

# Tamil nationalists stage sham protest vs. Sri Lankan president's visit to Jaffna

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Ahead of the visit of President Maithiripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to Jaffna today, Tamil nationalists staged a symbolic protest on Wednesday. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe will participate in the festival events of "Thai Pongal" a traditional Hindu religious festival, presumably with the participation of Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leaders.

The protest, two days in advance of the visit, was a shameful manoeuvre to provide cover for the TNA's orientation to Sirisena's government. The leading organiser of the protest is M.K. Shivajilingam, a Northern Province Councillor and leader of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), one of the constituents of the TNA. Along with him, Selvarajah Kajendran, the secretary of the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF), and several other leaders of the TNA and TNPF participated in the protest.

TamilNet prominently advertised the protest, portraying Shivajilingam as an opponent of the politics of the government, and the TNA "urged the public" to attend the protest.

Despite all this publicity for a protest squarely in the Jaffna city centre, less than 30 people turned up. This low attendance itself reflects growing popular disillusionment with the Tamil nationalist groups' support for Sirisena, who was installed in a US-led regime change operation a year ago, and has moved to implement social attacks demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

In contrast, 600 Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslim students of Jaffna University medical faculty held a demonstration at the same venue, as part of the country-wide protest against the planned privatisation of medical studies.

In his speech at the TNA protest, Shivajilingam said,

"The president and prime minister are cheating the Tamils. This is a first warning; don't make us wave black flags in the face of you and your ministers. This is a warning, if you don't understand this, we fight and establish self-rule with the help of the international community."

The protest displayed a banner with five demands to the president and prime minister: "Justice for genocide war crimes", third-party mediation for the Tamil national question, releasing military-occupied land and immediately stopping further occupation, revealing the whereabouts of the disappeared, and releasing all Tamil political prisoners.

These demands are similar to that of the TNA election manifesto in the parliamentary elections in August. After the elections, the TNA abandoned these promises, transforming itself instead into a key prop of the government to impose broader attacks on the working class and poor of all ethnicities. While serving as a docile official opposition for Sirisena, the TNA is simultaneously covering up the continued use of torture by the Sri Lankan government, including against the TNA's own members.

A handful of relatives of people who disappeared during the Sri Lankan civil war attended the protest and spoke to the WWSWS. A mother from the village of Moolai said, "The military arrested my son Ganes Karunakaran and another boy on 3 March 1997 on his way to a rice mill. He was then 19-years-old. We went to the Mavadi army camp and asked. They told us both of them would be released after three days in front of the 'Gramma Niladhari' (village officer), but they have not yet been released.

"We have met [former President] Chandrika Kumaratunga who was the president at that time. She said, 'your children are there, we would definitely

release them' but nothing happened. I am attending protests like this and meeting politicians with the hope that my son would come one day."

Mahadevan Parameswaran said his brother was 15-years-old when he was seized by the army: "He was taken away in 2009, during the shelling of the region by the army. He was with many people during the shelling, people dispersed in panic, and he went to the military-controlled area. We haven't seen him after that. We have searched for him in camps and prisons.

"We also registered complaints with human right commission and presidential commission. We also met Alliance [TNA] members, but nobody helped us. Wherever we go, we talk and ask about him. My mother became sick searching for him. My sister and her husband were injured in the war and are unable to work. We are goldsmiths, we lost everything in the Mullivaikal. For us Mahinda [Rajapakse, Sri Lanka's previous president] and Maithiri [Sirisena] are the same."

The Tamil nationalist perspective of allying with the Indian bourgeoisie and the imperialist powers to win concessions for members of the Tamil minority has proven to be a dead end for masses of Tamil workers and oppressed people.

Last year's events in Sri Lanka once more proved that the global strategic interests of the imperialist powers shape their intervention in any country. The regime change operation led by Washington, with India's support, targeted the pro-Chinese government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse. After the installation of Sirisena as president, and the formation of a government led by Wickremesinghe's United National Party, the US brought Sri Lanka into the orbit of the "pivot of Asia" and its war preparations against China.

The government's first austerity budget aims to dismantle all remaining obstacles to the unlimited exploitation of workers in Sri Lanka by international capital. The working class and oppressed face a massive wave of attacks against their living standard and political rights.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe will visit Jaffna today to make empty promises. Last year, Sirisena repeatedly travelled to the North, making surprise visits to paddy fields and poor families, to present himself as concerned about ordinary people. Yet none of his

promises to people in the war-torn areas have materialised.

According to the Tamil daily *Thinakkural*, Sirisena's frequent visits to Jaffna aim to relieve "international pressures" over the military occupation of private land in northern Sri Lanka. When Sirisena came to power, the military occupied 26 square kilometres (6,459 acres), but 4.5 square kilometres (1,118 Acres) have been returned in two stages. However, new land seizures are continuing.



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