

Sri Lankan racist groups whip up communal tensions over controversial archaeological site

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Sinhala-Buddhist racials, with the backing of President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government and the corporate media, have begun an orchestrated anti-Tamil campaign in the war-ravaged Mullaitivu district in north-eastern Sri Lanka.

The ever-widening provocation, which centres on the controversial Kurundi or Kurundumalai (in Tamil) archaeological site in the Tamil-dominated Mullaitivu district, is a clear warning to the working class. The Colombo ruling elite is resorting to divisive politics of racialism amid the growing resistance of workers—Sinhala and Tamil alike—to its brutal International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures.

On August 18, a private television channel broadcast footage of Buddhist monks and a large number of “devotees” holding a religious ceremony at the Kurundi site. For generations Tamil people believed that an old Hindu temple, known as Aathi Sivan Kovil, was located there. The majority of Sri Lankan Tamils are Hindus.

It followed a provocative July 22 article in *Ceylon Today* declaring Tamils “who stood up for a separate state in Sri Lanka [had] gradually encroached on Buddhist ancient sites in North and Eastern provinces, [and] if possible other areas of the island too, with the cruel intention of erasing evidence of united, unitary Sri Lanka that was predominantly Sinhala Buddhist.”

The article further stated: “[T]he ancient or historical identity of the island was a Sinhala Buddhist one and those who created and established a civilization on the island are known as the Sinhala race and the religion that shaped a civilization was Buddhist.”

These reactionary claims are only the latest in a long series of provocations.

Following Colombo's military defeat in May 2009 of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), ministers of the then government of President Mahinda

Rajapakse and a clique of Sinhala-Buddhist racists initiated a campaign, claiming the site was previously a Buddhist monastery.

In 2018, the chauvinists began construction of a Buddhist temple at the site, continued in defiance of a court order ordering an end to the construction. Three years later, in 2021, Vidura Wickramanayake, former President Gotabaya Rajapakse's state minister for national heritage, visited the area with military and archaeological department officials. They placed a Buddhist statue at the site, also in violation the court order.

Last week's provocation at the site involved scores of Buddhist devotees transported in buses to the site where a group of Hindus were holding the Pongal festival at the adjacent Hindu temple.

Galgamuwe Santhabodhi, the so-called chief prelate of the Buddhist temple at the site, attempted to stop the Hindu event, provoking a heated argument, with violent clashes only prevented by police intervention.

Noting the seriousness of these developments, the English-language *Island*, recently reported that local intelligence services have been ordered to collect information about those “creating disturbances and unrest over the Kurundumalai temple.”

The intelligence directive, the newspaper said, was in response to leaked “Indian intelligence reports warning of imminent communal riots that could be created by the disputes and controversies over the temple.”

There was “a strong possibility,” Indian intelligence had warned, of “communal riots and such disturbances that could easily surpass those that took place in Sri Lanka, prior to the 2019 presidential elections, in terms of severity.”

This is a reference to anti-Muslim communal riots whipped up by Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists following ISIS-backed terrorist bombings of three Christian

churches in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, 2019. The latest warning is highly significant, given the fact that Indian intelligence agencies had issued its alert in advance of the Easter Sunday bombings.

On July 13, Santhabodhi issued the highly provocative claim that “Tamil extremists are planning to establish a Hindu Kovil” at the site and “getting ready to start a separatist struggle in this country based on Kurundi Buddhist temple.”

Santhabodhi concluded by appealing to leading Buddhist monks and other forces to “do something to stop this extremist attack.” His accusations are clearly aimed at whipping up the Sinhalese population against the Tamil minority. Santhabodhi’s allegations are false.

As previously stated, the racist provocations were initiated in 2018 by the group of Buddhist monks who visited the site claiming it was the location of an ancient Buddhist shrine. Their actions were backed by the government’s heavily-politicised archaeological department, the media and the security forces stationed in the area.

After coming to power in 2019, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse established an 11-member Presidential Task Force (PTF) for Archaeological Heritage Management. Defense Secretary Kamal Gunaratne, a retired major general and a vicious Sinhala racist, was chairperson of PTF. Other members included, Ellawala Medhananda, a former parliamentarian for the extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and other notorious Sinhala-Buddhist supremacists.

In June 2, 2020, the PTF was given the task of identifying “sites of archaeological importance in the Eastern Province.” No details were provided, however, on the definition of “archaeological,” thus allowing the PTF to erase any evidence proving the existence of Tamil or other ethnicities.

Within a month of its formation, the PTF identified some 2,000 sites in the Eastern Province which would be subjected to “archaeological” examination. Its actions are not primarily motivated by academic or intellectual concerns but to justify building Buddhist temples and acquisition of land in the midst of Tamil majority areas.

In March 2021, the archaeological department ordered more than 400 acres surrounding the Kurundi site, which were, and are still, being cultivated by local Tamil farmers, to be handed over to the department for archaeological purposes.

Predictably, this led to widespread resistance from

Tamil farmers who suspected that they will lose their paddy lands, livestock farms and agricultural dams. In response, the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists stepped up their provocations.

Communalism is now being whipped up to divert and divide rising working class opposition to the Wickremesinghe government’s IMF austerity attacks.

Colombo’s ruling elite is acutely nervously about any repeat of the unified action by Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, which ousted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government last year. The ruling class as a whole is deeply fearful of the reemergence of a unified popular working-class uprising.

On June 8, President Wickremesinghe held a discussion with representatives of the Tamil National Alliance and other government officials, including Archaeological Department Director Anura Manatunga. During the discussion Wickremesinghe ordered the land previously deemed to be part of the Kurundumalai Temple complex to be released to the local farmers for cultivation. However, he quickly withdrew the order following harsh criticism from the Buddhist clergy.

Like their Sinhala counterparts, the Tamil bourgeois parties share the same fear of a united movement of the Sri Lankan working class and are using the controversy over the archeological site to promote their own brand of communalist politics.

While Tamil National Alliance has been politically discredited among large sections of the Tamil population, other parties, including the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) and Tamil National People’s Front (TNPf), are exploiting the issue. TNPf parliamentarian Selvarasa Gajendran was a leading figure at the August 18 Hindu religious festival at the Kurundumalai site.

As the Socialist Equality Party has consistently explained, the only way to fight the government’s brutal austerity measures and the communalism methods of Sri Lankan ruling elite is through a unified movement of the working class and the oppressed masses against Sri Lankan capitalism and for internationalist and socialist perspective.



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