

Sri Lankan president pledges to strengthen the military

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena used the May 19 “war victory day,” the anniversary of the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), to glorify the military and promise to strengthen it with “ample physical and human resources.” The civil war ended in 2009 with the annihilation of the LTTE leadership and the killing of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians trapped in the war zone.

The main celebration was held in Matara in Sri Lanka’s predominantly Sinhala south—a military parade of 7,300 military, police and civil defence force personnel, as well as tanks and other military equipment. Two commemorations were held in Colombo.

Cabinet spokesman Rajitha Senaratne told the media on May 15 that Sirisena and the right-wing United National Party (UNP)-led government would not treat the war victory “communally,” like former President Mahinda Rajapakse who presided over the final phase of the war, but commemorate it as a “remembrance day.”

These statements are utterly hypocritical. A UNP government not only began the war in 1983 but Sirisena was Rajapakse’s health minister until he defected to run against him in January’s presidential election. Elected to parliament in 1989, Sirisena did not oppose the war’s conduct by any government and backed Rajapakse’s final military offensive in 2009.

Addressing the “victory parade,” Sirisena declared that he would “never let brutal terrorism raise its head in this country again” and he had “the foremost trust and respect in the security sector led by the tri-forces.” The government, he added, had instructed the military chiefs to “work out a new national security system and plan.”

Like all his predecessors, Sirisena blamed the LTTE for the war, demonising the separatist group in Sinhala-communalist language while covering up Colombo’s war crimes and praising the military for its “brave defence of the Motherland.”

At the same time, Sirisena postured as a crusader for “peace,” criticising Rajapakse for not placing enough emphasis on “the process of reconciliation among communities.”

Sirisena’s “peace and reconciliation” rhetoric is in line with his foreign policy shift toward the US and India. Both Washington and New Delhi want Colombo to strike a limited power-sharing deal with the Tamil elite, represented by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA).

The US and India, which backed Colombo’s war, have no interest in the democratic rights of Sri Lanka’s Tamil population. Washington and New Delhi calculate that an arrangement with the Tamil elite will dissipate discontent among Tamils in Sri Lanka and in India’s southern state of Tamil Nadu. The move is part of US efforts bring Sri Lanka into line with the “pivot to Asia,” its military and geo-strategic moves against China.

Sirisena came to office via a regime-change operation instigated by Washington, with New Delhi’s involvement, to oust Rajapakse who had developed close ties with Beijing.

To bolster his “reconciliation” facade, Sirisena claimed that the “freedom struggle” to end British colonial rule in the 1930s and 1940s was conducted “with the cooperation of all the communities.” This is a lie. There was no “freedom struggle” led by any faction of the Sri Lankan elite.

Subservient to British colonial rule, the local capitalist class never called for “national

independence.” It slavishly appealed for “Dominion status” under the British crown. So-called independence in 1948 was an arrangement made with British imperialism as part of the post-war settlements in the Indian sub-continent to hand over political power to the national bourgeoisie.

Only the Trotskyist Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the Indian sub-continent section of the Fourth International, fought for the independence of Sri Lanka and India from British rule, and for a Union of Socialist Republics of the Indian sub-continent.

Sirisena declared that attempts were made to “forge peace, harmony, coexistence and reconciliation” after independence but “many shortcomings” led to “divisions between the communities.” These are also outright lies. Fearful of the mass struggles by the working class and the rural poor, Sri Lanka’s ruling elite systematically fostered anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class along ethnic lines and defend the profit system.

In its first act after independence, a UNP government disfranchised the Tamil-speaking estate workers and suppressed their basic democratic rights. Anti-Tamil discrimination was intensified in the subsequent decades, with Sinhala made the only official language in 1956 by the government of Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Buddhism was declared the state religion in 1972.

Contrary to Sirisena’s claims, the chief responsibility for the communal war against the Tamils lies with the Sri Lankan ruling class. Such attacks were possible because of the betrayal of the working class by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which entered a capitalist coalition government with the SLFP in 1964 and completely abandoned the struggle for socialist internationalism.

It was the UNP government of President J.R. Jayawardene that directly paved the way for the eruption of the civil war in 1983. Hand in hand with its free market policies, it attacked the wages, jobs and social rights of workers and increasingly provoked anti-Tamil communal attacks.

The Tamil elite has noted US Secretary of State John Kerry’s appeals during his recent trip to Sri Lanka for them to work for a power-sharing deal with Colombo. Global Tamil Forum president, S. J. Emmanuel, hailed Sirisena as an “emerging statesman.” Similarly, British

Tamil Forum leader Suren Surendiran called the government’s approach “breathtakingly fresh.”

All sections of the Tamil elite backed Washington’s exploitation of the Rajapakse government’s human rights violations to pressure Colombo to distance itself from China. These forces want the Sri Lankan government to create more favourable conditions for them to exploit the Tamil workers.

The collapse of the LTTE’s separatist perspective, based on support from India and various imperialist powers, underscored the bankruptcy and reactionary character of Tamil nationalism. The line-up behind US imperialism and its geo-strategic agenda is the logical outcome of this nationalist perspective.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), was the only party that consistently opposed the war and demanded the withdrawal of Sri Lankan forces from the north and east. This was an integral part of its fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, and a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally.

As SEP general secretary Wije Dias explained in a *World Socialist Web Site* Perspective on May 18, 2009: “All workers must reject the nauseating jingoism issuing from the political and media establishment. The SEP says to workers: this was not your war and it is not your victory. We warn that behind the victory parades, a savage new assault is being prepared on the economic and social position of the working class.”

Sirisena and the other sections of the ruling elite, who have lined up to back US imperialism’s reckless anti-Chinese war agenda, are preparing to deepen the attacks on the working class. This is the content of Sirisena’s pledge to strengthen the military and other security forces.



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