

North and East of Sri Lanka paralysed by mass anti-government protest

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The entire North and East of Sri Lanka was paralysed by a mass protest campaign (hartal) on September 28, against the right-wing government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

This was triggered by banning of a commemoration of a former LTTE leader, Thileepan, who died on hunger strike in September 1987, after the Indian military occupation of the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Tamil groups organised commemorations of Thileepan from September 15 to 26—from the day he started fasting until the day he died. However, police obtained a court order on September 14 prohibiting all protests, declaring that Thileepan was a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has been banned as a terrorist group. The order added that “remembering a banned organization.... is an offence punishable by arrest under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.” The court order allowed police to detain protesters under the draconian anti-terror law.

Police then arrested former Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian M.K. Sivajilingam on September 15 for violating the court order, releasing him 24 hours later on bail. They removed photos of Thileepan at his memorial site in Nallur, Jaffna. Police also threatened a group of Jaffna University students who were protesting in front of the university.

The hartal was called by United Tamil Nationalist Parties, a hurriedly-formed front of Tamil bourgeois nationalist parties including the TNA, the Tamil People’s National Alliance, the Tamil National People’s Front and several other groups. These discredited parties called the protest not out of concern for democratic rights, but to control rising popular opposition and shore up their fast-dwindling support.

Mass participation in the protest, however, reflected broader opposition to police-state measures and determination to defend the democratic right to conduct commemorations and legitimate struggles.

Tamil and Muslim people in the north-east participated together in the hartal, shutting down all public affairs and business. Schools were open, but students did not attend. Lawyers did not appear in court. Public transport came to a halt, as there were no passengers to travel. Only government offices and banks were open.

Teachers and state employees attended work only because authorities indicated that otherwise they would be penalised. Police and the military were patrolling the streets, threatening traders to force them to open their shops.

In Vavuniya district, military forces visited schools to compile

lists of teachers who did not attend school. Military intelligence units were deployed to gather information, according to local reports.

Small groups of government supporters held “protests” against the hartal, but the hartal continued throughout the day. People in the east also held similar protests.

Mass participation in the hartal despite police-military threats in the north and east reflects growing opposition among workers and the poor in the entire country against mounting attacks on living conditions and democratic rights under President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

In recent years, joint strikes and protests of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers erupted despite the Colombo political establishment’s communalist propaganda, while Tamil parties tried to rouse nationalism to divide the working class.

People across the North and East are still suffering from the devastation of the thirty-year communal war waged by successive governments in Colombo against the LTTE. Over 100,000 people died during the war, and thousands are missing.

Thousands still live in houses without basic facilities. There are about 90,000 war widows and many disabled persons in the North and East without proper means of living.

Furthermore, the North and East have been under military occupation for about four decades, facing continuous surveillance and harassment. The Rajapakse government’s repression and continuous anti-Tamil provocations are part of its drive towards a dictatorship based on military.

Two days earlier, on September 26, a hunger strike was held at Chavakachcheri Sivan temple, south of Jaffna city, in commemoration of Thileepan, while dozens of police were watching. At the end of the action, Mavai Senadhirajah, the leader of the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK or Federal Party, the leading party in the TNA), thanked police for their “support.”

The ITAK leader’s remarks reflected the close allegiance and support of Tamil nationalist groups for the repressive state forces occupying the North and East. Significantly, Senadhirajah made those remarks while the police and military forces were roaming Jaffna, threatening people and arresting his fellow TNA member, Sivajilingam. However, Senadhirajah did not condemn the actions of the security forces or the Colombo government which is directing them.

The TNA acted as a de-facto partner of the previous government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil

Wickremesinghe, helping its austerity program and undermining war crimes investigations. In recent months, its leaders have sought a rapprochement with President Rajapakse, who is fast moving towards entrenching presidential dictatorship. Every section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie fears mounting social opposition amid the crisis accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

At times, they try to stir memories of the LTTE's past, with politically impotent and bankrupt actions aiming to confuse workers and youth.

All Tamil nationalist parties, including the defeated LTTE, based their perspective on appealing to the Indian bourgeoisie and to imperialism, particularly the United States, to achieve a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government. After the LTTE's defeat, these parties have gone further to the right, supporting US geopolitical interests against China. The TNA's backing for the regime change operation to oust President Mahinda Rajapakse in 2015, replacing him with Sirisena, was part of this shift.

Thileepan's fasting during the Indian military occupation of the North and East of Sri Lanka for about 2 years starting in 1987 has important lessons. The Indian military had been brought in the pretext of peace-keeping in the North and East, according to the Indo-Lanka Accord signed between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayewardene on July 29, 1987. The agreement proposed limited concessions to the Tamil elite in a devolution package for the North and East to garner their support.

The LTTE agreed with the accord dictated by New Delhi, which acted as ruthless regional policeman. The Tamil bourgeois parties, then mainly rallied under the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and other armed militant groups, fully supported the accord and the Indian military intervention.

In reality, India's role was to suppress the Tamil insurgency and defend the Sri Lankan capitalist unitary state established amid the postwar settlement that the imperialist powers and the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy imposed in the Indian sub-continent.

The Indian military was soon consolidating its occupation of the North and East while compelling LTTE to hand over its arms. Directed by LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran—who was killed by the Sri Lankan military at the war's end in May 2009—Thileepan, the leader of the group's political wing, started fasting on several demands.

Those demands included the release of political prisoners held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act; disarming home guards, an auxiliary police force; and halting colonisation settlements of Sinhalese in the North and East.

These demands were forwarded to New Delhi, which contemptuously ignored them. Masses of people supported Thileepan's fast to express their opposition to the Indian intervention. Thileepan died on September 26. As mass anger grew, after systematic provocations, the Indian military launched an assault on the LTTE in early October. Apart from LTTE cadres, thousands of Tamil civilians were killed in the Indian military assault.

Only the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the

predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lanka section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord and the Indian invasion on the basis of the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers. The RCL demanded the withdrawal of Indian forces and the Sri Lankan military from the north and east of Sri Lanka. It also held two well attended public meetings in Jaffna and Karainagar in August, 1987 explaining the dire consequences of the Accord.

The ICFI issued a statement on November 19, 1987 titled "The Situation in Sri Lanka and the tasks of the Revolutionary Communist League." The ICFI condemned the Indian intervention, which marked a political turning point. In this statement, the ICFI summed up the LTTE's role:

"Prabhakaran now claims that his decision to fly to New Delhi and agree to the terms of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord was the product of Indian tricks and deceit. This 'excuse' exposes not only the naiveté of the LTTE, but the political impotence of petty-bourgeois nationalism. If the LTTE leader could be tricked by Gandhi, it is because his entire policy had been built upon soliciting the assistance of the Indian bourgeoisie in securing the self-determination of Tamil Eelam. The source of catastrophic miscalculation lies in the essential class perspective and program of bourgeois nationalism."

The ICFI developed the program of Sri Lanka and Eelam Socialist Republic as part of Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia in opposition to the Indian bourgeoisie's intervention. This program has been vindicated over the decades since 1987.

The evolution of the LTTE further to the right in the subsequent period—and also the TNA and other nationalist groups—is the logical outcome of this politics. Bitter experience during the past nearly three-and-a-half decades has powerfully proved the necessity of fight for the program developed by the ICFI and the SEP.

Workers, youth and all those seeking an alternative must turn to those lessons and break with the Tamil bourgeois parties' reactionary nationalist politics. We urge them to join the SEP to fight for this socialist and internationalist program.



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