

Ten years after civil war ends, Sri Lankan ruling elites prepare for class war

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May 18 marked a decade since Sri Lanka's protracted communal war ended in the bloody defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In commemorating the military victory, President Maithripala Sirisena paid a glowing tribute to the armed forces, which had just been deployed in its first major, island-wide operation since the end of the conflict in 2009.

Sirisena's brief speech on Sunday at a ceremony in the grounds of parliament was dominated by April 21 terrorist bombings that killed nearly 260 innocent people. Attacks on churches and luxury hotels was coordinated by the Islamic fundamentalist Islamic State with a local extremist group, National Thowheeth Jamma'ath.

Sirisena praised the "heroic soldiers who put an end to the barbaric LTTE ... once and for all. But, after ten years of peace and harmony, there was an unexpected act of terrorism..." He boasted that "with 30 years of experience," the military will be able to end "international terrorism."

Firstly, Sirisena's claim that the bombings were "unexpected" is an outright lie. The security forces had been warned in advance by an Indian intelligence agency of the planned attacks including some of the specific targets on Easter Sunday. The warning was ignored and the bombings allowed to happen. No one has plausibly explained why.

Sirisena and the government, however, have seized on the attack to impose a state of emergency giving sweeping powers to the military and police. In the name of "fighting international terrorism," tens of thousands of troops and police officers have been deployed across the island.

At the same time, the media and political establishment are whipping up a vicious anti-Muslim campaign aimed at intimidating Muslims and dividing the working class. Above all, these police state measures are aimed against the working class, which has increasingly come into struggle against the government's attacks on living conditions.

The claim that "peace and harmony" have prevailed over the past ten years is absurd. Sirisena was a senior minister in the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, which, immediately after the LTTE's defeat, declared an

"economic war."

The island was devastated economically by nearly three decades of bloody civil war, which was compounded by the global financial crisis of 2008-09. The "economic war" was above all directed at imposing the economic burdens onto the working class through the implementation of the International Monetary Fund's austerity agenda.

The mass opposition that emerged was channelled into ousting Rajapakse in the regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington in 2015 that brought Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to power.

The US had backed the communal war and Rajapakse's autocratic rule, but opposed his close relations with Beijing. It sought to integrate Sri Lanka into its war preparations against China, and Sirisena and Wickremesinghe fell into line.

Four years on, the mass struggles of workers, young people and the poor have erupted to the surface and fuelled bitter infighting in the competing factions of the ruling class led by Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse. Whatever their differences, however, they all support the mobilization of the military on the pretext of fighting international terrorism to prepare for class war against working people.

In order to fight these police state measures, workers and youth must be politically equipped, particularly with the lessons of the country's bloody civil war.

Sirisena, like the entire Colombo establishment, treats the war in chauvinist terms as the consequence of "LTTE terrorism." In reality, the civil war was the culmination of systematic official discrimination against the Tamil minority since Sri Lanka's formal independence in 1948.

Incapable of addressing demands for democratic and social rights, the ruling class in Colombo resorted to anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide working people along ethnic lines. One of the first actions of the United National Party government in 1948 was to strip a million Tamil plantation workers of their citizenship rights.

In the wake of the 1953 Hartal that brought the UNP government to its knees, the ruling class turned to the

Sinhala supremacism of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which won power in 1956. The SLFP implemented its Sinhala-only language policy and in 1972 the SLFP-led government elevated Buddhism to a state religion, thereby reducing Tamils to the status of second-class citizens.

Amid another crisis produced by the economic collapse of the mid-1970s, the UNP led by J. R. Jayawardene won power in 1977, and was among the first governments in the world to implement “open market” policies that had a devastating impact on the working class.

Facing rising opposition, Jayawardene changed the constitution to vest autocratic powers in an executive president, and at the same time staged anti-Tamil provocations. Following the killing of 13 soldiers in July 1983, the UNP government unleashed a devastating island-wide anti-Tamil pogrom that killed hundreds, and declared war on the LTTE.

The war against the “LTTE terrorists” was above all a war against the working class. Starting with Jayawardene, successive governments exploited the war to drastically slash social basic rights, including to free education, free health service and price subsidies for the poor. Privatisations in the state sector led to massive job losses. The war was also used to justify police-state measures that were used against workers.

While it claimed to be fighting for the democratic rights of Tamils, the LTTE was a bourgeois party that represented the interests of the Tamil elites. It aimed to win the backing of the imperialist powers to establish an independent Tamil state where the bourgeoisie could offer up workers as cheap labour for foreign investors.

The LTTE’s defeat was above all a consequence of its political bankruptcy. As the Sri Lankan military closed in, it was incapable of making any appeal to the working class in Sri Lanka, Asia or internationally for support. Instead it was reduced to making pathetic appeals to the very powers that were providing political, financial and military support for the Rajapakse government’s brutal war.

The conflict left the island in ruins, with more than 100,000 dead, mostly Tamils, and many more suffering psychological and physical injuries. A UN report found that, in the final weeks of the war, the military massacred more than 40,000 Tamil civilians. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, with the backing of the US, has blocked any investigation and prosecution of these war crimes.

Nearly 300,000 people were herded to military controlled detention centres. Another 12,000 young men and women were seized and held in so-called rehabilitation camps where they were subject to torture and brain washing. Many disappeared without any trace. Several hundred are still in prison. The north and east of the island is still under military

occupation by hundreds of thousands of soldiers.

Thousands of Tamils still live in miserable conditions in makeshift camps without basic facilities. They have lost their businesses and occupations. Most of the land seized by the armed forces during the war has not been returned to its owners. About 90,000 war widows struggle each day to maintain their families without any real income.

So much for Sirisena’s ten years of “peace and harmony.” Now the entire political establishment is preparing another bogus “war on terror” which, in the first instance, is targeting the island’s Muslims, but will be used to suppress the opposition of the working class. Very quickly, the police-state measures, built up and honed in 30 years of vicious communal war, have been activated and enforced throughout the island.

The Tamil bourgeoisie has immediately fallen into line. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which acted as the LTTE’s mouthpiece, turned rapidly to the right after the end of war. It fully supports the imposition of emergency rule, and even demands the government not withdraw the military from the north and east because of the supposed danger of terrorist attacks. Like its Sinhala counterparts in Colombo, the TNA fears above all a rising movement of the working class.

The overriding political lesson for workers is that they cannot defend their social and democratic rights if they are divided. The poisonous propaganda pumped out by the media and bourgeois political parties that seeks to set worker against worker on the basis of language and religion must be rejected. Workers face a common enemy in the exploiting class, the bourgeoisie, which will stop at nothing to maintain its power and wealth.

The working class can only fight for its class interests by building a unified political movement, independent of all of the parties of the bourgeoisie, in the struggle to overturn capitalism and establish a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fights for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as an integral part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. We urge you to join the SEP and build it as the revolutionary leadership necessary to lead the struggles ahead.



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