Lanka's Ceylon Electricity Board, at Sampur in the eastern district of Trincomalee, were signed in the presence of Khurshid and Peiris. Bilateral negotiations about the project have been conducted for several years. An initial agreement was signed in late 2011, but the project was delayed by opposition from Sinhala chauvinist elements in and around Rajapakse's government.

Concerned about Beijing's influence in Sri Lanka, including substantial investments such as a new airport and seaport in the southern province, New Delhi is pushing for its own opportunities. India is involved in rebuilding the northern railway line, devastated by nearly three decades of civil war. India's push for the Sampur power project also exposes its pledges "to uplift the lives of the people of the Northern Province," a claim repeated by Khurshid in Jaffna. The Rajapakse government secured the land for the project by militarily driving out Tamil residents during the renewed civil war that culminated in the LTTE's defeat in 2009.

The Rajapakse government expected Khurshid to bring a "special message" from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh about his yet-to-be confirmed participation in the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) to be held in Colombo next month. Rajapakse considers holding CHOGM in Colombo as politically crucial to counter the pressure from the US and other Western powers to distance his government from Beijing.

Responding to a question about Singh's presence at CHOGM, Khurshid said in a joint press conference with Peiris in Colombo on October 7 that an "announcement would be made at an appropriate time … from the Prime Minister's office." While the Rajapakse government desperately wants Singh's attendance at CHOGM, India has kept the issue in abeyance to extract further economic, political and strategic concessions from Colombo.

Rajapakse was compelled to hold elections for the Northern Provincial Council in September due to pressure from the US and India. Khurshid commended Rajapakse for his "stewardship in holding elections after decades," hailing this as a "great historic moment." Whatever the diplomatic niceties, however, New Delhi is far from satisfied with its relationship with Rajapakse.

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