

Tamil nationalists exploit remembrance of war victims to advance pro-imperialist agenda

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Last month marked the eleventh anniversary of the bloody end of Sri Lanka's nearly 30-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), on May 18, 2009, ordered by the government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse. More than 40,000 men, women, children and the elderly were killed in the final weeks of war in indiscriminate firing of the Sri Lankan military.

Hundreds of young men and women including LTTE fighters who surrendered to the military are still missing. More than 300,000 civilians who survived the war were interned for months in military-controlled camps in Vavuniya. About 11,000 youth were herded into so-called rehabilitation camps.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse—who together with his brother Mahinda presided over this bloodbath—held a war victory celebration this year in the Colombo suburbs, paying a glowing tribute to “war heroes.” Rajapakse declared he would oppose penalizing war criminals like those leaders in US and other imperialist countries. (See: Sri Lankan president demands legal immunity for the military)

The Tamil people have recalled the May 18 catastrophe every year since the end of the war, commemorating their loved ones. This year, the military and police intervened to suppress any commemoration. While the military threatened to arrest anyone engaged in “remembrance of terrorists,” the police took out court orders banning the events, claiming that gatherings of more than five persons are prohibited because of the coronavirus. Colombo directed the crackdown in the north, fearing any expression of opposition among workers and the poor against war crimes.

On May 18, soldiers and police were heavily deployed in the north and east of the country. Soldiers in uniforms and plainclothes were seen at junctions of roads to Mullivaikkal, armed with weapons, poles and knives. Participation in the Mullivaikkal event was low.

Police also kept Tamil bourgeois politicians like former Chief Minister of Northern Province C. V. Wigneswaran and Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam from attending the site.

On the same day, Wigneswaran, who is also the leader of Tamil People's Alliance (TPA), addressed a meeting at his party office in Jaffna. Wigneswaran said he “continuously emphasized the need for an international investigation into the genocide in Mullivaikkal.” He added, “The accountability program carried out by the UN Human Rights Council has failed. Therefore, steps should be taken to place Sri Lanka in the International Criminal

Court,” and to remove Sri Lanka from the UNHRC.

He called for establishment of a “global Tamil advisory council” including persons from the Tamil diaspora to form into a committee to work out a case.

Wigneswaran concluded his appeal by requesting that “the international community must come forward to deal with human rights violations taking place all over the world including the genocide committed against the Tamils in Sri Lanka.”

From whom is Wigneswaran asking justice for war victims? These are imperialist countries including the US and European Union (EU) states, and also the regional power, India, who provided the successive Colombo governments with logistics, weaponry and training for the Sri Lankan military in the guise of supporting a “war against terrorism.”

These powers are not defending human rights anywhere in the world as Wigneswaran and other Tamil bourgeois politicians imply. Washington, together with other powers, has violated human rights and engaged in genocidal wars including in former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, killing millions. These were immense war crimes. These powers are also unleashing brutal repression on helpless immigrants and suppressing democratic rights of workers in their own countries.

Wigneswaran is not appealing to these powers for justice, but signaling that he lines up behind them. The former chief minister was a leader of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which supported Colombo and Washington as they prepared a resolution in October 2015 at the UNHRC to end war crime investigations. The resolution called for toothless domestic inquiry, letting the government and military get off the hook.

It confirmed the insistence by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) that the democratic rights of Tamil masses including justice for war victims could only be realised through the united struggle of the working class for socialism.

In contrast to the reactionary positions of Wigneswaran and other Tamil bourgeois parties, the SEP in Sri Lanka—and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—maintained a principled opposition to the separatist bourgeois politics of the LTTE, which at times used terrorist methods to achieve its agenda. Its separatist line was based on seeking the support of international powers to carve out an ethnic Tamil state which could have served as a strategic outpost of the United States.

The RCL/SEP explained that the LTTE's defeat was not just a

military question but a result of the bankruptcy of this separatist perspective. In a perspective article on May 21, 2019, it wrote:

“This movement was utterly incapable of making a political appeal to the Sinhalese workers and oppressed or countering the ceaseless attempts of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism. Because of its separatist outlook, it was unable to make such an appeal even to the Tamil workers in India. And its anti-democratic character, which found expression in the ruthless repression of any political opposition—particularly within the working class—in the areas under its control, led to the disaffection of wide layers of the Sri Lankan Tamil population itself.”

It continued: “The tragic events in Sri Lanka mark the end of a whole period, but have resolved none of the country’s profound contradictions. In the period that is now opening up, the SEP’s struggle to unite Tamil and Sinhalese workers against all forms of nationalism and communalism in a common fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam will provide a way forward for the masses of the island. It will also serve as an internationalist pole of attraction for working people throughout South Asia as part of the struggle for the socialist unification of the working class on a world scale.”

Chief responsibility for the Sri Lankan war, however, lies squarely on the Colombo ruling elite and successive governments that used anti-Tamil discrimination to divide working class opposition along ethnic lines in order to defend capitalist rule. This racist discrimination and systematic provocations culminated in the outbreak in 1983 of a war that lasted decades. The SEP continuously opposed the war, demanding the withdrawal of Sri Lankan military from the north and east. It explained that the war was not just against the LTTE, but that its chief aim was suppressing the entire working class.

Wigneswaran’s appeal to the major powers for a so-called international investigation exposes the reactionary politics of Tamil bourgeois parties—including the TNA, the Tamil National People’s Front (TNPf) and similar, smaller organizations. These parties principally back Washington’s geopolitical agenda and its war preparations against China. Amid the devastation caused by COVID-19, Washington has intensified its provocations against China. Tamil parties are seeking to take advantage from it.

The pro-US stance of Tamil bourgeois parties once again was openly expressed by the TNPf leader, Ponnambalam, in his May 18 speech. He declared that amidst US-led global strategic competition in the South Asian region, Tamil nationalists should “stand up against the faction supported by the Sri Lankan government.”

He added that Tamil parties “must understand the international politics surrounding the island of Sri Lanka. Competition of the major nations on the island of Sri Lanka should also be observed. Through this we must focus our attention on the opportunities and losses of Tamil national politics.” He called for a policy to “bargain with superpowers” intelligently.

Sri Lanka is strategically located in the Indian Ocean. Ponnambalam, who has continuously appealed to Washington, is implying that the Rajapakse regime in Colombo is taking the side of China and they can bargain with America. For what would he bargain? Sops of privileges for the Tamil propertied elites, in

return for supporting US war preparations against China.

On this reactionary line, Tamil parties including the TNA lined up with Washington’s regime change operation in 2015 that ousted Mahinda Rajapakse, who leaned more towards Beijing, and brought Maithripala Sirisena to power with the pro-US United National Party’s support. The TNA became a de facto partner of the government in supporting a shift in Sri Lankan foreign policy in favour of Washington, the suppression of war crimes investigations, and the implementation of an IMF-dictated austerity program.

Wigneswaran, who was elected in 2013 as Northern Province Chief Minister on a TNA ticket, was part of these machinations. He later took his distance from the TNA as it became deeply discredited among workers and poor and organised the Tamil People’s Forum, the Tamil People’s Alliance (TPA) and Eluka Tamil (Rise up Tamils) to trap mass anger behind reactionary nationalist politics.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government was shattered by working class unrest against austerity amid an international resurgence of the class struggle. Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers alike participated in these struggles showing their objective unity in the struggle against capitalism.

Since Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government came to power, TNA and TPA have hobnobbed with it. As the pandemic created unprecedented crisis in Sri Lanka, the TNA twice participated in all-party conferences and held secret meetings with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse. (See: Tamil National Alliance backs Sri Lanka’s Rajapakse regime on COVID-19)

The common fear of the Tamil and Sinhala ruling elite is the developing objective conditions for united struggles of the island’s working class.

Tamil-speaking workers and youth must oppose the pro-imperialist program of the Tamil parties. The defence of democratic rights of the Tamil masses depends on uniting workers’ struggles across the ethnic divide in a struggle for international socialism. Only the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fights for this program.



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