

Sri Lankan Tamil party leaders ready to work with President Rajapakse

Subash Somachandran, S. Jayanth
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Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leaders R. Sambandan and M.A. Sumanthiran declared their willingness to work with Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse during the parliamentary debate on his policy statement early last month.

Both TNA leaders pathetically appealed to Rajapakse for a “political solution to the ethnic question,” offering, in return, TNA support. The catchphrase “political solution to the ethnic question” is routinely used by the Tamil elite to appeal for political devolution—i.e., allowing it to govern the North and East of Sri Lanka where the majority of Tamils live.

The pro-US TNA is an umbrella organisation of the Tamil bourgeois parties and includes the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

Three months ago, during the presidential elections, the TNA declared that the United National Party (UNP) and its candidate Sajith Premadasa were “more democratic” than the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna’s candidate, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who had “authoritarian tendencies.” The TNA urged Tamils to vote for Premadasa.

Responding to these recommendations, and lacking a political alternative, the Tamil masses, who widely despise Rajapakse, voted for Premadasa. Rajapakse is hated by Tamil workers and the poor because of his role as defense secretary during the final years of former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).

Thousands of Tamil civilians were killed in indiscriminate shootings in the last weeks of the brutal conflict, according to UN reports. Hundreds of youth, who surrendered to the Sri Lankan army, are still missing. About 300,000 civilians were incarcerated in military camps, and over 11,000 youth were hauled off into so-called rehabilitation camps.

The TNA’s claim that Premadasa and the UNP are more “democratic” is an outright lie.

The UNP instigated anti-Tamil discrimination from the outset of Sri Lanka’s formal independence in 1948, and used it to divide and suppress the working class. In 1983 it provoked the communal war against the LTTE.

Sujith Premadasa’s father, President R. Premadasa not only

restarted the war in the North and East but was politically responsible for the massacre of about 60,000 Sinhala youth during rural unrest in 1988–1990. As a UNP leader and a minister in the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, Sujith Premadasa endorsed all of Colombo’s economic and political attacks on workers and the poor.

Having previously stated that Gotabhaya Rajapakse had “authoritarian tendencies,” the TNA leadership has now changed its tune.

During last month’s parliamentary debate on the newly-elected president’s policy agenda, the TNA’s Sambandan praised Gotabhaya Rajapakse, describing him as the country’s first “non-politician” president and someone “prepared to speak the truth and to do the right thing.”

And the flattery continued. “If he makes any errors,” Sambandan declared, “we need to advise and correct him. We are prepared to work with him.”

Sambandan said Sri Lanka was “neck-deep in debt”—much of this incurred by Colombo’s prosecution of the war—and that the country’s income was insufficient to service the debt.

“[M]assive investment and development with export-oriented production is needed to overcome the crisis... [but] the economic miracle that could happen in Sri Lanka, under the Policy Statement of the President, could just vanish,” he warned, if the Tamil elite failed to assist the government.

This support, Sambandan continued, would be forthcoming if the government honoured commitments made to India and the “international community” by the previous Mahinda Rajapakse government, after the military defeat of the LTTE.

Mahinda Rajapakse promised Indian leaders that he would give increased powers to the provincial councils and promised the major imperialist powers that his government was ready for “reconciliation” or limited power-sharing with the Tamil parties.

In short, the TNA leaders’ current appeal is this: In order to carry out Rajapakse’s economic austerity program, which is aimed at attracting international capital, he needs our support. We are ready, but we need some sops.

Former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s commitments to India and the so-called “international community,” following the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, were a hoax and an

attempt to dissipate international pressure on Colombo. New Delhi wanted to prevent the widespread sympathy for Sri Lanka's Tamils, on the part of those ethnically related to them in Tamil Nadu, from provoking political instability within India.

The US and the European powers have also applied pressure on Colombo to distance itself from China.

Washington endorsed Mahinda Rajapakse's anti-democratic regime, and his government's brutal war against the LTTE, but was hostile to Colombo's close relations with Beijing. The US hypocritically used Rajapakse's human rights violations, during the war, to push for resolutions against Colombo in the UN Human Rights Council.

In the end, the US, with the assistance of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, orchestrated a regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse. The TNA endorsed the political operation, which brought Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to power, and backed that government's International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity program.

What Sambandan is appealing for is a political arrangement with the new government for the joint exploitation of Sri Lanka's cheap labour and implementation of the government's austerity measures, in exchange for the Tamil bourgeoisie being given greater control of the North and East.

In order to strengthen the TNA's argument, Sumanthiran told parliament that although some government leaders were talking about Singapore's economic success: "Singapore prospered while achieving national harmony among its citizens. Singapore is a great example"

Sumanthiran's message is clear. If the Sri Lankan government wants to emulate the "great example of Singapore," the TNA is ready and willing to assist.

It is significant that the TNA, like every other faction of Sri Lanka's political elite, is praising Singapore. That country, however, is not an example of "national harmony" but a police-state, in which ordinary people are subjected to harsh repressive measures in order to maintain the country as a commercial transit hub and centre of international capital.

The TNA, like the rest of Sri Lanka's political elite, is well aware that it sits on a social powder keg. The last two years have seen an eruption of strikes and protests, including by teachers, university workers, railway employees and plantation workers, against the government's IMF program. These struggles, which have seen workers unite across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnic lines, shattered the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration and paved the way for its defeat in last year's presidential election.

Rajapakse and the SLPP exploited the mass social discontent by making various promises to improve living standards whilst intensifying communalist propaganda against the Tamil and Muslim population.

Rajapakse told big business he would establish a "strong

government" and appealed to the military, in preparation for authoritarian forms of rule. After coming to power, he quickly appointed senior military figures to key government posts.

Sambandan's appeals to the new Sri Lankan president also included a political cover-up of US and Indian support for Colombo's brutal communalist war; justification of the previous Rajapakse government's criminal actions; and the TNA's ongoing support for the bloody destruction of the LTTE.

"The LTTE was seen by both Sri Lanka and India as an impediment to a reasonable, negotiated political solution," Sambandan said. "The military defeat of the LTTE was seen as a precursor to a reasonable political solution."

Washington and New Delhi both regarded the LTTE's campaign for a separate state as a barrier to their geo-strategic interests in South Asia, destabilising the strategically located island country. Colombo's decades-long war against the Tamil separatist movement was not only focused on keeping the North and East under its control, but at defending capitalist rule in Sri Lanka, by promoting communalism to divide and suppress the working class.

The TNA's appeals to the newly-elected President Rajapakse are yet another reflection of the rightward shift of the venal "national bourgeoisie" in every country, in response to the deepening global capitalist crisis and the revolutionary upsurge of the international working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, was the only political party that consistently opposed the war, demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the North and East, and fought for the unity of all workers across ethnic lines, whilst opposing Sinhala chauvinism and Tamil nationalism. This revolutionary perspective is based on the fight for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic, as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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