

Buddhist groups in Sri Lanka provoke communal tensions by seeking temple expansion

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Buddhist groups backed by the Sri Lankan military are provocatively attempting to expand a Buddhist temple at Thayitti village, situated near Kankesanthurai in the northern Jaffna Peninsula.

The temple was illegally built by the occupying Sri Lankan army on the private lands of 14 Tamil families, displaced in 1990 during the communal war waged by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The temple named Tissa Viharaya, which previously existed on a small plot of land, has been expanded using land seized by the army.

The temple expansion was initiated by then Army Commander, General Shavendra Silva, in 2021 ignoring a court case filed by the legal landowners. The temple was officially opened on June 3, 2023. Since then, local people have protested against it every month on full moon day.

On February 6, Tamil National People's Front (TNPf) leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam tabled a letter in parliament calling for the acquisition of more land to again expand the temple. The letter was written in December by All Ceylon Buddhist Congress (ACBC) President Chandra Nimal Wakishta, who is a former director of the National Intelligence Bureau of the police. The new plan has further fuelled local opposition.

Tissa Viharaya is one of the hundreds of Buddhist worshipping places established in the north and east by the military and Buddhist groups after the bloody end to the 26-year communal war with the LTTE's defeat in May 2009. Colombo governments have backed these communal provocations as a means of demonstrating the domination of the Sinhala-Buddhist state.

While military-backed Buddhist groups are seeking to escalate communal tensions, Tamil nationalist parties, for their part, have seized on the issue to whip up anti-Sinhala chauvinism among Tamils. The Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP)

and TNPf have all been involved in this campaign.

On February 9, ITAK leader and Jaffna district MP, S. Sritharan, in a press conference, warned they would demolish the temple if the government did not take measures to remove it. On February 11 and 12, the Tamil parties called a protest along with several other groups demanding the removal of the temple and the return of the land to its owners.

The police obtained a court order from the Mallakam magistrate to ban the demonstration but protesters defied it. The magistrate summoned TNPf leader Ponnambalam for violating the court order. He was released on a 100,000 rupees (\$US330) surety, with the case postponed to June 26.

Former public security minister, retired Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera appealed to the president, as the commander-in-chief, to "look into the developing situation." He called on the ruling and opposition parties in Colombo not to "turn a blind eye" to "an explosive development." Weerasekera is notorious for his Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism.

Retired General Jagath Dias, who is an alleged war criminal, demanded ITAK leader Sritharan be arrested. Dias has said that "the government couldn't ignore that [he was] espousing violence" and any failure to act promptly would "encourage other troublemakers."

Amid these attempts to provoke communal tensions, the complicity of President Anura Kumara Disanayake and his Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government is also clear. Disanayake presided over a meeting of the Jaffna District Development Committee on January 31 in which the issue was raised, but nothing has been done.

During last year's presidential and parliamentary elections, Disanayake campaigned in the north promising that under his government the land controlled by the security forces would be returned to its owners. Like other election promises, the government has also ditched this pledge, after

distributing a few acres back to owners. Thousands of acres are still controlled by the military for its camps and agricultural farms.

The government's collusion with the military over the Tissa Viharaya temple was revealed by A.M.P.M.B. Atapattu, secretary for the ministry of Buddhist doctrine, religious and cultural affairs. Speaking to the *Morning*, he said the ministry was holding a discussion of the relevant ministries including the security forces to "reach a decision" on the issue.

Atapattu said that "the government intends to have the temple registered under the Commissioner General of Buddhist Affairs," because an earlier registration included only land there. He added that "there are two temples operated by the Army and the Navy" at the military-built site.

In other words, the government has already decided to officially register the illegally-built temple. This is no surprise. The reactionary Sri Lankan constitution has enshrined Buddhism as the "priority" religion and Sinhala as the official language. The JVP/NPP repeatedly pledged to protect this communal constitution.

Its stance on the temple exposes the false claim by Dissanayake and his JVP/NPP to stand for "equality" across the ethnic and religious divide and to oppose communal provocations. In his policy statement to parliament on November 21, he said that the government will take responsibility to not to allow the resurgence of "divisive racist politics" or "religious extremism to take root."

However, like all parties of the Colombo political establishment, the JVP backed the communal war to the hilt, and defended the military's atrocities and war crimes. The JVP, which was founded on Sinhala communal politics, depends heavily on the support of the military and Buddhist establishment.

Under conditions where the Dissanayake government is imposing the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures and deepening the attacks on the social position of working people, the whipping up of chauvinist sentiments both by Sinhala-Buddhist groups and Tamil parties only divides the working class.

Tamil parties, including the longstanding ITAK, have been widely discredited among the Tamil masses and suffered a humiliating defeat in last year's elections. They lost all electoral districts in the north and east in the parliamentary election in November, except for Batticaloa.

The hostility to these parties and leaders stems from their failure to defend the democratic rights of working people, their support for the IMF's austerity agenda and backing for US imperialism as a means to try to extract greater privileges from Colombo governments.

The latest communal tensions, which are being deliberately stirred up by the military, Sinhala-Buddhist racist groups and Tamil communal parties, is a serious warning to the working class. The working class must oppose this racist campaign and fight for the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers to defend the social and democratic rights of all.

The JVP/NPP government and the capitalist ruling class as a whole are haunted by the spectre of the April–July 2022 mass uprising which forced President Gotabaya Rajapakse to flee the country and brought down his government. Millions of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers and rural toilers participated in those protests and strikes.

The trade union bureaucracies, backed by fake left groups including the Frontline Socialist Party, betrayed the mass movement by diverting it into support for the proposal of the opposition parliamentary parties—the JVP/NPP and Samagi Jana Balawegaya—for an interim capitalist regime.

Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers must reject all forms of poisonous communalism and nationalism. Around the world, the ruling classes and their governments are resorting to chauvinism and xenophobia to drive a wedge between workers. In response, international unity must be the battle cry of the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) demands the immediate withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the north and east. Occupying forces are not only being used to suppress the Tamil masses but are also spearheading the whipping up of communal tensions.

Ending communal discrimination and defending basic democratic rights can only be achieved through a unified struggle of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers with the support of the rural masses to overthrow capitalism and establish a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. The Socialist Equality Party calls for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a united Socialist Federation of South Asia and internationally.

The SEP calls for the building of independent action committees in all workplaces and rural areas to fight for the social and democratic rights of working people. Build a Democratic and Socialist Congress based on delegates of these action committees to rally the working class and rural masses in the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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