

# Sri Lankan president glorifies military at victory celebrations

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The Sri Lankan government held its fifth anniversary celebration of the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on May 18, venerating the military, hiding its war crimes and stirring up Sinhala chauvinist sentiment. The event took place amid a deepening political crisis of the government, as opposition among working people grows to its attacks on living standards.

President Mahinda Rajapakse deliberately staged the celebration at Matara in Southern Province, which is predominantly Sinhalese, in order to inflame communalism. The military parade included thousands of armed personnel, along with armoured units, naval vessels and a display of air power. Rajapakse declared: “Today we exhibit the various kinds of weapons used to defeat the ruthless terrorist ... Are we not feeling proud when we witness them?”

Rajapakse delivered a speech full of lies and hypocrisy. He claimed the government is “not celebrating war but peace,” adding: “Peace, stability, real democracy and every freedom were offered to the Sri Lankan people on a day like this.”

While Rajapakse was speaking about “peace, stability and democracy,” his government had put the North and East of the island, particularly Jaffna, under military siege, banning any kind of public commemoration and meetings on Tamil war victims. During the more than a quarter century of civil war, nearly 200,000 people perished. A UN expert panel estimated that 40,000 civilians were killed during the final months of the war under the Rajapakse government, which was responsible for numerous other war crimes.

The military branded events marking these deaths as commemorating “LTTE terrorists.” The Jaffna armed forces commander, Udaya Perera, warned Jaffna University teachers and student union leaders not to

organise any gatherings. Just a day after the warning, a number of university teachers and student leaders received death threats. The military closed down the university from May 16 to 26. Reflecting the anger among academics and students, the Jaffna University Science Teachers’ Association issued a statement, declaring: “The Tamil people should have the freedom to mourn collectively the untimely death of a large number of members of their community.”

Access to the Jaffna head office of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main political party of the Tamil elite, and the entrance to the *Uthayan* newspaper office were blocked with armoured vehicles and soldiers. The homes of TNA parliamentarians and members of the northern provincial council were placed under military surveillance. Roads to the Keerimalai Hindu Temple in Jaffna, commonly used for remembrance rituals, were also cut off. In the East, the military broke up a TNA meeting organised at Pottuvil.

For all his talk about democracy and freedom, Rajapakse has also increasingly used the military and police over the past five years to suppress the struggles of workers, youth and the poor against the attacks on living conditions, public health and education.

The government deployed police commandos against a protest of 40,000 Katunayake Free Trade Zone workers in May 2011, killing one worker. One person died in Chilaw when police fired on a fishermen’s protest in March 2012. In August 2013, the military killed three youth at Weliveriya during an attack on a demonstration of villagers who were demanding clean drinking water. Just two days before Rajapakse’s speech, police mercilessly attacked students protesting against education cuts.

Rajapakse boasted at the Matara gathering that the government had made huge economic developments.

“We have built highways, ports, airports and fisheries harbours. We have spent millions of rupees to develop infrastructure facilities. We have built new hospitals and improved facilities at most of the hospitals.”

In reality, the government has engaged in a relentless assault on living standards that has resulted in soaring prices for essential goods. The privatisation of education and slashing of health services has been extended. The improved infrastructure facilities are for the corporate elite, and for attracting foreign investors, not to meet the needs of ordinary working people. Foreign investors have been given more concessions, such as tax holidays, while the military is evicting thousands of shanty dwellers from their homes in Colombo and its suburbs.

Significantly, unlike in previous years, Western countries stayed away from the victory celebration. The Canadian ambassador issued a statement publicly rejecting the government’s invitation. US, British and German diplomats did not participate.

The US and its allies all backed the communal war against the LTTE by successive Colombo governments. They only began criticising the military’s human rights violations during the final months of the war when it became clear that China would have a significant presence in post-war Sri Lanka. Beijing had provided the Rajapakse government with weapons and funds to fight the war.

As part of its “pivot to Asia,” aimed at undermining China throughout the region, the US is exploiting the human rights issue to pressure Rajapakse to distance his government from Beijing. Washington sponsored a third resolution against Sri Lanka in March at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) calling for an international probe of war crimes.

The failure of Western diplomats to attend the celebration is another warning to the government that it faces international isolation if it does not wind back relations with Beijing. Rajapakse put on a brave face, declaring: “Irrespective of objections from anyone, irrespective of who participates or not, we should celebrate this great victory.” He did not name the countries making objections.

Earlier this month, Rajapakse told visiting Japanese vice foreign minister Seiji Kihara that his government was implementing the UNHRC resolution, but would not accept an international investigation. Rajapakse is

desperate to avoid a probe that could result in government leaders, including himself, top bureaucrats and military commanders being charged with war crimes.

At the same time, Rajapakse continues to whip up nationalism and communalism by claiming his government is the victim of an international conspiracy by unnamed Western powers and by making false claims about the threat of an LTTE revival.

Faced with a deepening economic and social crisis, the government is seeking to divide working people along communal lines as it maintains the huge police-state apparatus built up during the war to suppress opposition to deteriorating living standards.



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