

India demands more autonomy for Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority north

V. Gnana
24 March 2021

Amid growing tensions between India and Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalist parties on the island are backing calls from the Indian government for the Sri Lankan government in Colombo to devolve authority to the provincial government in the Tamil-majority north of Sri Lanka.

This was the subject of a four-day visit by India's High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Gopal Bagli, to the war-torn north and east of Sri Lanka, earlier this month. Bagli met with all the political parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Tamil People's National Alliance (TPNA) and Tamil National People's Front (TNPF). Bagli stressed the "aspirations of the Tamil community for equality, justice, peace and dignity" and the need for "meaningful devolution within a united Sri Lanka," according to a report in the *Hindu*.

The visit came as the COVID-19 pandemic devastates India and Sri Lanka due to "herd immunity" policies of both governments, and shortly after the founding of the Sri Lanka Bharatiya Janata Party (SLBJP), a political ally of India's Hindu-supremacist ruling BJP.

Their empty rhetoric notwithstanding, the purpose of Bagli's visit and meetings with the Tamil nationalists was not to advance the democratic rights of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. Rather, amid a vastly more explosive situation bound up with the pandemic, they are drawing together to pursue the same geostrategic interests that dictated India's bloody 1987 military intervention in Sri Lanka's communal war of 1983-2009. What is unfolding is a bitter struggle inside the bourgeoisie for profits and strategic advantage, antithetical to the interests of the working class.

In the present century, by moving ever closer to Washington, successive Indian governments have locked themselves in a bitter geostrategic rivalry with

China across the region, including notably in Sri Lanka, which sits on critical shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean. As US officials demand massive increases in US military spending to prepare to "fight" China, the purpose of this visit is to counter China's influence and make the necessary political and military preparations for war.

Only weeks after the SLBJP's founding, Bagli made a point of signaling the Indian government's support for Hinduism and violently anti-Muslim Hindu forces in Sri Lanka. On March 11, the first day of his visit, he traveled to Mannar in order to perform a Hindu ritual on the beach. There, he pledged that "Indo-Sri Lankan ties will be strengthened." Bagli also visited the Vegan Monastery in Nallur. There he was welcomed by Sachithanandan, the leader of the Sri Lanka Shiv Senai, who is notorious for his hate speech against Muslims.

After the Hindu ceremonies, he met separately with religious leaders, political parties, businessmen, journalists and intellectuals.

After the meeting, TNA media spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran told the press: "The Indian High Commissioner explained that there is no change in India's diplomatic position. He said that there was no change in their policy of devolution and that they would exert pressure in this regard."

TPNA leader C.V. Wigneswaran repeated earlier calls from India and Tamil nationalist parties for Sri Lanka to promptly hold provincial elections: "Although we do not receive the required powers through the provincial council, the absence of a provincial council means the Tamil Community is losing one of its entities. ... We reiterated that provincial council elections should be held, and the high commissioner accepted that."

These remarks point to the explosive international

class and geostrategic tensions surging in Sri Lanka and across the region. The Sri Lankan government has postponed regional elections since 2019, citing legal issues related to a reform of electoral law in 2018. This month, Sri Lankan External Affairs Minister Dinesh Gunawardena said the government could not hold an emergency election and that an election could be held only after the High Court duly framed the law.

It is not difficult to identify political issues bound up with Colombo's decision not to promptly hold elections. As it attempts to balance between its economic ties to China and its historic alliance with Washington, the Colombo regime must take into account the possibility that provincial elections in the north, strengthening the Tamil nationalists, would also strengthen India's position in Sri Lanka.

As Tamil businessmen founded the SLBJP last month, leading TNA politician M.K. Shivajilingam demanded that Colombo cut its vital economic ties to China or face a joint US-Indian invasion. Calling for Chinese companies to "be immediately withdrawn" from the north of Sri Lanka, Shivajilingam warned that otherwise, there could be "major conflict ... There is no guarantee that perhaps American or Indian troops might not land and stay in the North and East" of Sri Lanka.

These geostrategic interests are closely bound up with the attempts of the Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil bourgeoisies to suppress mounting class tensions and class struggles at home. While tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka are taking strike action against poverty wages, India has seen an explosion of class struggles. Mass public sector strikes across India and in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, as well as insurrectionary farmers protests, have shaken the Modi government to its foundations.

Broad sections of the ruling elite, both in India and in Sri Lanka, are turning to the incitement of anti-Muslim hatreds in order to divide the working class.

This is a longstanding theme of the Tamil nationalists. After the BJP won the 2019 elections and installed as prime minister Narendra Modi, who had overseen the massacre of 2,000 innocent Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, Vigneswaran hailed the victory of a "strong government in India." He launched into an anti-Muslim diatribe: "We need to realize the challenges facing India today. Bangladesh is to the northwest of India and Pakistan to the northeast. Both are Islamic

majority states. Pakistan has nuclear weapons. And there are more than 20 crore [200 million] Muslims in India."

"India fears that the challenge of Islamic organizations may come to India through Sri Lanka," he said, adding that he believed an independent Tamil statelet would help India's defense: "When our autonomous state is established in our territories, the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal will have to join hands for India's security. Then we will take steps to ensure that India's internal security is strong without fear of maritime intrusion."

Recently, Indian politicians have made similar points. On March 12, Indian Samata Party leader N.A. Cohn said: "Now, Sri Lanka is important to us. You can infiltrate [India] from Sri Lanka, reaching Rameshwaram in 20 minutes from Nainital. The ports are under their [Chinese] control. So this is a big threat to India." He claimed, "India can only get relief if China is removed from Sri Lanka."

The Tamil nationalists' alignment on these forces amid the pandemic exposes their hostility to the working class and vindicates the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party's principled opposition to all forms of nationalism. One would have to be politically blind to believe that their criminal ethno-sectarian activities aim to advance the democratic aspirations of the Tamil people. By associating with the SLBJP and Shiva Senai, they are signaling that they have utterly repudiated promises they made in earlier decades to defend democracy and end exploitation.

Against the escalating threat of imperialist war against China, and against "herd immunity" policies adopted by the ruling class amid the spread of COVID-19, it is critical to unify the working class of all ethnicities across the Indian Ocean on the SEP's socialist and internationalist program.



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