

Tamil National Alliance offers to support Sri Lankan president's autocratic rule

Paramu Thirugnanasambanthar—lead SEP candidate for Jaffna district
17 July 2020

Tamil National Alliance (TNA) spokesman and former parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran announced at a press conference on June 16 that if President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was “ready to make a constitutional change that would fulfill political aspirations of Tamil people, the TNA is ready to support him.”

The TNA, which is comprised of the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), has a long and sordid history of making deals with Colombo governments to advance the interests of the Tamil elite. It has no concern for the democratic aspirations and social needs of Tamil working people.

Sumanthiran’s appeal for “constitutional changes” is a reference to the TNA’s long-standing call for a limited power-sharing arrangement for the north and east where the majority of Tamil people live. The appeal is particularly cynical and grovelling as Rajapakse is vehemently opposed to any devolution of powers to provincial councils or concessions to the Tamil elite.

In the midst of the current campaign for the August 5 general election, Rajapakse is indeed pushing for constitutional changes—but of a different character. He is seeking to win a two-thirds parliamentary majority in order to amend the constitution to strengthen the already sweeping powers of the executive presidency.

The TNA is offering to support Rajapakse’s moves to dictatorial forms of rule as long as he makes concessions, no matter how small, to the interests of the venal Tamil elites. In doing so, the TNA is seeking a pact with the man, who, as defence secretary, was directly responsible for the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in the final offensives of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009.

Such was the hostility among Tamils to Rajapakse at the presidential election last November that the TNA called for a vote for Sajith Premadasa, the candidate of the right-wing United National Party (UNP), falsely portraying him as the “lesser evil.” After Rajapakse won, however, the party abruptly shifted its position.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated the economic and social crisis in Sri Lanka and thus the political crisis in Sri Lanka. The entire political establishment has come together to back Rajapakse as he has militarised his administration and moves towards dictatorial forms of rule.

On April 27, the TNA joined the other main opposition parties in pledging “responsible cooperation” with the president “without any strings,” if he reconvened parliament. In an anti-democratic move to strengthen his position, Rajapakse had dissolved parliament, where his party is in a minority.

On May 4, TNA leaders held a closed-door meeting with the president’s brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse. After the meeting, Sumanthiran declared “everyone should cooperate and support the government.”

Workers’ opposition is brewing against the relentless attacks on jobs, wages and conditions while rural unrest is developing due to severe hardships. Like their counterparts in the south, the Tamil bourgeois parties are deeply fearful of the developing struggles of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers amid growing international class struggles.

We warn workers: the TNA is willing to support Rajapakse as he is rapidly entrenching the basis for dictatorship based on the military to crush the growing workers’ resistance. Thus, the Tamil nationalists have shown their class unity with the Sinhala chauvinist political establishment in Colombo against the working class.

In a lengthy interview in *Veerakesarion* June 21, TNA leader R. Sambandan sought to justify the party’s rotten collaboration with the Rajapakse government by citing wretched negotiations and deals reached by Tamil bourgeois parties in the past. The party “must have a connection to those in power,” he declared.

Sambandan detailed the history of negotiations by the ITAK (also known as the Federal Party) under its founding leader S.J.V. Chelvanayakam with successive Colombo governments. He even boasted that after the end of the communal war in 2009, the TNA held 18 discussions with then President Mahinda Rajapakse, who with his brother Gotabhaya, had presided over the slaughter of Tamil civilians and the incarceration of some 300,000 Tamils.

What this record reveals is the history of the treacherous role played by the Tamil bourgeoisie in collusion with the reactionary Sinhala ruling elites in Colombo. It is an outright lie that these talks brought “progress” for Tamil masses. Rather the result has been one disaster after another including a 30-year war that was a disaster for the entire population of the island.

Ever since formal independence from Britain in 1948, Sri Lankan bourgeois parties and their governments have exploited Sinhala supremacism and anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class and establish a social base for their rule. Tamil bourgeois parties have responded, not by defending the democratic rights of Tamil working people, but by seeking to manoeuvre within the Colombo political establishment for the interests of the wealthy Tamil elites.

The ITAK was formed in 1949 after the UNP government, in one of its first acts following independence, abolished the citizenship rights of a million Tamil-speaking plantation workers of Indian origin. The ITAK opposed this blatantly anti-democratic measure and split from the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, which was a partner in the UNP government and supported the legislation.

From the outset, the ITAK sought a federal set-up in which the Tamil bourgeoisie would have significant powers within predominantly Tamil areas in the north and east of the island. In other words, it sought an accommodation with the Sinhala ruling elites that would enable their joint exploitation of the working class.

ITAK, like the UNP, was always bitterly opposed to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which, despite its political backsliding, was fighting

to unite the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—around a socialist program.

In his account of ITAK's history, TNA leader Sambandan approvingly cites the deal struck by ITAK leader Chelvanayakam with Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike to give limited autonomy for Tamils via regional councils.

Bandaranaike and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) had come to power in the 1956 election on a blatantly anti-Tamil program that advocated Sinhala as the country's only official language. ITAK steered the protests against this Sinhala-only policy into the dead-end of demands for Tamil autonomy.

The deal came to nothing. Bandaranaike himself tore up the agreement in public after Sinhala chauvinists on whom he based himself in the 1956 election denounced it as a betrayal and launched anti-Tamil protests. Bandaranaike was assassinated by a Sinhala extremist in 1959. With the collapse of the agreement, racist thugs turned their attacks on Tamils.

The LSSP, which still claimed to be a Trotskyist party, opposed the Sinhala-only policy but increasingly adapted to the Sinhala populism of the SLFP. In 1964, the LSSP, amid a huge upsurge of working class struggles, entered the bourgeois SLFP-led government of Bandaranaike's widow—Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike. Its historic betrayal had profound consequences leading to the emergence of petty-bourgeois radical tendencies advocating the "armed struggle"—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna among Sinhala youth and later, separatist groups including the LTTE among Tamil youth.

TNA leader Sambandan hails another, equally disastrous pact reached in 1965 between ITAK leader Chelvanayakam and UNP leader Dudley Senanayake whom ITAK helped form government after the Bandaranaike coalition fell apart. The agreement to modify the Sinhala only policy and make limited land grants to Tamils collapsed in the face of chauvinist opposition from the SLFP, LSSP and Sri Lankan Communist Party (CP). Nevertheless, ITAK continued to support the anti-working class policies of the UNP government.

The LSSP's betrayal deepened the communal divide with the formation of the second SLFP coalition government after the 1970 election. LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva was directly responsible for the 1972 constitution that enshrined Buddhism as the state religion as well as the Sinhala only language policy.

Amid mass opposition among Tamil youth, ITAK formally opposed the constitution and in protest refused to sit in the parliament—a stance it dropped within weeks. It formed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1972 and, at its Vaddukoddai conference in May 1976, passed a resolution demanding a separate state of Tamil Eelam.

The TULF backed the opposition UNP and promised support for a future government led by its right-wing, anti-working class leader, J.R. Jayawardene. Having helped Jayawardene to power in 1977, the TULF participated in the committees to prepare a new constitution. Far from democratic rights including Tamils, the 1978 constitution established an executive presidency with sweeping powers.

Jayawardene was well aware that his pro-market agenda of transforming Sri Lanka into a cheap labour platform for global investors was provoking opposition in the working class and sought autocratic powers to suppress unrest. As opposition emerged, the TULF expressed nominal opposition to the constitution, but not to the government's austerity agenda.

Confronting deepening resistance among workers, Jayawardene resorted to whipping up divisive anti-Tamil chauvinism and provocations. Tamil youth frustrated with the TULF's parliamentary tactics turned to armed, separatist groups such as the LTTE to fight back. The brutal anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 in which the UNP had a direct hand, precipitated a bloody civil war that lasted for three decades.

TNA leader Sambandan cites the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord that paved the way for Indian troops to enter northern Sri Lanka to disarm the LTTE

as another positive outcome of talks involving Tamil leaders. They welcomed the establishment of provincial governments as a means of widening their power and privileges.

In reality, President Jayawardene reached the deal with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi out of desperation. It was a bid to buy time in the war against the LTTE while the Colombo government used police state measures to crush rising opposition among rural youth in the country's south. All the Tamil parties including the LTTE backed the rotten agreement which rapidly broke down leading to fighting in which Indian "peace-keepers" killed thousands of Tamil civilians.

In the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union which reflected the undermining of all national programs by the processes of the globalisation of production, the LTTE and the Tamil bourgeois parties, like their counterparts around the world, dropped all their socialistic phrasemongering. Far from posturing as anti-imperialists, the Tamil parties have all sought the backing of the imperialist powers, offering in return to turn north and eastern Sri Lanka into a cheap labour platform.

In the end, however, US imperialism had no interest in supporting the establishment of a separate Tamil state on the island. Neither did India, which was deeply concerned that Tamil separatism would spread to southern India. Both backed the Rajapakse government's savage offensives that finally crushed the LTTE's armed forces in 2009.

The response of the TNA, the successor to the TULF, was to shift further to the right and align itself completely with the US. It backed the US regime change operation that ousted Mahinda Rajapakse in 2015—not for his brutal war against Tamils, but because he was too closely aligned with China.

What Sambandan's review of the tortured history of manoeuvres by the Tamil bourgeoisie demonstrates is the futility of Tamil workers, youth and rural toilers placing any faith in their empty promises. At every turn, the Tamil bourgeois parties bartered with their counterparts in Colombo for a few temporary crumbs, and in return blocked any unified movement of the working class and rural masses to overturn capitalism—the root cause of their joint oppression.

The SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), have consistently opposed all forms of nationalism and racism—the Sinhala chauvinism of successive Colombo governments and the Tamil parochialism of parties like the TNA—and fought for the unity of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

The SEP/RCL advanced its program for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of Union of Socialist Republic South Asia and internationally in 1987 to fight for the socialist unity of workers across ethnic lines. On this basis we opposed the war from its inception and continue to demand withdrawal of the military still occupying the north and east. Our party relentlessly exposed the treachery of Tamil bourgeois parties while intransigently defending the democratic rights of Tamils.

In this election we advance this program in opposition to all capitalist parties and their pseudo-left hangers on. We are standing candidates in the Jaffna, Nuwara-Eliya and Colombo districts. Vote for us to support this program of socialist internationalism. Join our party and its youth wing, International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact