

Sri Lankan government promises “devolution pact” to woo Tamil elite

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27 January 2015

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe declared last week that his government would implement the 13th amendment to the country’s constitution. After nearly three decades, the amendment, which provided for the limited devolution of powers to the Tamil elite on a provincial level in the island’s north and east, has never been carried out fully.

Wickremesinghe made the statement on January 19 while explaining the government’s agenda to the first parliamentary sitting following Maithripala Sirisena’s election as president on January 8. Sirisena appointed Wickremesinghe, leader of pro-US United National Party (UNP), as prime minister based on a new ruling coalition, the National Democratic Front, which includes a number of right-wing parties.

Wickremesinghe’s promise to implement the 13th amendment is in the first instance a pitch for the support of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil bourgeois party. More fundamentally, however, it underscores the shift in foreign policy toward the US and India that was ushered in by Sirisena’s election. India, supported by the US, has repeatedly demanded the amendment’s implementation as part of a “political solution” to the protracted Sri Lankan civil war that ended with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

The presidential election had the character of a regime-change operation backed by both the US and India against former President Mahinda Rajapakse. Sirisena, a key cabinet minister and general secretary of Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), defected to the opposition as soon as the election was announced in a move orchestrated by Wickremesinghe and ex-President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Washington was

hostile to Rajapakse’s ties with Beijing in conditions where it is seeking to strategically encircle China as part of the US “pivot to Asia.”

The 13th amendment was introduced in November 1987 under the Indo-Lanka Accord, which provided for Indian “peacekeeping” troops to occupy the island’s north and disarm the LTTE. The amendment, which provided for the devolution of powers to a combined north-eastern provincial council, was aimed at securing the backing of the Tamil elites for the Accord. Eight provincial councils were established across Sri Lanka in 1988 but the north-eastern council was dissolved in 1990 when a UNP government plunged the island back to war.

Sinhala chauvinist parties and organisations have always bitterly opposed the 13th amendment. The Supreme Court ordered the de-merger of the northern and eastern provinces in 2006 on the application of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Under pressure from the US and India, the first election for the northern province was held last year, and was won by the TNA. However, Rajapakse’s government continued to effectively rule the province through a military governor, marginalising the TNA-dominated council.

While Wickremesinghe’s promise to implement the amendment will be welcomed by the TNA, as well as India and the US, it will generate sharp tensions within the ruling coalition, which includes the Sinhala supremacist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and General Sarath Fonseka’s Democratic Party. Fonseka was army chief during the final brutal offensive against the LTTE. The JVP is not part of the ruling coalition but is also supporting the government.

In an effort to placate his Sinhala chauvinist allies, Wickremesinghe declared that the “reform will be introduced preserving the unitary character of the

country.” He also indicated that one of the more controversial powers—control of the police—would not be granted to the provinces. He told India’s NDTV television channel there was a “big fear in the country” that provincial “chief ministers may turn the police into their own private army.”

Wickremesinghe’s statement came as his external affairs minister, Mangala Samaraweera, was making his first overseas trip—to India, which welcomed Sirisena’s election. New Delhi is hoping that the new government will enable India to strengthen its position in Colombo at the expense of Beijing, which India has long regarded as a regional rival.

The Modi government is also hoping that the implementation of the amendment will deflect opposition among working people in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu to the treatment of Sri Lankan Tamils. The protracted civil war in Sri Lanka and continuing repression and discrimination against Tamils has generated political instability in India.

Wickremesinghe and Samaraweera have both painted devolution as enabling “reconciliation” and democratic rights for Tamils. In fact, the 13th amendment is the means for establishing a power-sharing arrangement with the Tamil elites to facilitate the joint exploitation of the working class. Speaking to a group of journalists in New Delhi, Samaraweera called on the TNA to join the government.

The TNA, along with the JVP, is already part of the National Executive Council established by the government to oversee the implementation of its 100-day program in preparation for parliamentary elections at the end of April.

In his statement to parliament, Wickremesinghe announced that the government will introduce a 19th constitutional amendment to replace the 18th amendment, which gave wide powers to the president to appoint top judges, the election commissioner and other senior officials. The government also plans the “transfer of executive powers to the legislature and the cabinet” currently held by the president.

The government is preparing to release an “interim financial statement” on January 29 to deliver a limited salary increase for public sector employees and tax reductions on some essential items. All this, along with a propaganda blitz over the previous Rajapakse administration’s corruption, is part of the

government’s efforts to conceal its real agenda as it prepares for parliamentary elections.

Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake has already started discussions with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and promised to meet the IMF’s fiscal targets. The previous government agreed to reduce the budget deficit to 3.8 percent of the gross domestic product in 2016, down from 5.8 percent in 2013.

The new government is seeking to establish the widest possible coalition in anticipation of popular opposition to its agenda of austerity at home and the integration of Sri Lanka into US war plans. While Wickremesinghe is promising to implement the 13th amendment to secure the TNA’s support, his UNP is just as mired in Sinhala chauvinism as Rajapakse’s coalition. As social tensions sharpen, it will inevitably turn to the whipping up of communal tensions as the means to divide the working class.

During the presidential election, the Socialist Equality Party was the only party to fight for the unity of workers—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—in a common struggle to oppose the US war drive and secure basic democratic and social rights by abolishing capitalism. The SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral part of the struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.



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