

After the Sri Lankan elections: Tamil nationalists support US-backed parties

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In the wake of the August 17 parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalist parties are serving as key props for President Maithripala Sirisena in his attempt to install a new pro-US regime in Colombo.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has the third-largest faction in parliament, after the United National Party (UNP, 107 seats) and the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP, 96 seats). TNA leader Sampanthan had called on voters to elect at least 20 TNA legislators from the 29 seats in the Tamil-majority North and East of Sri Lanka. In the event, the TNA ended up winning only 16 seats. Fourteen were elected directly, and two were awarded on the basis of the party's proportion of the national vote.

The TNA is aggressively backing Sirisena—who was installed in a US-backed regime change operation in the January 8 presidential elections—as he attempts to win over a faction of the SLFP to form a “national government” with the UNP. In one meeting, Sampanthan said: “We will support the National Government which would endorse the silent revolution of January 8th, the people’s mandate for a positive change in the country.”

Sampanthan even shared a podium with Sirisena on August 23 in Sampoor, in the Eastern province. He praised Sirisena as a fighter for “truth, integrity, and justice,” adding: “I think it is my duty to ask him without any delay to concentrate on the Tamil issue.”

The TNA could emerge as a political linchpin of the new pro-US government. It would play a particularly important role if Sirisena faces difficulty in securing a coalition with the SLFP, as now seems to be the case, and the UNP is forced to govern with a narrow parliamentary majority.

The eagerness of the TNA to work with US imperialism testifies to the bankruptcy of Tamil

nationalism. The TNA, supported by various smaller Tamil nationalist parties, is backing what would be a violently reactionary government in Colombo. Its main role would be to place Sri Lanka fully behind the US “pivot to Asia,” aimed at containing or waging war with China. It would also be tasked with implementing austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

As for the TNA’s claim that the Sirisena government will resolve the Tamil question, in fact it is staffed by officials who played leading roles in the bloody offensive against the Tamils at the end of the civil war in 2009. That offensive ended in the massacre of tens of thousands of people, including many of the members of the Tamil-nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The bourgeoisie is well aware of the explosive social tensions that are waiting to erupt, especially in the working class. Under these conditions, the role of the Tamil nationalists is to block opposition in the working class and oppressed masses to Sirisena.

The TNA’s election campaign centered on promoting illusions in the January 8 presidential elections as a “revolutionary” event that created democracy in Sri Lanka. Two days before the election, Sampanthan told a group of TNA supporters, “Maithiripala [Sirisena’s] faction [of the SLFP] will join the UNP to form a government on the 18th. The TNA is ready to extend its support to get a two-thirds majority for this government. If there is a government with a two-thirds majority, a new constitution would be drafted with utmost priority for a political solution for the Tamil people. ... through this, an immediate solution would be arrived for the 65 years struggle of the Tamil people.”

The TNA avoided standing its own candidates in certain areas with Tamil populations, such as Colombo,

to facilitate the victory of UNP-led forces. Sampanthan was confident that the UNP would win the elections. If they did, he said, it would be a “unique opportunity” for a political solution for the Tamil people.

This is a cruel political fraud. The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has proven itself over decades of bloodshed incapable of resolving the ethnic divisions that beset the country. Indeed, the ruling elite in Colombo relies on stoking nationalist sentiment among both Tamils and Sinhalese to divide the working class.

Sirisena himself was a close associate of Rajapakse. He acted as defence minister during the last two weeks of the military onslaught in 2009 when the worst war crimes were committed. As for Wickremesinghe, he sanctioned the breaking of the “memorandum of understanding” signed between his government and the LTTE in 2002, restarting the war in 2006.

The Tamil nationalist parties represent a thin layer of the Tamil bourgeoisie that is hoping for an agreement with the Sinhala bourgeoisie that will allow them to exploit their “own” people.

Tamil workers and poor have nothing to gain from the “solutions” the TNA is proposing. The interests of Tamil workers can be advanced only through a political break with Tamil nationalism and a joint struggle against imperialism and austerity in solidarity with Sinhalese workers and oppressed masses.

The prospect of a united movement of the working class throughout Sri Lanka terrifies the Tamil nationalist parties as much as it does the UNP and the SLFP. There are clear signs that the Tamil nationalists have lost significant popular support in recent years. During the election campaign, the TNA was not able to attract crowds as it was in the past. Meetings were attended by a few hundred people, in some cases less than a hundred. With more than 40,000 Tamils missing as a result of the brutal civil war, the “Association of parents and guardians of civilians arrested by Sri Lankan armed forces in North,” founded in 1997, called for a boycott of the elections.

It was under these conditions that other Tamil parties that advance a similar Tamil nationalist program—in particular, the Tamil National People’s Front (TNPf) and the Crusaders for Democracy (CD)—stepped forward in an attempt to block popular opposition to the TNA’s bankrupt program. In the Jaffna district, the TNPf polled 15,022 votes, and the CD received 1,979.

The CD ran only in the Jaffna district, declaring that it did not want to split the TNA vote elsewhere.

The TNPf and CD differ from the TNA primarily in their proposed negotiation tactics with the “international community”—that is, imperialism and the Indian bourgeoisie. They peddle the same illusions that the Tamil people can secure their interests by achieving a separate “traditional homeland” through a deal with the imperialist powers. The TNPf accuses the TNA of not “properly upholding the interests of the Tamils” in negotiations.

After the humiliating defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the TNA distanced itself from the LTTE’s demand for a tiny Tamil state in northeastern Sri Lanka. The TNPf and CD present themselves as the successors of the LTTE, promoting separatist sentiments. Nonetheless, their perspective of alignment on the demands of US imperialism and the IMF is not essentially different from the TNA.

After the elections, TNPf leader Gajendran Ponnambalam said his party would support the TNA “if they work towards a solution based on federalism and self-determination as mentioned in the TNA election manifesto.” He thus proposes to provide indirect support for the attempt to assemble a US-backed government in Colombo.



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