

Forty years since the beginning of civil war in Sri Lanka

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14 August 2023

Forty years ago, in the last days of July 1983, Sinhala chauvinist thugs backed by the United National Party (UNP) government and security forces unleashed a pogrom against Tamils in Colombo and other areas of Sri Lanka. It triggered the 26-year communal war by successive governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The war took hundreds of thousands of lives—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—and devastated the living conditions of many more, mainly of the Tamil minority in the north and east of the island. The conflict came to a bloody end in May 2009 with the military crushing of the LTTE and the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.

The protracted civil war contains important strategic lessons for the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. Though the war ended 14 years ago, the political issues that led to the conflict have not been resolved and continue to fester.

The carnage carried out against Tamils 40 years ago was triggered by the death of 13 Sri Lankan soldiers who were killed by the LTTE in an ambush on July 23, 1983. With the approval of the government, the military brought the bodies to Colombo the same day, furnishing the pretext for the anti-Tamil violence.

Well-organised thugs armed with guns, explosives, axes, knives and sticks, and provided with electoral lists, targeted Tamil homes and businesses. The gangs acted with the full backing of the UNP government of President J.R. Jayawardene. Some ministers were implicated in organising and directing the attacks. The armed forces and police either participated directly in the violence, or turned a blind eye.

Officially, the number killed was 300, but the real figure is at least a thousand. Hundreds of Tamil women were raped. More than 250,000 people were displaced. In Colombo's Welikada jail, 52 Tamil prisoners were massacred with the connivance of prison officials. Thousands of homes and shops owned by Tamils were burned and destroyed.

President Jayawardene appeared on national TV on July 28 and justified the communal pogroms. "Because of the violence by the terrorists, the Sinhalese people themselves have reacted," Jayawardene stated. He declared that the government had decided to proscribe organisations advocating the division of the country, adding that "this is the only way to appease the natural desire and request of the Sinhala people."

On August 4, the government enacted the sixth constitutional amendment banning political parties that did not take an oath of allegiance to the "unitary state" from entering parliament or local government bodies. Every state employee was ordered to take a similar oath on pain of dismissal.

The North and East were formally declared war zones and "strategies for military operations" in these provinces were drawn up and initiated by army commander Major General Tissa Weeratunga.

The 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom did not come out of the blue. Confronted with widespread opposition among workers to its open market policies, the Jayawardene government resorted to the reactionary stock-in-trade of

the Colombo political establishment—the whipping up of anti-Tamil chauvinism and violence to divide the working class.

Sri Lanka was one of the first countries in the world to end the policy of national economic regulation and import substitution and adopt a free market program. Amid a deep economic crisis, the Jayawardene government that came to power in 1977 devalued the rupee and began to shut down or privatise state-owned enterprises, slash spending on essential social services and cut back price subsidies on basic food items such as rice and flour.

The consequences for workers and the urban and rural poor were devastating and provoked a growing number of strikes and protests. In July 1980, public sector workers launched a general strike, demanding a 300-rupee wage hike, to which the government responded by sacking 100,000 employees. The strike was ultimately crushed after the main working-class parties—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and the centrist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP)—refused to wage a political struggle to bring down the UNP government.

To counter the widespread opposition, Jayawardene escalated the anti-Tamil campaign that had already led to violent attacks throughout the island, including on Tamil workers in the plantation districts. More than 100 had been killed and nearly 100,000 had been forced to flee their homes.

In June 1981, thugs mobilised from Colombo, with the support of security forces and the police, went on a rampage in the northern town of Jaffna, setting fire to the Jaffna Public Library, which had stored valuable books, including irreplaceable manuscripts. Then came the July 1983 pogrom and the war.

The Jayawardene government's resort to anti-Tamil chauvinism can be traced to the foundations of the Sri Lankan state, formed after formal independence from British colonial rule in 1948. The ruling class had faced the development of class struggles in the final years of British rule following World War II, particularly by plantation workers, including general strikes in 1946 and 1947.

One of the first actions of the UNP government that took power in 1948 was to abolish the citizenship and voting rights of hundreds of thousands of Tamil workers brought from India as indentured labour to work in the plantations. The aim was to divide the working class on ethnic lines and weaken it.

However, the Trotskyists of the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the Ceylonese section of the Fourth International, which had played a leading role in the general strikes, opposed the Citizenship Act and fought tenaciously for the unity of the working class.

In the parliamentary debate, BLPI leader Colvin R de Silva condemned the dangerous fascistic principle on which the Act was based, namely "that the state must be coeval with the nation and the nation with the race." He warned that though the Tamils in the North and East had not been targeted by the Act, it was "not only a short but easy step," once the

racialist principle was adopted as the basis for the Sri Lankan state.

The warning was rapidly confirmed. In 1953, the UNP government was brought to its knees by a profound economic and political crisis that had provoked a nation-wide hartal—strikes and business closures—that united working people across communal lines.

The response of the ruling class was to turn to the newly formed Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which came to power in 1956 on the basis of an openly Sinhala-chauvinist program dressed up with socialistic phrase-mongering. The SLFP-led government implemented its policy of making Sinhala the country's only official language, severely disadvantaging Tamils, including many public servants who lost their jobs.

The roots of the civil war that erupted in 1983 lie not simply in the anti-Tamil chauvinism in which the Colombo ruling class is mired, but in the liquidation of the BLPI into the centrist LSSP in 1950 and the LSSP's subsequent political backsliding and adaptation to Sinhala populism and the SLFP. In 1964, the LSSP completely abandoned any adherence to socialist internationalism and joined the bourgeois SLFP-led government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike.

The LSSP's great betrayal was aided and abetted by the revisionist tendency within the Fourth International led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and sought to subordinate it to the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR, social democratic parties and bourgeois nationalist forces like the SLFP in countries such as Sri Lanka. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was formed in 1953 in a break from the Pabloites to defend genuine Trotskyism.

The LSSP's betrayal generated great confusion and disorientation within the working class. It opened the door for various petty-bourgeois radical groups based on communal politics. In the south, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was formed in 1966 on an eclectic mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism and gained a base among oppressed rural youth.

In 1972, the SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition government brought in a new constitution, drawn up by attorney-general and LSSP leader Colvin R de Silva, that formally enshrined Buddhism as the state religion, along with the Sinhala-only language policy. It also enacted discriminatory measures against Tamils in public sector employment and for university entrance.

Tamil youth in the north deserted the traditional Tamil bourgeois parties in droves and embraced various Tamil groups including the LTTE that advocated the armed struggle for a separate Tamil state.

A group of youth who had opposed the LSSP's betrayal formed the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, in 1968, as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI.

The RCL alone championed the program of socialist internationalism, opposed all forms of communal politics and fought for the unity of the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. When conflict finally erupted in 1983, the RCL was the only party that consistently opposed the war, defended the democratic rights of Tamils and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan army from the North and East.

The 26-year war is an indictment against the Sri Lankan ruling class and a confirmation of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. Trotsky demonstrated that the bourgeoisie in countries of belated capitalist development are organically incapable of meeting the democratic and social aspirations of the masses. That task falls to the working class as part of the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist politics and the fight for socialism internationally.

The war also graphically exposed the LTTE's separatist policy that sought to carve out a separate state of Eelam in the North and East of the island with the support of India. Despite its various socialistic phrases, the LTTE's call for a separate state represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie that sought an arena to profiteer from the exploitation of

Tamil workers.

The LTTE's promotion of illusions in the Indian bourgeoisie was exposed in July 1987 when the Indian government reached an agreement—the Indo-Lanka Accord—to bail out the crisis-ridden Jayawardene regime. The LTTE backed the Accord under which India sent “peace-keeping” troops into northern Sri Lanka to disarm Tamil armed groups on the promise of limited provincial autonomy. The Accord allowed Jayawardene to send his army to crush the rural unrest in the south.

The LTTE's support for the Accord reflected deeper processes internationally that were undermining so-called national liberation movements. The globalisation of production in the 1980s had undermined all programs based on national economic regulation, most clearly revealed in the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The LTTE increasingly dropped its socialist window dressing and anti-imperialist rhetoric and turned to the major powers to assist in setting up a separate state where foreign capital could exploit cheap Tamil labour.

As part of the broader discussion in the ICFI, the RCL, which had advocated the “right of self-determination for the Tamil people,” as a means of unifying Tamil and Sinhala workers, concluded that the slogan no longer had any progressive content. While continuing to demand the immediate withdrawal of Sri Lankan armed forces from the North and East, our party advanced the call for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally.

While the communal war dragged on until 2009, the LTTE's separatist perspective resulted in its increasing isolation. It blamed the Sinhala masses for the crimes of the Sri Lankan military and attacked innocent Sinhalese people, which only strengthened the hand of the Colombo government. In the North and East, the LTTE increasingly alienated Tamil working people through its oppressive and anti-democratic rule.

The LTTE's defeat was not just a military catastrophe but demonstrated the bankruptcy of its political program. As the Sri Lankan military closed in for the kill, the LTTE was incapable of appealing to the working class in Sri Lanka, let alone India and internationally, for support. Instead, it continued to issue futile appeals to the “international community”—that is, to major powers such as the US and India which had been backing Colombo's war politically and militarily.

None of the issues of the protracted civil war have been resolved. The Sri Lankan army maintains its heavy-handed occupation of the North and East, the basic democratic rights of Tamils continue to be trampled on, and, amid an unprecedented economic crisis, communal tensions are again being whipped up.

The government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe is implementing harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It is facing widespread opposition and unrest among workers and the rural masses—Sinhala and Tamil alike. In a desperate attempt to stabilise his government, Wickremesinghe is seeking the support of bourgeois Tamil parliamentary parties by offering greater power-sharing for provincial councils.

Anti-Tamil communalism has immediately raised its ugly head in Colombo. Sinhala chauvinist groups have already launched a campaign denouncing Wickremesinghe for preparing to divide the country by giving more power to the Tamils.

In early August, the former army chief of staff, Lieutenant General Jagath Dias, addressed a Sinhala chauvinist gathering at a Buddhist centre in Colombo, where he claimed that “a plan is underway to help establish Eelam by constitutional means.” The *Island*, which reported the meeting and is notorious for boosting Sinhala chauvinist groups, declared that Dias would spearhead a campaign against greater provincial autonomy.

Another Sinhala extremist group, the National Freedom Front, has

accused Wickremesinghe of seeking the “Indianisation of the country” through its economic agreements with New Delhi. Sagara Kariyawasam, secretary of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), on which Wickremesinghe relies for parliamentary support, has warned the president against prioritising discussions on more powers to provincial councils.

The whole history of Sri Lanka, particularly the brutal civil war that devastated the island, constitutes a sharp warning to the working class that its class interests for decent, well-paid jobs, social services and living conditions cannot be met through divisive communal politics. Instead, what is desperately needed is a unified struggle of workers, mobilising the downtrodden rural toilers, against the capitalist system and all its defenders, including the trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to form their own democratically elected action committees, independent of all capitalist parties, in every workplace and rural area to fight for their basic democratic and social rights. We are campaigning for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on the representatives of the action committees to take up the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to abolish all forms of communal discrimination, repressive laws and to implement socialist policies.



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