

Sri Lanka: Standoff between government and TNA deepens

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The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a front of Tamil bourgeois parties, last week rejected a call by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse to participate in a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) to discuss the so-called national question. The committee is another attempt by Colombo to claim that it is seeking a “political solution” to the island’s protracted civil war that ended with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

The TNA is frustrated over the government’s continued refusal to reach a power-sharing deal with the organisation. TNA parliamentarians and provincial and local government members met in Vavuniya on December 24 and resolved not to have any dialogue with Colombo “until it made public” its proposals for “reconciliation”—i.e., agreed to devolution of power to the Tamil elite in the north and east.

The Rajapakse government is nervous about moves for the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) meeting in March to establish an international probe into war crimes during the war against the LTTE. The US and UK have already indicated that they plan to move a new resolution against Sri Lanka. Rajapakse hopes that he can deflect pressure from the UNHCR by involving the TNA in discussions.

Last year the UNHRC endorsed a US proposal requesting Colombo to investigate human rights violations and grant limited powers to the island’s north and east. The US and India, which supported the communal war against the LTTE, are now exploiting Colombo’s war crimes to back their geo-political manoeuvres in the Indian Ocean region.

As part of its “pivot” to Asia aimed against China, the US is seeking to undermine economic and political relations between Colombo and Beijing. India, which regards China as a regional rival, is also seeking to

undercut Beijing’s influence in Colombo.

The TNA is hoping to use this international pressure to secure the interests of the Tamil elite in Sri Lanka. As well as refusing to participate in the Parliamentary Select Committee, the TNA meeting decided to reject the government’s current survey of casualties, injuries, and property damage during the 30-year of civil war. The survey is part of a report by the Sri Lankan government for the UNHRC.

President Rajapakse has previously dismissed evidence that the military was responsible for war crimes, saying the army was involved in a “humanitarian operation with zero casualties.” The UN, however, has calculated that at least 40,000 people were killed during the final weeks of the war alone. The BBC’s Channel 4 has produced two films on the Sri Lankan government’s war crimes.

On December 28, leading TNA parliamentarian Suresh Premachandran told the media, that his organisation will “push for an independent international probe” into war crimes when the UNHRC meets in March. The TNA, he said, will also brief foreign diplomats in Colombo.

The TNA’s principal concern is not war crimes or the democratic rights of the Tamil masses. The party is seeking a “political solution” to the war that will benefit the Tamil elite, not workers or the rural poor. The TNA won elections for the Northern Provincial Council last September and wants its powers extended.

TNA leader, R. Sambandan and Northern Provincial Council (NPC) Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran when previously seeking a deal with Colombo said they did not want to go into the past—that is, into war crimes. But Rajapakse, who depends on political support from Sinhala communal parties and groups, is unwilling to grant even limited powers to the Tamil elite.

Wigneswaran has sought land and police powers for the council under Sri Lanka's 13th Amendment to the constitution. Colombo made clear, in defiance of the constitution, that it was unwilling to grant these powers. The NPC then passed a resolution demanding that military governor G.A. Chandrasiri be removed and be replaced with a civilian governor. This was rejected by Colombo.

The Rajapakse government, in fact, is strengthening its military occupation over the north and east. It is currently expanding military installations in these areas and building infrastructure to attract foreign investors. An industrial zone is being completed at Atchuveli on the Jaffna Peninsula and the multi-national MAS apparel company has established a factory in Kilinochchi. Several islands around Jaffna peninsula have also been earmarked to develop tourist resorts.

These developments are fuelling the concerns of the Tamil elite who are nervous that they are being bypassed. The TNA is seeking international support to back its efforts to attract global capital and jointly exploit the Tamil working class.

Rajapakse's Parliamentary Select Committee was only set up last June to counter India's insistence that Colombo should implement the 13th amendment, which was part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord between the two countries. Concerned that the civil war in Sri Lanka would destabilise the region, India sent military "peacekeepers" to northern Sri Lanka under the Accord to disarm the LTTE. Colombo enacted the 13th amendment setting up the provincial council system that gave limited powers to the Tamil elite.

The 13th amendment remained a dead letter as the Accord broke down, Indian troops withdrew and the war resumed, with the north and east under the control of the military. In the wake of the LTTE's defeat, the Rajapakse government rejected implementation of the 13th amendment and only held last year's Northern Provincial Council election under pressure from the US and its allies.

Rajapakse established the Parliamentary Select Committee in an effort to deflect international pressure. Sinhala extremist parties, including Jathika Hela Urumaya, which is part of the ruling coalition, and the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, have refused to participate, falsely claiming that it was established to hand power to Tamils.

The refusal of the TNA to take part in the PSC highlights the on-going standoff with the Colombo government over a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites, and the deepening geo-political rivalries with which it has become intertwined.



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