

Sri Lankan president's Independence Day speech: All for the “motherland”

Wasantha Rupasinghe
10 February 2025

President Anura Kumara Disanayake delivered a speech on February 4, Sri Lanka's 77th Independence Day, full of lies, distortions and half-truths making a patriotic and nationalist appeal to working people to share the “weight of burden” of the country's economic crisis.

The government reduced the number of invited guests by half to 1,600, supposedly to ensure “greater public participation” in the celebrations. It was only able to mobilise a few hundred people, and, with few exceptions, there was no hoisting of national flags outside people's homes.

The indifference is an unmistakable proof of a growing awareness among working people that so-called “independence” has nothing to do with them. At the same time, even though the government came to power in a landslide, its support is waning as it rapidly breaks all its election promises.

In his speech, Disanayake declared that in 1948 the country attained “the political autonomy requisite for self-determination.” While “constrained, it nonetheless held profound significance” because it marked “when we secured political independence.” We have reached our 77th anniversary of independence, having borne that baton through the passage of time, including the pivotal year 1972, when we attained full political sovereignty under a constitutional crown, he said.

“In that journey, we have arrived at this day, forged by the blood and sweat of thousands of gallant people, both celebrated heroes and heroines as well as the unsung ones, who sacrificed their lives for our freedom. We hereby pay our homage to all of them in this moment.”

All of this is to deliberately obscure the real history of the last 77 years, including that of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in particular. The “independence” handed to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1948 was a sham. It was a conspiracy by the British colonial rulers with a tiny conservative capitalist elite, behind the backs and against the will of insurgent working people in the country, who struggled against colonial rule and social degradation.

Disanayake's unnamed “heroes” include D.S. Senanayake, D.B. Jayatilake and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike who sent their representative Sir Oliver Gunatilake to London in 1947 to appeal for “a dominion status,” but not independence to avoid the threat of “Communism.” The real concern of these bootlickers of British colonialism was the threat posed by working class led by the Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the then Indian sub-continent section of the Fourth International.

The BLPI was the only party fighting for independence for Sri Lanka and throughout the Indian subcontinent since its formation in 1942 by mobilising workers and the oppressed on the basis of socialist internationalism. Senanayake and company never demanded independence and backed the British to the hilt during World War II, suppressing the struggles of workers with the help of the Stalinist Communist Party in the name of supporting the reactionary war efforts.

The workers rose in a general strike led by the BLPI and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in Sri Lanka in 1947, against British rule. Though it was suppressed, the seething anger remained. On February 11,

1948, the day after formal independence was declared, the BLPI held a mass rally of 50,000 workers on Galle Face Green in central Colombo, denouncing the sham independence.

BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva explained: “For the new status of their obtaining is not ‘independence’ but actually a refashioning of the chains of Ceylon's slavery to British imperialism. It is a continuation of British imperialism's method of exercising that rule ... There is a change. But the essence of this change lies not in any passage of Ceylon from colonial status to the status of independence, but in the change-over of British imperialism in Ceylon from methods of direct rule to methods of indirect rule.”

From the very outset, the political establishment in Colombo relied on reactionary communal politics to divide the working class and buttress bourgeois rule. The first administration of the United National Party (UNP) abolished the citizenship rights of nearly a million Tamil plantation workers in 1948. As the UNP became mired in a deep economic and political crisis, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was formed and came to power in 1956 on the basis of making Sinhala the only official language, thus reducing Tamil speakers to second-class citizens.

The unprincipled integration of the BLPI into the LSSP marked the beginning of a political degeneration that was to lead to an outright betrayal in 1964 when the LSSP joined the bourgeois SLFP-coalition government. Its explicit abandonment of the principles of socialist internationalism opened the door for the emergence of petty-bourgeois radical parties based on communal politics, such as the JVP, which was founded on Sinhala patriotism, the armed struggle and an admixture of Maoism and Castroism.

Disanayake's reference to “the pivotal year 1972” in which the country gained “full political sovereignty under a constitutional crown” simply underscores the Sinhala Buddhist supremacist ideology on which the JVP is based. The constitution not only made Sinhala the main official language but also enshrined Buddhism as having “priority” over other religions. In doing so, it profoundly alienated the Tamil minority, particularly Tamil youth, leading a decade later to open civil war.

The 1972 constitution was rammed through a sham ‘constituent assembly’ by the second SLFP coalition government with the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party. It was drawn up by none other than Colvin R. de Silva who in doing so repudiated everything he had said in 1948. Moreover, it took place after the coalition government brutally crushed an adventurer armed uprising by the JVP in 1971 in which 15,000 rural youth were slaughtered.

Disanayake's homage to “unsung heroes” who defended the “motherland” is noteworthy as the JVP has always hailed those killed in the 1971 rebellion and later in its reactionary 1988–90 campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord as heroes.

The UNP government of J.R. Jayawardene that came to power in 1977 had resorted to anti-Tamil chauvinism as working-class opposition erupted to its “open-market economic policy.” This culminated in a

devastating anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983 that marked the outset of full-scale communal war.

As the war compounded the country's economic and political crisis, Jayawardene cut a deal with New Delhi in 1987—the Indo-Lanka Accord—to bring Indian “peacekeeping” troops to disarm the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the promise of greater political autonomy for the North and East.

The JVP launched a fascistic campaign against the Accord declaring that it was splitting the nation and sending its gunmen to murder hundreds of political opponents, trade unionists and workers who refused to take part. Three members of the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), were among those killed.

As it resumed the war against the LTTE, the UNP government, which had been considering an alliance with the JVP, finally turned on it, murdering not only JVP leaders and members but tens of thousands of Sinhala rural youth. Dissanayake and several other government ministers were deeply involved in the JVP's chauvinist campaign and still regard the leaders killed as “heroes” who defended the motherland.

Throughout the three decades of communal war prosecuted by successive Colombo governments, the JVP defended the military and its war crimes to the hilt, including final military offensives that murdered at least 40,000 Tamil civilians. Thousands more simply disappeared, and 300,000 Tamil civilians were rounded up and held in military detention camps.

Dissanayake's “heroes” include the military officers responsible for these atrocities, some of whom are part of the National People's Power's own “Three Armed-Forces’ Collective.”

In his speech, the president declared that “we all are warriors of this battle” and urged the whole population to “embark upon a journey towards economic liberation and socio-cultural emancipation... of our motherland.”

Farmers, fishermen, garment factory workers and oppressed Tamil women harvesting tea leaves were told to join with industrialists, police and security forces, IT sector professionals and tourism advocates to “propel our nation toward industrialisation” and “economic liberation.”

Artists, writers, journalists and scholars, were called on to “purify and rejuvenate our national spirit which has been tarnished by hatred and anger.” Dissanayake emphasised the need to “eradicate the entrenched prejudices that exist between political representatives and the populace, between institutional leaders and their staff... to purify our society.”

In a nutshell, Dissanayake's speech paid glowing tribute to sham independence, the island's pro-imperialist ruling class and insisted that the class interests of workers and the oppressed be subordinated to the good of the nation—that is, to big business and international finance capital. Far from being “leftist” or “Marxist,” as the international media proclaimed last year, the JVP's program carries the stench of fascism.

What is this “motherland” that the president calls on everyone to save? While Dissanayake declares that “we overcome the ethnic, religious, and caste divisions that have long fragmented and subjugated us,” the JVP remains mired in Sinhala-Buddhist supremacism. Tamil, Muslim and other minorities will only be tolerated if they acknowledge the dominant role of the Sinhala ruling elites enshrined in the country's communal constitution.

Referring obliquely to the international crisis of capitalism, the president repeated: “To secure our economic freedom, rather than succumbing to weakness in the global economic system and being overwhelmed by its every fluctuation, we must unite in our efforts for this motherland.”

To imagine that Sri Lanka can ride out the global storm amid international economic turmoil and the drive by US imperialism to colonial expansion and war is sheer fantasy. Dissanayake is celebrating Sri Lankan independence while the fascist US President Trump is openly preparing to integrate Canada as the 51st US state, seize the Panama

Canal, Greenland and the Gaza Strip, and to wage economic and military war against China.

Already, for all Dissanayake's talk about “independence,” the JVP/NPP has made a marked shift to the US and its chief regional partner India as the US builds up its military forces and strengthens its alliances in the Indo-Pacific against China. The string of top US officials, including the Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Steve Koehler, has met with Dissanayake to ensure Sri Lanka plays its part.

On the eve of the Second World War, Trotsky warned of the fate of colonial countries: “Surrounded by decaying capitalism and enmeshed in the imperialist contradictions, the independence of a backward state inevitably will be semi-fictitious, and its political regime, under the influence of internal class contradictions and external pressure, will unavoidably fall into dictatorship against the people...”

The SEP warns the working class that this is precisely what the JVP/NPP government is preparing for. Dissanayake is well aware of the growing opposition among working people to the IMF austerity measures which he has pledged to implement in full. One of the slogans of the mass uprising that erupted in 2022 was directed as the bankruptcy of all governments that had held power since 1948. If working people refuse to sacrifice for the motherland, the JVP/NPP will not hesitate to use the military and police to suppress any opposition.

The 77 years of Sri Lankan “independence” confirms the truth of Leon Trotsky's seminal Theory of Permanent Revolution—that the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development, tied to imperialism, are organically incapable of meeting the basic democratic and social aspirations of the masses.

That political task can only be carried out by the working class, rallying rural poor and oppressed masses behind it, in the struggle for power based on a socialist international program. That is why the SEP is fighting for a workers' and peasants' government, in the form of Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the broader struggle for a Federation of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact