

Sri Lankan president showers praises on the military

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President Maithripala Sirisena devoted his speech at a ceremony celebrating the 2009 defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to eulogise the military and issue Sinhala chauvinist appeals.

Sirisena, who is also the commander in chief of the Sri Lankan armed forces, presided over the so-called national war heroes' day on May 19, marking the ninth anniversary since the end of the bloody 26-year communal war.

Sirisena's craven praise for the military is a measure of his dependence on it. He is leading a politically fragile government with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and facing mounting social opposition by workers and the poor. A rival group led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse is challenging his coalition government.

Standing in front of army, navy and air force commanders, Sirisena declared: "Because of the great war heroes, we are enjoying freedom today." He added: "The brave soldiers sacrificed their lives to defend the unitary state, territorial integrity, democracy and independence of the motherland from the brutal LTTE terrorists."

Sirisena's rhetoric echoed that uttered by Rajapakse after the military ruthlessly completed the war in May 2009, killing tens of thousands of civilians and maiming many more.

It is a lie that the end of war produced "freedom, peace and democracy." Tamil people in the north and east still live under military occupation and intelligence surveillance. The devastation of living and social conditions for all working people continues.

Rajapakse ultimately lost office in 2015 because of the mass opposition to his authoritarian rule during and after the war. Once the conflict ended, he declared "now we must wage economic war" and began to impose the burden of the massive military expenditure and the economic crisis produced by 2008 global financial breakdown.

Sirisena exploited the opposition to Rajapakse's regime with the help of a right-wing "good governance" movement led by Wickremesinghe's United National Party, supported by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and a host of pseudo-left groups and NGOs.

Within months of taking office, the cash-strapped Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government dumped its promises to address the issues of war victims and improve social and living conditions. Instead, it imposed austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. For all the rhetoric about democracy, the struggles of workers, the rural poor and students have been suppressed by police and military violence and the draconian essential services order.

Sirisena's claim that "LTTE terrorists" were responsible for the war is another lie, seeking to cover up successive governments' role in instigating the conflict.

President J. R. Jayawardene's government started the war in 1983, while preparing a major assault on living conditions in order to implement pro-market economic policies. The military conflict was the culmination of decades of systematic discrimination against the Tamil minority by the capitalist class since formal independence from British colonial rule in 1948.

Anti-Tamil discrimination is used to divide the working class along ethnic lines and defend capitalist rule. At every stage, whenever the Sri Lankan capitalist class faced economic and political crises, its governments intensified the communal provocations and attacks.

The 1964 betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in joining the capitalist government of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party gave a free hand to the ruling class to mount its communal attacks. The LSSP abandoned socialist principles and adapted to Sinhala nationalism.

The capitalist class conducted the war to preserve its rule. The Tamil elite responded by waging a communal

campaign for its interests, not for the democratic rights of workers and the poor. The LTTE's separatism sought to carve out a tiny state for the Tamil elite with the help of the imperialist powers. It also used attacks on Sinhala people to divide Tamil and Sinhala workers.

A major part of Sirisena's speech was devoted to insisting that the military committed no war crimes. He declared that a UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution, adopted after he took office, had not mentioned military war crimes "as certain media and extremists depict."

In reality, the UN estimated that at least 40,000 people were killed during the final months' offensive against the LTTE alone. The security forces were also implicated in numerous abductions and disappearances, carried out in association with paramilitary groups.

Washington fully backed the war, turning a blind eye to the human right violations. Only during the final months of the conflict did it begin criticising the security forces. After war ended, the US sponsored UNHRC resolutions against Sri Lanka, not out of any sympathy for democratic rights but to pressure Rajapakse's regime to distance itself from with China. When that failed, Washington supported a regime-change operation, via the January 2015 presidential election, to help install Sirisena.

Sirisena shifted Sri Lanka's foreign policy in favour of the US and its regional ally India. In return, the US backed another UNHRC resolution in September 2015, hailing his government's "contributions to promoting democratic governance." The government, the TNA and US State Department together dumped an international investigation into the Sri Lankan war crimes, on the pretext that a local judicial investigation would be conducted.

No such investigation has eventuated. Instead, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe vowed not to allow any security force members to face court, thus appeasing the military, the Buddhist clergy and the chauvinist groups.

Sirisena casually dismissed the possibility of counting civilian deaths but the overall toll would be 100,000. He announced that, according to the security forces, 28,708 soldiers were killed and 40,107 disabled. Far from being "war heroes," these troops were economic conscripts, mainly from rural areas, who joined the forces because of poverty and unemployment.

Sirisena castigated those "who can't identify terrorists and war heroes." They included, he said, "politicians in the government, as well as in opposition, and NGOs here and abroad."

The president was referring to Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne who made a passing remark at a press conference that people in the north had a right to commemorate their dead. Senaratne was not opposed to the war but tried to claim that people enjoyed freedom under the present government.

The opposition, chauvinist groups and media outlets immediately seized upon Senaratne's statement to step up their propaganda, insisting there was no right to commemorate LTTE cadres and civilians who died during the fighting. In his speech, Sirisena lined up with this campaign to appease the chauvinists and stress his allegiance to the military.

Though Sirisena hailed the military, Rajapakse and his supporters attacked the government for allowing "massacre commemorations" in the north and east and criticised the lack of pompous military pageants to honour "war heroes." Rajapakse is seeking to resume power by appealing to the military, while organising Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups.

Every faction of the ruling elite is mired in Sinhala chauvinism and subservient to the military. Their nervousness is deepening as the objective conditions develop to unite the working class across ethnic divides. Increasingly besieged by the political crisis, Sirisena wants to keep the military on side as his government lurches toward dictatorial rule.

Only the Socialist Equality Party is advancing an alternative perspective for the workers and oppressed, based on Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution. The working class, organising independently of every capitalist faction, must rally the oppressed and poor, and fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for a Socialist Federation of South Asia and international socialism.



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