

Tamil nationalists try to prop up Sri Lankan government against mass protests

V. Gnana
19 April 2022

Across Sri Lanka, anger is exploding as prices for food and fuel explode out of reach for the masses. Workers, youth and the rural poor are uniting across ethnic and religious lines in mass protests demanding the toppling of the Sri Lankan government in defiance of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's security forces.

For the first time in the history of the University of Jaffna—a centre of Tamil nationalism for decades in Sri Lanka—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim students united in protest marches. Shocked by the incident, the university administration immediately suspended all academic activities and closed the university. For weeks, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and allied Tamil nationalist tendencies maintained a deafening silence on the protests.

On April 13, TNA leader M. A. Sumanthiran suddenly broke the TNA's silence to announce that for weeks, he had been negotiating behind the backs of workers with the hated Rajapakse regime and other leading Sri Lankan politicians. The aim of these talks, Sumanthiran made clear, was to create political "stability," end the protests, and impose on Sri Lanka the diktat of the banks and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Sumanthiran openly explained: "Former President Sirisena spoke to me, and former President Madam Chandrika [Bandaranaike Kumaratunga] spoke to me in the morning. Other leaders are talking to me. I have been involved in many of the ongoing negotiations to try to bring stability to the political situation. My advice to the current prime minister, Mahinda Rajapakse, yesterday was that if the government itself takes steps to abolish the executive presidency, we can move forward. I personally told him my opinion."

What a cynical fraud! Sumanthiran wants workers and youth to believe that Rajapakse willingly plans to abolish his own autocratic regime out of the goodness of his heart, so Sri Lanka can "move on." This is a dangerous political lie. The Rajapakse brothers Gotabhaya and Mahinda are ruthless political criminals, whose hands are drenched in the blood of tens of thousands of defenceless people. To reactionaries who peddle the illusion that the Rajapakse brothers will reform themselves, one can only reply: no devil ever cut off his own claws.

Only two days before Sumanthiran spoke, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse directly threatened protesters. "Every second you protest on the street, our country loses opportunities to receive potential dollars," Rajapakse said, warning that Sri Lanka could be "slipping into a time as dark as that in our history, through these actions."

Given Sri Lanka's history, replete with government massacres of Sinhalese and Tamils alike, this was a barely veiled threat to drown the protests in blood. Rajapakse himself, as president in 2009, led the mass murder of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians during the defeat

of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters. Yet Sumanthiran, whose party hypocritically claims to lead the Tamil people in seeking justice, unabashedly boasted of his back-channel talks with the same Rajapakse.

Sumanthiran made clear the TNA aims for Rajapakse to stay in power to "rectify" the situation by imposing devastating IMF austerity measures on a starving, impoverished population. After telling Rajapakse to "Talk to the IMF immediately. Talk to lending countries and organisations," he continued: "Successive governments have been responsible for this crisis. But the last mistake was made during this presidency. So the onus is on them to rectify this."

In this context, Sumanthiran's invocation of the popular demand to abolish Sri Lanka's executive presidency is a monumental political fraud.

A week before Sumanthiran spoke, the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) issued a political statement advancing that demand. Basing itself on the perspective of Permanent Revolution, the SEP laid out a revolutionary path for masses of working people coming into struggle. It explained that the abolition of the executive presidency was integral to the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses unified across ethnic and religious lines, led by the working class. It called on workers to form action committees to secure food, fuel, medicine and other key necessities for everyone.

Sumanthiran turns the abolition of the executive presidency into an empty slogan that he fills with a reactionary class content. The TNA is seeking to prop up Rajapakse, bolster the diktats of the banks over the people, and divide workers and the oppressed along ethnic and religious lines to prevent them from uniting to fight for their common class interests. Significant sections of the TNA, especially in the Tamil Federal Party (ITAK), are whipping up racial hatreds against the Sinhalese.

ITAK parliamentarian Sivagnanam Sreedharan is playing a leading role in the Tamil nationalists' foul racist propaganda. In a recent speech, he gloated at the present suffering of Sinhalese, by referring to the Sri Lankan army's racist anti-Tamil war: "In the 1990s, it was the Tamils who faced the embargo in Sri Lanka. We Tamils have experienced what is happening now for over 20 years. It is only now that the Sinhalese are getting ready to face this misery in this country. They are just standing in queue now."

Sreedharan hailed the conditions during the civil war, when the LTTE led by Velupillai Prabhakaran had military control of the Tamil-majority north. Downplaying the suffering of the people in northern Sri Lanka and the shortages of food and energy that it faced during the war, he said: "Did you know that someone died of starvation during the Prabhakaran era? Have you ever heard of people standing in line

for fuel during the Prabhakaran era?”

Sreedharan's argument is a reactionary fraud, above all because the crisis today affects working and toiling people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds. Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims alike are protesting across Sri Lanka against the lack of essential food and medical supplies, the unbearable upward spiral of prices and the corruption of the Rajapakse cabal.

Sreedharan makes his racist attacks on the Sinhalese because he is terrified of the upsurge of the masses and opposes what the SEP stands for: fighting for the unity of the working class.

At the same time, Sreedharan is leading the TNA's outreach to the bloodstained Hindu-supremacist regime of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi bears responsibility not only for the 2002 Gujarat massacre of Muslims but also for the unnecessary deaths of more than 5 million people during the COVID-19 epidemic. But TNA officials, who have served as assets of the Indian bourgeoisie for decades, rushed to meet Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar when he made an emergency visit to Sri Lanka during the mass anti-government protests.

Jaishankar advised the TNA not to try to modify the Sri Lankan constitution or to take power, but to manoeuvre with Sri Lanka's despised government. "Do not join in trying to draft a new constitution," he said, adding: "The government is claiming that the process is ongoing. If parties, including India, talk to Sri Lanka, they will say that the TNA is working with us in drafting the constitution.... Do not get caught up in the issue of the new constitution, do not wait for it and do not be deceived on other issues, try to get them quickly."

The TNA's negotiations with the reactionary Modi government expose the fraud of their pledge to end the executive presidency in Sri Lanka. They have not tried to explain how they will abolish the executive presidency via legislative action, while leaving untouched the constitution upon which the executive presidency rests. However, as part of the TNA's longstanding alignment with the IMF, Washington and New Delhi and their growing conflict with China, the TNA is seeking to politically prepare some form of Indian intervention in Sri Lanka.

In an online discussion with the *Malai Malar* newspaper in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, Sreedharan called on the Indian ruling elite and business to intervene in Sri Lanka, as "many countries, including China can help in the south, but the Tamil people are without any relief." To save lives in the Tamil-majority north of Sri Lanka, he said, "the Government of Tamil Nadu must create a separate mechanism. I kindly request His Excellency, [Tamil Nadu] Chief Minister M. K. Stalin to immediately provide relief supplies and food items on board."

Explaining the basis on which India could intervene in Sri Lanka, he said, "India signed as the representative of the Eelam Tamils in 1987. It is an international agreement on which the right to protect the Eelam Tamil people belongs to India and the people of Tamil Nadu."

The 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, titled "Prosperous life returns to the Tamil people," proved to be a bloody trap for the workers. It was implemented by the Sri Lankan and Indian governments, supported by the Indian Stalinist parties. Indian occupation troops then turned viciously on the civilian population in areas they controlled, killing more than 6,000 people, raping women, and terrorising the population.

Then as today, the Sinhalese and Tamil bourgeoisie tried to work out a division of labour against the danger from below. With the Indian army and allied Tamil nationalist militias like the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and the Eelam People's

Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) attacking the population of the north, this freed the Colombo regime to crush mass social unrest in the south resulting in the murder of more than 60,000 Sinhalese youth.

Only the SEP opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord from a socialist perspective and proposed a progressive solution for the working class and the Tamil minority. In its 1987 statement, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, wrote:

"The rule of the bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka now rests upon the twin pillars of Indian occupation of the North and anti-Tamil racism in the South. This situation merely illustrates the fact that the democratic equality of all national, racial and religious groupings within any country can only be achieved through the socialist revolution led by the proletariat. While the conspiracies of Gandhi and Jayewardene have unmasked the brutal nature of the national bourgeoisie in the Indian subcontinent, this latest historical experience has demonstrated the bankruptcy of petty-bourgeois nationalism ..."

These lines not only illuminate the events that took place during the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka 35 years ago, but the political tasks facing workers in Sri Lanka and India today. The different ethnic factions of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie have no progressive solution to the crisis facing working people in Sri Lanka—driven by the global pandemic, the US-led NATO war drive against Russia in Ukraine, and mounting global inflation.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that no nationalist party, and in particular none of the Tamil bourgeois nationalist groups, has a progressive solution to problems triggered by this international crisis. The SEP has given a clear class content to its demand for the abolition of the executive presidency, stressing that this task falls to rank-and-file committees of working people, unifying them across ethnic, religious and national lines, including with workers in India, in a struggle for socialism.

On this basis, it is irreconcilably hostile to the empty demagoguery with which the TNA tried to prop up the Rajapakse clique, while falsely posing as a friend of the people.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact