

Sri Lankan presidential election: Sordid manoeuvres by the Tamil capitalist parties

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The Tamil capitalist parties based in the north and east of Sri Lanka are deeply divided over their stance in the country's presidential election to be held on September 21. Whatever their tactical differences, however, their common aim is to bargain and pressure the next government for greater powers and privileges for the Tamil bourgeoisie at the expense of the Tamil masses.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its presidential candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena emphatically reject both the Sinhala chauvinist politics of the Colombo elite, which plunged the country into a devastating 26-year civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the communal politics of the Tamil bourgeois parties. The SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), have fought since the RCL's inception to defend the democratic rights of Tamils and the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers on the basis of a socialist program as the only means of advancing the common interests of the working class as a whole.

The Tamil parties have adopted three different positions on the election:

* The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) is supporting Sajith Premadasa, the candidate of the right-wing, opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), which is a split off from the United National Party (UNP). Like the UNP, which was responsible for the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom that marked the beginning of the communal war, the SJB is mired in Sinhala supremacist politics.

ITAK is the only party that remains in the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which used to be a coalition of Tamil parties. It fixed on supporting Premadasa after considering equally reactionary alternatives—including backing the current president Ranil Wickremesinghe or Anura Kumara Disanayake of the National People's Power (NPP) led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

* The People Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), the Tamil People's National Alliance (TPNA) and several others are fielding a "common Tamil candidate"—Pakyaselvam Ariyanethran.

PLOTE, TELO and EPRLF were part of the TNA. The EPRLF broke away in 2017 followed by the other parties. In 2018, Northern Province chief minister C. V. Wigneswaran also withdrew from the TNA and formed the Tamil People's Alliance (TPA) which later became the TPNA.

In April, Wigneswaran declared that fielding a common

candidate would give the Tamil parties "an opportunity to place our reasonable request for a referendum in the North and East to find out what they want politically." In reality, the appeal for a referendum is a means for reaching a deal on the devolution of greater powers to the Tamil elite.

* The Tamil National People's Front (TNPf), whose main constituent party is the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), is calling for a boycott of the election. While the TNPf postures as the more hardline proponent of Tamil nationalism, its aims are the same as its rivals—to reach an accommodation with the Colombo establishment. TNPf secretary Selvarajah Kajendran blurted out the real aim of the boycott to the media declaring that it might pressure the next government to consider the Tamil question.

The splits and divisions among the many Tamil parties reflect the widespread hostility and disgust among broad layers of Tamil workers, youth and rural toilers with their sordid manoeuvres and broken promises. The 2020 election revealed the collapse of the TNA's social base when its vote plummeted by 200,000 and its seat count fell from 16 to 10.

None of these parties address the enormous social crisis facing working people in the North and East following the end of the communal war in 2009. In the final months of the war, the Sri Lankan military, backed by the US and India in particular, slaughtered an estimated 40,000 civilians as it indiscriminately bombarded hospitals, aid centres and so-called "no fire" zones. Some 300,000 were herded into military detention camps and thousands of Tamil youth were dragged off to torture and brainwashing in "rehabilitation camps." Hundreds more were simply "disappeared" during and after the war by military-linked death squads.

Much of the North and East of the island was devastated by the war and has not fully recovered. The military occupation by tens of thousands of troops continues in which the harassment of Tamils is routine. There have been at least 11 documented cases of abduction and torture by soldiers under the Wickremesinghe government. The military occupies large sections of land and profits from the businesses it has established.

The social disaster facing many Tamils only worsened following the country's 2022 debt default when skyrocketing prices and acute shortages hit the entire working class. According to the Central Bank, unemployment in the northern city of Jaffna nearly tripled in 2022 to 21 percent.

The United National Development Program report for 2022-23

showed that the Northern and Eastern provinces had the highest incidence of multidimensional vulnerability determined by income, debt and access to basic services. “In the districts of Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, the predominant concern is not household debt, but rather the availability of a reliable water source,” the report stated.

While the Tamil capitalist parties occasionally appeal for the return of lands or justice for the “disappeared,” their overwhelming preoccupation is for a deal with the very parties that waged the brutal war and have subsequently worked to cover up the war crimes for which successive governments and the military were responsible. Only a handful of soldiers have ever been prosecuted and punished, while the politicians and military top brass with blood on their hands are treated as heroes.

The leading presidential candidates—Wickremesinghe, Premadasa and Dissanayake—have all visited the North in a bid to woo Tamil politicians and, through them, Tamil voters. Significantly, the discussions have all centred on the implementation of the 13th constitutional amendment, which was part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord that brought Indian “peace-keeping” troops into the North to disarm the LTTE and granted a limited devolution of powers to provincial councils, including a combined North-East province.

The 13th amendment is the political touchstone for the Tamil bourgeoisie as it would expand their powers at the provincial level and facilitate their exploitation of the working class. From the outset, successive Colombo governments have refused to fully implement the devolution of powers, particularly police and land powers, due to the furious opposition of Sinhala chauvinist extremists who declare that it would amount to dividing the island.

ITAK’s support for SJB candidate Premadasa is undoubtedly bound up with the fact that he declared that he would implement the 13th amendment when he visited the northern town of Kilinochchi in June. The SJB has also announced that it would revive the Office of Missing People to investigate those taken away by death squads. As in the past, these promises are meaningless gestures that would do nothing to address the systematic abuse of the democratic rights of Tamils.

As for the worsening social crisis facing the working class as a whole, Wickremesinghe, Premadasa and Dissanayake, along with all the Tamil parties, are committed to implementing the IMF’s draconian austerity measures that impact the whole working class. The support of the Tamil parties for the IMF is bound up with their backing for US imperialism and its strategic partner India in the drive to war against China.

The mass uprising in 2022 of strikes and protests that drove former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign cut across the communal divisions fostered by all sections of the Sri Lankan ruling class and brought Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers together in a common struggle for their class interests. That movement was betrayed by the trade unions, the fake lefts such as the Frontline Socialist Party and the various Tamil parties that worked to limit and block the struggle and divert it into the political dead-end of parliament. The result was the anti-democratic installation of Wickremesinghe as president and an onslaught on the social and democratic rights of working people.

The Socialist Equality Party and its candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena reject all forms of communalism and nationalism and fight to unite the working class in the struggle to overthrow capitalism—the root cause of war and all forms of exploitation and oppression. We have a decades-long record of opposing the systemic discrimination against Tamils and Muslims and the 26-year racist war, demanding the withdrawal of all military forces from the North and East.

The SEP advocates the formation of democratically elected action committees in every workplace, plantation and locality independent of all capitalist parties and their trade unions, including in the North and East. This would provide the basis for unifying workers across communal lines in the fight for their democratic and social rights. We call for the establishment of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates from action committees to formulate and fight for a strategy to oppose the bourgeois program of war, austerity and dictatorial forms of rule.

To defend the democratic rights of Tamil and Muslims, we call on action committees throughout the island to advance the following demands:

- End the military occupation! Withdraw all troops from the North and East!
- Release all political prisoners!
- End all discrimination against Tamils and Muslims!
- Abolish the communal constitution that gives special status to Buddhism and the Sinhala!
- Release all lands occupied by the military in the North and East!

The struggle for these basic democratic demands is bound up with the fight to establish a workers’ and peasants’ government to repudiate all foreign debt, nationalise the major corporations, plantations and banks under the democratic control of the working class and restructure society along socialist lines. The SEP calls for the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral component of the fight for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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