

Sri Lanka: TNA election manifesto prepares imperialist-backed deal with President Rajapakse

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5 August 2020

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of Sri Lankan Tamil bourgeois parties, issued a manifesto for the August 5 elections indicating its readiness to support President Gotabhaya Rajapakse in the guise of “negotiating” with him for a “political solution.” At the same time, TNA is cynically promoting Tamil nationalism to divide Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala workers who have come together in recent class struggles.

The TNA is insisting to voters that it needs at least 20 seats in the next Parliament “to represent the Tamil community in a meaningful way.” In other words, the TNA is reacting to a surge in mass opposition by desperately trying to strengthen its position in talks with Colombo.

The TNA is comprised of the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK, Federal Party), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). This alliance is utterly discredited among Tamil workers and poor because of its pro-imperialist and anti-working-class role.

It has been wracked by splits because of this crisis. The Eelam People’s Liberation Front (EPRLF) withdrew from the alliance in 2017. In 2018, Northern Province Chief Minister V. Wigneswaran left the alliance and formed a separate party, the Tamil People’s Alliance (TPA), as another political trap for Tamil working people. A faction of TELO broke away from the party to support Wigneswaran. There are however no fundamental political differences between these parties.

The TNA’s pro-US, anti-working-class nature has been starkly demonstrated since 2015. In that year, the party directly supported the US-engineered regime change operation in Colombo to oust President Mahinda Rajapakse, replacing him with Maithripala Sirisena. M. A. Sumanthiran, a leading TNA member, has openly boasted that they supported selecting Sirisena.

The Obama administration supported the Rajapakse’s ruthless communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but opposed his close relations with Beijing. The regime change operation was orchestrated to integrate Sri Lanka, a strategically-located island, into US military preparations against China.

After the regime change, the TNA acted as a de facto partner of the Colombo regime until President Rajapakse won the November 2019 presidential election. It followed advice from the United States and India to keep the Colombo government’s stability intact. The TNA backed the government’s ruthless IMF austerity program, as well as every anti-democratic action including the military occupation in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

After mentioning various past attempts by TNA to achieve a “political solution” for Tamil elite with the successive governments in Colombo, the manifesto says: “It is through a constitutional arrangement on the model of federalism within a united Sri Lanka that the legitimate aspirations of the Sri Lankan Tamils and other Tamil-speaking inhabitants of the

northern and eastern parts of the island could be met.”

The manifesto also claims that “successive governments during the last thirty years have moved towards” such a “political solution.” As in the past, the TNA will continue “negotiations in the future too, undeterred by any challenges on the way.”

The formula of a “political solution” is used by Tamil parties to mean a “power-sharing” arrangement for Tamil bourgeoisie for the north and east with the Colombo. They aim to advance their privileges by jointly exploiting the working class with the Sinhala elite. Such power sharing has nothing to do with establishing the democratic rights of Tamil people or addressing their social problems.

Such “negotiations” and deals since 1956 by the ITAK and other parties paved way for one disaster after another. This record was concisely summarized in the WSWs article “Tamil National Alliance offers to support Sri Lankan president’s autocratic rule.”

It is now offering talks with Rajapakse, well aware he is rapidly moving towards a presidential dictatorship based on the military. Sections of big business backed Rajapakse’s bid for power because he promised a “strong and stable” rule—that is, a dictatorial regime to take on working-class opposition to attacks on living and social conditions dictated by IMF austerity measures. United protests and strikes of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers erupted since 2018 as part of an international upsurge of class struggle.

As in every country, the global pandemic has intensified the economic, political and social crisis facing the Sri Lankan capitalist class, including the Tamil ruling elite. Anger is seething among workers and the poor against cuts to jobs, wages, and working and living conditions. Ten thousand Colombo port workers went on strike last week for three days, in one indication of this rising working-class opposition.

The Tamil capitalist elite, like its counterpart in Colombo, fears workers’ militancy. As COVID-19 spread throughout the world, including in Sri Lanka, the TNA together with other established parties in the south participated in two all-party meetings called by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and supported the president’s supposed efforts to fight the pandemic.

On April 27, the TNA and other opposition parties sent an appeal to the president, offering “support without stirrings” and asking him to reconvene the dissolved parliament. On May 4, TNA leaders secretly met the prime minister and promised the party’s support to the government. They thus showed their willingness to back a presidential dictatorship to crush the working class.

The TNA’s rhetoric about fulfilling the “aspiration of Tamil People” to self-determination in the north and east serves to hoodwink Tamil-speaking workers and poor with nationalism. Such rhetoric is calculated to divide Tamil workers from their class brothers and sisters in the south. It

coincides with the anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinist campaign of the ruling party and its chauvinist allies and bourgeois opposition parties.

The TNA claim that the “successive governments during the last thirty years have moved towards” a political solution is false to the core. The history of the class struggle in Sri Lanka fully bears out Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution. In countries of belated capitalist development, the bourgeoisie and its parties cannot resolve democratic questions and establish fundamental democratic rights, or overcome ethnic and sectarian divisions exploited by imperialism. These tasks fall to the working class, fighting to establish democratic rights in a struggle that goes over into a socialist revolution that is international in scope.

During the 1983-2009 anti-Tamil civil war in Sri Lanka, talks with the Tamil nationalist tendencies were nothing but Colombo’s attempts to buy time for the next assault. In 1994, after Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga’s election as president, negotiations with the LTTE were ended and a fresh offensive started in 1995. In 2002, peace talks backed by Washington and other imperialist powers using the threat of the “war against terror” collapsed due to opposition from Kumaratunga and the Sri Lankan military.

After this brief period, in 2009, the Mahinda Rajapakse government brought the war to a bloody end with a massacre of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and disarmed LTTE fighters.

The TNA manifesto has a section on the “militarisation of north and east.” It complains that “it has had a severe impact on all aspects of the lives of the Tamil speaking people as it placed informal, extra-legal and arbitrary curbs on the freedoms and rights of the people...” It calls for “demilitarisation.”

This is a bogus call, however. The TNA has supported military occupation of the north and east and does not call for withdrawal of military from these two provinces.

The Manifesto declares: “On 19th May 2009 when the thirty-year-old war ended, it left behind a ravaged North-East and a people who suffered immeasurable loss and trauma.” Then it gives an account of the ruthless assault that killed civilians and displaced hundreds of thousands.

The TNA has called for “justice and accountability, truth, reparations, memorialisation (commemorating the dead), freedom of expression, repeal of the prevention of terrorism act,” defense of the rights of the displaced and war widows etc. These are ritualistic demands whose emptiness was made clear by the TNA’s support for the authoritarian policies of the Sirisena government. The TNA is hypocritically posing as a defender of the rights of Tamil workers and poor.

The Tamil masses will see these demands with deserved contempt. After the bloody end of the war in May 2009, the TNA worked to suppress reporting of the war crimes. Its leader R. Sambandan has boasted having 18 rounds of talks with then-President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government. These bogus talks aimed to suppress the legitimate demands of war victims.

At the same time, the TNA lined up with the hypocritical US campaign on Sri Lanka, sponsoring resolutions calling for war crimes investigations in UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). These resolutions were intended only to pressure Mahinda Rajapakse to move away from Beijing.

TNA leaders collaborated with the government of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe to produce a US draft resolution on Sri Lanka presented to the UNHRC in September 2015. It was a cynical exercise in covering up the war crimes and atrocities carried out by the military and successive Sri Lankan governments in the civil war, including leading figures of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

At the same time, however, the TNA ignored the ongoing campaign of Tamil mothers and supporters demanding information about tens of thousands of missing persons during the war.

The TNA manifesto concludes with a section of “Role of the International Community.” It pledges that the “TNA will continue to

advocate for an independent international mechanism” and for the involvement of “international community.”

This reference to an “international mechanism” to discuss with the “international community” is the TNA’s euphemism for its back-door dealings with Washington.

The Tamil bourgeoisie as a whole, like its counterpart in Colombo, have shifted far to the right in the period since the globalisation of production and the Stalinist regime’s dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. They have lined up behind the imperialist powers—above all, with Washington.

With its false nationalist perspective for a separate state, the LTTE called for Washington’s support to carve out a Tamil statelet for north and east of the Island. Like every faction of the Tamil bourgeoisie, the LTTE was ferociously hostile to an international appeal to the working class in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally against the racist policies by Sri Lankan elite since independence in 1948. This racism was the vicious weapon used to divide and strangle the working class.

The LTTE’s defeat was not just a military question, but illustrates the bankruptcy of its separatist perspective, which was based on lining up with imperialism.

Now, the venal Tamil bourgeoisie has lined up with US geopolitical interests as Washington prepares war against China. The TNA’s readiness to back President Rajapakse is integral part of this reactionary politics.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has an unbroken, decades-long record of fighting these Tamil bourgeois parties’ twists and turns, as part of its central struggle to unify the working class in a socialist struggle against capitalism. It has opposed every forms of discrimination against Tamils and Muslims, and communal war, and demanded the military withdrawal from the north and east. The Tamil bourgeoisie has shown however that it serves as agents of imperialism, like the reactionary Sinhala bourgeoisie, oppressing the workers and toiling masses.

Democratic rights and social questions can be addressed only by overthrowing pro-imperialist capitalist rule in Colombo by a joint struggle of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers uniting with the international working class. This is the struggle to establish the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist States of South Asia and internationally. The SEP is the only party fighting for this revolutionary socialist perspective.



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