

Infighting in Tamil party signifies deep political crisis in Sri Lanka

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A factional clash that erupted last week between Sri Lanka's Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leadership ended yesterday after a political compromise.

Wigneswaran, a retired supreme court judge, became the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) chief minister after being appointed as the TNA's leading candidate in the 2013 elections. Although he had not previously been a member of the alliance, he was brought into the organisation by TNA leader R. Sambandan because he was regarded as a reliable figure by the Colombo establishment and the international powers.

Differences within the Tamil elite, however, came to the surface last week when Wigneswaran removed two NPC ministers on corruption charges and sent two others on compulsory leave. The four ministers were members of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK), the dominant party in the TNA.

TNA leaders, including R. Sambandan and M. A. Sumanthiran, opposed the chief minister's ruling, declaring that placing the two ministers on compulsory leave was an arbitrary decision. ITAK councillors responded by presenting a no-confidence motion against Wigneswaran in the NPC.

In a counter move, the Tamil People's Council (TPC), a group of Tamil academics and the Jaffna University Students Union called protests supporting Wigneswaran in Jaffna and other northern towns. The TPC, which includes the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), are also partners of TNA. The Tamil National People's Front, another communalist party, is also a member of the TPC. Attempting to rally support for Wigneswaran, these formations painted him as a fighter against corruption and a defender of the Tamils' rights.

The conflict over Wigneswaran's moves against allegedly corrupt ministers has nothing to do with the rights of the Tamil masses, but reflects tactical differences within the Tamil elite over how best to defend its interests. The backdrop to these clashes is the deep-seated and growing anger of Tamil working people and youth in Sri Lanka's north and east against the TNA and the Colombo government over the ongoing military occupation, the suppression of basic democratic rights and terrible living conditions.

Wigneswaran, who has made limited criticisms of Colombo and the ongoing military occupation of the north, is attempting to channel the mass anger and opposition along communal lines.

Sections of the TNA, the Sri Lankan government and the military, however, are concerned that Wigneswaran and his supporters are adding to the deepening political instability throughout the country. The explosive discontent in the North and the East occurs at the same time as anti-government opposition has erupted among workers, poor and youth in the southern part of the country.

Yesterday, the Colombo-based *Daily Mirror* reported that several high commissions and embassies in Sri Lanka had "requested the TNA leadership settle the matter amicably." While the newspaper did not name them, US, European Union, British and Indian diplomats closely monitor every political development in Sri Lanka. These powers, particularly Washington and New Delhi, are keen to maintain a firm strategic grip on Sri Lanka in line with their actions against China.

Responding to these demands, Wigneswaran yesterday agreed to withdraw his compulsory leave order against the two ministers and reach a compromise with his opponents in the NPC. For his part, TNA leader Sambandan promised not to interfere in a corruption inquiry against the two ministers and withdrew his no-confidence motion

against Wigneswaran.

The NPC election in 2013 was organised under President Mahinda Rajapakse who was facing international pressure over human rights violation during the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and also wanted to pacify the Tamil elite. The principal concern of Washington, with the support of other western powers, was to pressure Rajapakse to politically and economically distance his government from China.

In 2015, the TNA fully backed the regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington to oust Rajapakse and replace him with Maithripala Sirisena. The TNA falsely claimed that Sirisena would bring democracy, reconciliation and improved social conditions for Tamils, and urged them to vote for him.

By “democracy” and “reconciliation,” the Tamil nationalists mean a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo to facilitate the exploitation of Tamil workers and youth. The TNA’s backing for the Colombo regime-change represented a new stage in the Tamil elite’s servitude to US imperialism in the hope of securing further privileges.

The Sri Lankan government over the past 30 months has brought Colombo’s foreign policy in line with US and Indian demands. Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have strengthened their military ties with both countries. It is also implementing International Monetary Fund demands to impose the burden of Sri Lanka’s mounting economic crisis onto the backs of the working class and the poor.

Apart from Sirisena and Wickremesinghe’s unstable “unity government,” the TNA is the single largest group in the Sri Lankan parliament. While Sambandan is the parliamentary opposition leader, the TNA acts as a de facto partner of the government, backing its austerity and anti-democratic measures, while offering empty, face-saving criticisms of the government.

Eight years after the end of the country’s devastating communal war, the Sri Lankan military virtually runs the North and the East. While there is deep-seated anger over the ongoing military occupation, the TNA has propped up the Sri Lankan government and backed its efforts to block an international investigation into the military’s war crimes.

In the Northern Province, there are continuous demonstrations demanding the return of land seized by the military during the war and information about those “disappeared” during the conflict. Unemployment is

rampant and thousands of those whose homes were destroyed in the war are still living in temporary huts.

In late 2015, Wigneswaran joined forces with several other groups to organise the Tamil People’s Council in an attempt to channel this explosive mass discontent along communal lines. Last September, the TPC organised *Ezhuga Thamizh (Rise up Tamils)* in the north and in the east in February this year under the banner of promoting the aspirations of Tamils to the “international community.”

At a meeting held on May 18 to commemorate the Tamils killed in the war, Wigneswaran declared that the “day when people come onto the streets demanding withdrawal of army is not far away.” This demagogic appeal was a warning to Colombo about the developing opposition. Sirisena responded by telling a commemoration meeting of “war heroes” that there would be “no withdrawal of the army.”

Against the background of developing class struggles internationally, every faction of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie—Sinhala Tamil and Muslim—is nervous about the danger of a united struggle of Sri Lankan workers across ethnic lines. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, the Rajapakse opposition and the military regard with dismay the developing struggles in the North and are whipping up Sinhala communalism in a bid to divide the working class.

Tamil workers and youth must reject the treacherous role being played by the TNA and the grouping around Wigneswaran who have no interest in fighting for the basic rights and living standards of the Tamil workers and the poor. Like the LTTE, these formations seek to advance their nationalist policies and defend their privileges by appealing to the major imperialist powers.

Workers and poor can only win their democratic rights and improve their social conditions by basing their fight on a socialist and internationalist program in a struggle against every faction of the national bourgeoisie and the imperialist powers. This involves the fight for workers’ and peasants’ government—a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam—as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. Only the Socialist Equality Party fights for this perspective.



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