

Sri Lankan president demands legal immunity for the military

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Addressing a victory celebration on Tuesday, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse eulogised the military for its part in Colombo's 30-year communal war and declared that he would continue to oppose all war crime indictments against the armed forces. The event was held at Battaramulla, in the Colombo suburbs, near a memorial to mark the 11th anniversary of the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The war ended on May 19, 2009 in a bloody assault that lasted several weeks. The United Nations estimates that about 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed during the final weeks of the conflict. Hundreds of those who surrendered, including LTTE fighters, simply disappeared and some 300,000 civilians were incarcerated in military-controlled camps. About 11,000 young men and women were herded into so-called rehabilitation centres.

Others participating in Tuesday's event included the president's brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, and the commanders of Sri Lanka's army, navy and air force. The Rajapakses directly oversaw the bloodbath, with Mahinda serving as president and Gotabhaya as his defence secretary. Along with the military leadership, they are implicated in the war crimes committed.

This year's "celebration" was held amid the deepening COVID-19 crisis and rising class tensions in Sri Lanka and internationally. While Rajapakse has "reopened the economy" and is demanding people return to work, his government and big business backers are nervous about the growing working-class opposition to unsafe working conditions, massive job and wage cuts and attacks on other rights.

This is what lies behind the president's boosting of the military on Tuesday. Under the banner of combatting the coronavirus, he has initiated a "wartime" deployment of forces in Colombo to "maintain social distancing." Rajapakse and the Sri Lankan ruling elite are preparing for another war—this time against the working class.

"I will not allow any room for attempts to discredit and destroy the dignity of our war heroes. It is a national responsibility to defend their rights," he declared on Tuesday. "Even the leaders of powerful countries have emphatically stated that they would not allow any action against their war heroes."

"If any international body or organisation targets our country and our war heroes, using baseless allegations," he said, Sri Lanka would withdraw from these organisations.

Rajapakse's threats echo the thuggish methods used by the US and other imperialist powers. US President Donald Trump withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in June 2018 and declared immunity for the American military's numerous war crimes over the last 40 years.

Rajapakse has rejected the UNHRC's 2015 resolution calling for a war crimes investigation, as well as the previous Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's call for toothless "domestic investigations" into human right violations.

In a direct appeal to his Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist base, President Rajapakse declared that Sri Lanka was "nourished by Buddhist philosophy... [and] possesses a form of administration that is an oasis for all religions and all nationalities." He then falsely insisted that "Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Malay and Burgher have had equal rights" during the country's history.

Rajapakse's claims turn history upside down. Since formal independence from Britain in 1948, successive Colombo governments have systematically used anti-Tamil communalism to defend capitalism by dividing the working class along ethnic lines.

The Sri Lankan ruling class, which abolished the citizenship rights of Indian-origin plantation workers in 1948, has consistently responded to militant industrial and political action by the working class with communalist

measures against the Tamil minority. This included making Sinhala the official national language and Buddhism the state religion.

The political betrayal of the working class by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in 1964, when it joined a bourgeois coalition government with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, strengthened the Sinhala elite's communal assault and saw a nationalist reaction by the Tamil capitalist class in an attempt to protect its privileges. These developments led to the emergence of armed Tamil groups, including the separatist LTTE, and further anti-Tamil provocations that culminated in full-scale war in 1983.

The war, however, was not just to suppress the Tamil masses but was aimed at suppressing the democratic rights of the entire working class. It was a manifestation of the Sri Lankan elite's inability to meet any of the social and democratic rights of working people.

Rajapakse also claimed on Tuesday that the end of the war in 2009 had produced "an environment where people could live without fear or anxiety and enjoy their human rights freely... [W]e built an atmosphere for free and fair elections" and "where people can travel freely without any restrictions."

This is another canard. De facto military rule still exists in the North and the East, with a military occupation of over 100,000 soldiers, security camps at every strategic point and the masses under continuous surveillance and harassment.

While the war killed more than 100,000 people, mostly Tamils, in 1988–90, the Sri Lankan government unleashed its armed forces to quash rural unrest in the country's south, killing an estimated 60,000 youth.

Thousands of poverty-stricken Tamils still live in substandard, makeshift homes that lack the most basic facilities, while some of the land seized by the armed forces during the war has not yet been returned to its previous owners. About 90,000 war widows struggle each day to maintain their families without any real income.

In the country's south, the Sri Lankan military and police are being increasingly used to suppress social struggles by workers and the poor.

After becoming president last November, Gotabhaya Rajapakse rapidly moved to militarise his administration, inserting retired senior military officers into key position of the government. Retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne was made defence secretary and Army Commander Major General Shavendra Silva appointed to head the country's National Operation Centre for the Prevention of COVID-19. Large numbers of armed forces

personnel have been stationed in Colombo schools.

Rajapakse also used Tuesday's victory celebration to elevate 177 army officers into senior positions, including as major generals, brigadiers, lieutenant colonels and majors. Army Commander Silva revealed that more than 14,600 soldiers of lower ranks would become military officers.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse was even more explicit in his victory celebration statement. He denounced calls by opposition political parties for a distinction between military and civilian bodies as "artificial," declaring: "When our government is in power former members of the security forces will inevitably occupy various positions within the government."

Once again, the government and its Sinhala-chauvinist allies are stoking anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim communalism to derail mounting social opposition.

As Colombo was celebrating the war victory on Tuesday, the police and military banned commemorations in the North and East for the Tamils killed during the war.

The police obtained court orders forbidding mass gatherings under the pretext of stopping the spread of COVID-19 and the military declared that it would prevent people from commemorating "terrorists."

Armed police and military were deployed to block Tamils from participating in any event. This included the dispersal of people attempting to participate in a commemoration at Mullivaikkal in Mullaithivu, where tens of thousands were killed in the final stages of the war.

The Tamil media reported that soldiers were armed with knives and sticks at roadblocks and that journalists and others were questioned and checked at many points. Tamil politicians, such as former Chief Minister of the Northern Province C.V Wigneswaran, were blocked at checkpoints and prevented from attending these events.

Workers and youth must take President Rajapakse's victory celebration speech as a warning, and another indication that he and his brother are preparing dictatorial forms of rule.



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