

Sri Lankan president holds “national reconciliation” conference

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On December 13, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe called an all-party conference (APC) to discuss how to “resolve the national ethnic question.” It was yet another desperate manoeuvre by Wickremesinghe to enlist the support of opposition parties amid rising social anger against its International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures.

Those participating in the conference included the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and its constituent parties, along with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Tamil People’s National Forum. Several APC meetings will be held this month.

Wickremesinghe called for all political parties to reach “a common agreement to provide a solution to the ethnic problem” before the country’s upcoming 75th independence celebration on February 4. He called for “a lasting solution to the grievances of the country’s Tamil minority.”

Notwithstanding Wickremesinghe’s pompous declarations, the APC is a complete fraud and has nothing to do with securing democratic rights for the Tamil minority. Successive Sri Lankan governments have systematically discriminated against Tamils since so-called independence in 1948. The ruling class has exploited and continues to exploit communalism to prop up bourgeois rule by dividing the working class along Sinhala and Tamil lines.

In 1983, Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP), after decades of anti-Tamil discrimination, provoked a communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Wickremesinghe, who was a minister in those UNP governments, shares responsibility for the bloody atrocities unleashed against Sri Lankan Tamils. All the other parties based in the island’s South and who participated in last month’s meeting have led, or been supporters of governments that continued this war.

Hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed during the 26-year conflict, with 40,000 massacred by the military in its final months, according to UN estimates. When the war ended with the defeat of the LTTE in May

2009, the military murdered surrendering LTTE leaders and then herded some 300,000 civilians into army-controlled detention camps. All the political parties at the December 13 meeting have defended these crimes, claiming them to be legitimate in a “war against terrorism.”

The destruction unleashed against residents from the North and East has driven them into unending misery with many living in brutal poverty without basic facilities and including thousands of war widows. The war-torn provinces still remain under heavy military occupation with the Tamil population, particularly young people, constantly harassed and intimidated.

Addressing the December 13 meeting, Wickremesinghe declared that the priority was to provide compensation to “missing persons,” issue death certificates to their families, and release land currently occupied by the military. Those “missing” were, in fact, abducted and likely secretly murdered by the military during the war. He also said that major issues, such as “devolution of power” to the North and East could be discussed later. Devolution of power is the establishment of limited power-sharing arrangements with the Tamil elite to govern the northern and eastern provinces in the joint exploitation of the working class.

Posturing as a democrat, opposition SJB leader Sajith Premadasa, said the discussion had “great importance” and he was “happy to have a time frame for the program... [and it will be] of great benefit to the country.” All the other participants welcomed Wickremesinghe’s calls.

Significantly, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or the National People’s Power which it leads, did not participate in the APC. The JVP fully backed the communalist war and has defended all its crimes.

In recent years, the JVP, in an attempt to cover up its communal politics, has claimed to oppose ethnic discrimination. The JVP, which is currently campaigning in a bid to strengthen its parliamentary support in Sinhala-majority areas in the south, however, does not want to identify with the APC.

Wickremesinghe’s fraudulent APC is an attempt to win

support from all parties of the political establishment, particularly the Tamil parties, in order to impose the country's economic catastrophe on the masses.

As in other countries, the Sri Lankan crisis has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia. In line with IMF demands, Wickremesinghe's 2023 budget includes the privatisation of public sector enterprises, the slashing of tens of thousands of jobs, cuts in subsidies, higher taxes on working people and increases in utility prices.

The TNA, the main Tamil parliamentary party, is an ardent supporter of the president's APC call. During last November's budget vote it abstained, allowing the harsh measures to pass in parliament. In a cynical manoeuvre, TNA parliamentarian M. Sumanthiran justified its abstention, declaring: "We oppose this budget, but for one reason we have decided not to cast a vote against it... The president has said that he is taking steps to resolve the longstanding Tamil national question, although we are skeptical."

The TNA actions are another indication that it has no concern for the democratic or social rights of working people and the poor but is totally preoccupied with securing its own privileges through a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo.

When Wickremesinghe told the all party conference, "Let's talk about the constitutional amendment and devolution of power later," Sumanthiran replied: "Without any major amendments to the provisions in the Constitution, other laws with regard to power sharing must be implemented and the Provincial Council elections held."

This is a reference to the 13th amendment to the Constitution, introduced amid a deep crisis in 1987, which provided for the devolution of provincial powers to a united North and East of the island. It was part of the Indo-Lanka Accord under which Indian peace-keepers were sent to northern Sri Lanka to disarm the LTTE and suppress opposition from working people.

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Wickremesinghe's APC is also a signal to the US and India, Washington's principal ally in South Asia, who have all called for "ethnic reconciliation" in Sri Lanka. These countries, which both backed Colombo's communalist war, have no concern for the democratic rights of Sri Lankan Tamils but have exploited the issue to exert pressure on Colombo.

The US and India are concerned about Beijing's economic relations with Colombo. Washington, in particular, is using Sri Lanka's human right violations during the war to pressure Colombo to sever its relations with Beijing. The

TNA and other Tamil parties are also backing the US war drive against China and expect, in return, Washington and New Delhi to assist in extracting a power-sharing deal with Colombo. These Tamil parties have supported the US-sponsored human rights resolutions against Colombo.

The sordid role of the TNA leadership was exposed during the mass protests of workers and the poor across ethnic lines demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government in April–July last year. Sumanthiran recently revealed that his party had discussions with the hated Rajapakse regime and other leading Sri Lankan politicians. The talks were aimed at creating political "stability," ending the protests and imposing IMF austerity demands.

As in the past, the Tamil parties' participation in Wickremesinghe's APC underscores the unity of all sections of the bourgeois elites against the working class as a whole. Their fear is a united struggle of the working class against capitalist rule.

Tamil workers and youth should have no illusion that the sordid political manoeuvring of the Tamil nationalist parties has anything to do with stopping ethnic discrimination.

The decades-long racial discrimination against the minority Tamil population can only be ended through a united movement of the working class in Sri Lanka—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—in the fight for a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. This is the program of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its predecessor, Revolutionary Communist League (RCL).

As Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the 1917 Russian Revolution, elaborated in his theory of Permanent Revolution, the basic tasks of the democratic revolution would not be won by any section of the national bourgeoisie in countries of belated capitalist development. They could only be realised by the working class, rallying other oppressed masses, as a by-product of the socialist revolution.

The SEP is the only party fighting for the unification and mobilisation of the Sri Lankan working class on this perspective. This is why the SEP has launched a campaign to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on democratically elected delegates of action committees from every workplace, factory, plantation, neighborhood and rural areas, independent of all bourgeois parties and their trade union, to take forward that struggle.



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