

Twelve years since the end of Sri Lanka's communal war

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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May 18 marked the 12th anniversary of the end of bloody 26-year communal war in Sri Lanka waged by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and more broadly the island's Tamil minority.

Speaking in parliament on the day, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse glorified the armed forces for the “liberation of the country from terrorism.” He added: “We ended the [war] era,” displaced refugees were “settled into their villages” and “public representatives from the North and East today are living with dignity, freedom and enjoy democracy.”

This turns history upside down, hiding the brutal truth about the end of the war. The relentless military offensives in the early months of 2009 drove the LTTE along with hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians into a small pocket of land near Mullaitivu on the northeast coast of the island.

The Sri Lankan military mercilessly pounded the area with artillery shells, and from the air, deliberately targeting hospitals, aid centres and designated civilian areas. According to UN estimates, at least 40,000 civilians were slaughtered. When the LTTE defences finally collapsed, the military murdered surrendering LTTE leaders and herded some 300,000 civilians into army-controlled detention camps. Hundreds of young people were hauled off for “re-education” to unknown locations.

Mahinda Rajapakse, who was Sri Lankan president at the time, was directly responsible for these war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights. His younger brother, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is now the country's president, oversaw these criminal military operations as defence secretary. He is directly implicated in the murder of LTTE leaders, who gave themselves up and carried white flags of surrender.

As for the situation facing the Tamil people today, those incarcerated in camps were “resettled,” with many still living in abject poverty in huts with elementary facilities. Around 90,000 war widows in the island's North and East are struggling to survive. The two war-torn provinces remain under heavy military occupation, with the Tamil population, particularly young people, constantly harassed and intimidated. Protests are taking place to demand information about the “disappeared” and the release of political prisoners.

While it was celebrating in the South its victory over the LTTE, the government unleashed a military-police crackdown in the North and East, arresting dozens for paying their respects to their loved ones who were killed in the massacre at Mullaitivu.

The government was forced to hold low-key victory celebrations this month because the COVID-19 pandemic is surging in the country. The Colombo regime is nervous about the developing mass opposition among workers and the poor who are facing wage and job cuts and rising prices for essential foods and other basic items.

The government's response to growing social unrest is to strengthen the armed forces in preparation for class war. As part of the victory celebrations, thousands of soldiers were promoted to higher ranks. In response to the defeat of the LTTE, the military has been expanded, not contracted, with its budget allocations increasing again this year to a

massive 440 billion rupees (\$US2.2 billion).

In opposition to the jubilation in ruling circles in 2009, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “The military defeat of the LTTE has done nothing to resolve the issues underlying the civil war. It has merely proved that the unity of the Sri Lankan state on a bourgeois basis could only be maintained through bloody repression and atrocities.” (WSWS perspective on May 21, 2009).

The eruption of the war in 1983 was the result of the communal politics pursued by the Sri Lankan capitalist class and successive governments since formal independence in 1948 from British imperialism.

Unable to address any of the democratic or social questions facing working people and the oppressed masses, Colombo governments resorted to Sinhala-Buddhist supremacism and anti-Tamil chauvinism in every political crisis to divide and weaken the working class.

Shortly after independence, the government of the day abolished the citizenship rights of a million Tamil plantation workers brought from India as cheap labour by the British colonial rulers. In 1956, following a profound crisis of rule that led to an uprising by workers and the rural masses in 1953, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party won the election on the basis of a Sinhala-only policy that made Sinhala the only official language and relegated Tamils to second-class citizenship.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which claimed to be Trotskyist, had initially acted as a brake on communalism, promoting the unity of the working class—Sinhala and Tamil. But its degeneration and betrayal in 1964, when it entered the capitalist government of Sirima Bandaranaike and embraced Sinhala populism, led to the formation of petty bourgeois radical organisations based on the “armed struggle” and communal politics—in particular, the LTTE among Tamil youth in the North and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) among rural Sinhala youth in the South.

The right-wing United National Party (UNP) government of J. R. Jayawardene, which came to power in 1977, responded to the country's economic crisis by implementing pro-market restructuring and encouraging foreign investors to take advantage of cheap labour. As working-class opposition erupted, Jayawardene rewrote the constitution to establish an autocratic executive presidency and engaged in one anti-Tamil provocation after another, culminating in the devastating anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 that led to outbreak of open warfare.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP)—and its forerunner Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—is the only party that consistently opposed the communal war on the basis of the fight to unite the working class. We demanded unconditional withdrawal of the military from the North and East and defended the democratic rights of Tamil minority. At the same time, the RCL/SEP opposed LTTE separatism, which promoted the communal division of the working class.

In 1987, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the RCL advanced the perspective of Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of fighting for a Union of Socialist States in South Asia.

This program was based on the Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which emphasised that only the working class can provide the leadership to the rural poor and oppressed masses in solving democratic tasks as part of the struggle for socialism.

The protracted and devastating war demonstrated the inability of any section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, all deeply mired in communal politics, to meet the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people. While Colombo governments sacrificed the lives of Sinhala youth to maintain the power and privileges of the majority Sinhala establishment, the bourgeois Tamil parties were seeking greater autonomy or a separate Tamil capitalist state to exploit the Tamil working class.

The SEP explained that the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 was not primarily a military question but was the result of its bourgeois-nationalist perspective. The LTTE was organically incapable of making a class appeal to Tamil workers, let alone to the working class elsewhere in Sri Lanka and internationally. As the devastating final army offensives were under way, it issued pathetic appeals to the "international community"—that is, to the very powers including the US and India that were backing Colombo's war and turning a blind eye to its atrocities.

The twelve years since the end of the war have only led to a deepening political crisis, as Sri Lanka has been swept up in sharpening geo-political tensions, particularly the US confrontation with China, and a worsening global economic situation, all of which has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The military and its brutal methods developed during the war are now being prepared for use against the working class, as unrest grows over the worsening social conditions facing working people.

The end of the war coincided with the 2008–09 global financial crisis. The Sri Lankan economy, already burdened with the heavy costs of the war and its devastation, was hit hard. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial assistance, implemented its austerity dictates and resorted to military and police repression against opposition from workers and the poor.

At the same time, the US was deeply hostile to Rajapakse's ties with China, which had supplied arms and finance for the war. In a regime-change operation orchestrated from Washington, Rajapakse was defeated in the 2015 presidential election which brought Maithripala Sirisena to power, with the support of the UNP, the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and also the pseudo-left groups.

The national unity government led by President Sirisena and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister rapidly jettisoned its promises of "good governance" and improved living standards. Deeply implicated in the war and its atrocities themselves, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe ensured there was no genuine investigation into the crimes of the Rajapakse regime. As the economic crisis deepened, the government again turned to the IMF, imposed new burdens on the working class and poor, and used police-state methods to suppress social unrest.

The pseudo-left groups and trade unions, which had promoted and helped Sirisena and Wickremesinghe into power, defended the national unity government to the hilt and assisted in suppressing a growing wave of strikes and protests. The TNA, the chief representative of the Tamil bourgeoisie, was a de facto partner in the government.

The national unity government also led to a further fragmentation of the political establishment, with the two major parties of the ruling class, the UNP and SLFP, reduced to shells. In this highly unstable situation, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, backed by the military and significant sections of big business, exploited the mass disaffection to win the 2019 presidential election, in which the vote was deeply divided along communal lines. While Tamils did not vote for Rajapakse, the man responsible for war crimes, Sinhala working people did not vote for the United National Front

candidate Sajith Premadasa, who had imposed new social burdens as part of the national unity government.

Rajapakse and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) that backed him were also able to exploit the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks by a local Islamist extremist group that killed 270 people and injured many more, promising a strong and stable government that would be tough on "national security."

The fact that Sri Lanka is now governed by the Rajapakse brothers—the two figures that bear the greatest responsibility for the military's crimes and atrocities in the final months of the war—must serve as the sharpest warning to the working class. In the midst of a profound and social crisis, the bourgeoisie is relying on Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his promise of "strong government" to suppress mounting opposition from working class.

President Rajapakse has installed retired or in-service generals to key positions of the government, including retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as defense secretary and Army Commander Major General Shavendra Silva as head of the national COVID-19 operation centre. At the same time, he rests heavily on Sinhala extremist groups and has helped whip up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism.

Workers need to draw the necessary political lessons from the disasters resulting from communal politics. Gotabhaya and Mahinda Rajapakse, who presided over the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians, will not hesitate to use the same brutal methods against the working class and the urban and rural poor.

The working class cannot defend any of its democratic and social rights without rejecting all forms of nationalism and chauvinism—both Sinhala-Buddhist supremacism and Tamil separatism—that were responsible for the war. Only through a unified struggle against the capitalist class, their joint oppressors, and the profit system on which it rests can workers win to their side the rural toilers and fight for a workers' and peasants' government. Such a government would implement socialist policies to meet the pressing needs of the majority, not the profit requirements of the wealthy few, as part of the fight for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

We urge the workers and youth to join the SEP, which alone fights for this program.



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