

Sri Lankan Tamil parties debate tactics in the presidential election

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Tamil nationalist parties based in the North and East of Sri Lanka are debating how to respond to the forthcoming presidential elections and how best to secure the interests of the Tamil elites with the Colombo government. The presidential election is due in September or October.

Previously the Tamil capitalist parties have sided with one or another Sinhala-majority parties in Sri Lanka's other provinces by calculating who would best support their particular demands.

The Tamil People's National Alliance (TPNA), Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) and Democratic Tamil National Alliance (DTNA), a front of several groups, are currently arguing over whether to field a "common Tamil candidate" for the presidential election. The Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) is calling on Tamils to boycott the election.

These bourgeois parties, however, are widely discredited among the Tamil masses because they have consistently demonstrated that they are only concerned about the interests of the Tamil elite not ordinary workers and poor.

Sri Lanka's Tamil minority has faced decades of legal and political discrimination by the successive Colombo governments which have whipped up anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class along ethnic lines.

In 1983, the then United National Party (UNP) regime on behalf of the island's ruling elite initiated its bloody communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The 26-year communal war killed over 100,000 Tamil civilians, many of whom were "disappeared," tens of thousands were injured, and countless properties destroyed.

Though the war ended in May 2009, some political prisoners remain in jail, while the Northern and Eastern provinces are still under continuous military occupation with much of the land forcibly taken during the war still under military control. The Tamil masses have not recovered from the devastation of the war.

C.V. Wigneswaran, a TPNA leader, parliamentarian and former Northern Provincial Council chief minister, has proposed that the Tamil parties field a common candidate in the presidential election, offering himself as the ideal candidate.

Wigneswaran says that the parties which have come to power in Colombo have not solved the problems facing Tamils and

declares, "What can the Tamils achieve by supporting them?" By fielding our own candidate, he says, "We can bring unity among Tamil people" and apply more pressure in discussions with Colombo.

The same position has been echoed by former MP and DTNA leader Suresh Premachandran. "Tamil people can emphasise to the Sinhalese that the national ethnic problem should be resolved," he said.

ITAK, the main Tamil parliamentary party, is divided over whether to field a Tamil presidential candidate. The newly elected ITAK general secretary S. Sridharan, who is an MP, has favoured nominating a Tamil common candidate.

Other ITAK leaders and parliamentarians, such as R. Sambandan and M.A. Sumanthiran, oppose this proposal. They believe this would harm direct collaboration with the Colombo political establishment and President Ranil Wickremesinghe in particular.

Sambandan has said that if a Tamil common candidate is fielded "it would create a crisis to travel within a united Sri Lanka." By this he means that Sinhala chauvinist groups would retaliate against Tamil people. Sumanthiran has endorsed this position.

TNPF general secretary and MP Selvaraja Gajendran told the media that by boycotting the election the Sinhala leadership can be pressured into accepting the "reasonable demands of the Tamils." By taking this stand, he added, "America, India and the European countries would also accept our requests." The TNPF, previously known as the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), has boycotted presidential elections since 2009.

The public debate by these Tamil capitalist parties over how to respond to the presidential election as a means for addressing the democratic and social rights of Tamil people is a total fraud.

Notwithstanding their tactical disagreements over the presidential election, these bourgeois parties have no fundamental differences. They all defend the profit-system and are unified and unwavering in their support for the Wickremesinghe government's ruthless implementation of the International Monetary Fund dictated austerity measures.

Their calculations centre on how best to pressure the Colombo ruling elite to secure a maximum devolution of power in governing the Northern and Eastern provinces. Without

exception, they all seek the support of the US and European imperialist powers and India to pressure the Sri Lankan government to grant favourable political and economic concessions for the Tamil elite.

These parties also support the US and Indian military build-up against China and maintain a deliberate silence on Washington's backing for the genocidal invasion of Gaza by the Israeli military.

The historical record of all these Tamil organisations, including the LTTE, is one of sordid manoeuvres and deals with every Sri Lankan government, combined with constant appeals to the imperialist powers, mainly the US, and India.

In 1994, the separatist LTTE supported presidential candidate Chandrika Kumaratunga, expecting peace talks and a power-sharing arrangement. After various political manoeuvres, however, she restarted and intensified the war in 1997.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) was formed in October 2001 under pressure from the LTTE for a parliamentary mouthpiece. This manoeuvre was taken in preparation for the US-backed peace talks with the government of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, which came to power in December 2001.

Those peace talks collapsed because of the hostility of the military and the Sinhalese chauvinist groups, mainly the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). With their backing, President Kumaratunga took control of various ministries in the Wickremesinghe regime in late 2003. She then sacked the government in 2004.

In 2005, the LTTE helped Mahinda Rajapakse come to power by boycotting the 2005 presidential election in the North and the East. Following his election, Rajapakse broke the then existing ceasefire and resumed the war.

After the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, the pro-imperialist TNA began to disintegrate. In 2010, the ACTC split from the alliance. During the presidential election that year, the TNA supported Sarath Fonseka, the military commander who led the bloody war against the LTTE during its final years.

The TNA then lined up, with US-led pressure, with Rajapakse to pressure him to distance his regime from China. Rajapakse had obtained financial and military assistance from Beijing and was cultivating close relations. Washington—though it supported Rajapakse's war campaign—was intensifying its “pivot to Asia” to diplomatically isolate and militarily encircle China.

When Washington sponsored several resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council on Sri Lankan human rights violations during the war to intensify its geo-strategic demands on Rajapakse, TNA backed these resolutions. In the 2015 presidential election, the TNA played a prominent role supporting the Washington-sponsored regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse and bring Maithripala Sirisena to power.

Other groups in the alliance in recent years—the Eelam People's Revolutionary Front (EPRLF), People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and the Tamil Eelam

Liberation Organisation (TELO)—broke from the TNA and formed the DTNA.

The Colombo-based capitalist parties, including Wickremesinghe's UNP and its offshoot, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, as well as the JVP-led National People's Power (NPP), are keen to secure votes from the North and East to win the presidential ballot. These parties, however, have a long and bloody record of instigating anti-Tamil communalism, war and repression, and are despised by workers and the poor, Sinhala and Tamil alike.

The working class and the poor in the North and East must reject the wretched manoeuvres and conspiracies of the Tamil parties. These organisations all defend the capitalist profit system. Like the rest of Sri Lanka's ruling elite, the concern is not the democratic and social rights of the oppressed masses but securing and bolstering their class privileges.

From the Tamil nationalist groups through to the UNP, SJB, JVP and the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna regime, these bourgeois parties are hostile to the objective unity of Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers in the mass uprising which erupted between April and July 2022 and brought down President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government.

Likewise, they are deeply concerned about rising working-class opposition to the brutal social attacks being imposed by the Wickremesinghe regime on behalf of the International Monetary Fund and finance capital.

The only way to defeat the escalating government assaults is through the independent mobilisation of the working class in a unified struggle for socialist internationalism and against the capitalist profit system. To unite, workers have to oppose all forms of nationalism and communalism, including anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim discrimination.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party that fights for this perspective. We call for the bringing down of Wickremesinghe regime and the repudiation of all foreign debts, the immediate withdrawal of the military from the North and East, and the scrapping of Sri Lanka's unitary state constitution which enshrines communal discrimination and repression.

Such a struggle involves the fight for a workers' and peasants' government in the form of a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as a part of the Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally. The democratic rights of Tamil and Muslim people can only be resolved as a part of this fight.



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