

Sri Lanka: Communal provocation over Buddha statue in Trincomalee

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A group of Buddhist monks, with the support of a few Sinhalese residents in the area, sought to illegally erect a shrine with a Buddha statue on November 16, at the beachfront on Fort Road in Trincomalee in eastern Sri Lanka.

The location was near a coffee shop built with the patronage of the adjacent Buddhist temple, Sambuddha Jayanthi Bodhiraja Viharaya, to channel part of its income to the temple. The land on which the coffee shop stood was disputed, as the authorities of the Coast Conservation Department (CCD) had demarcated it as part of the coastal area for the use of local residents and visitors.

CCD officials told the media that while they were preparing to “carry out the court-mandated demolition [of the hotel] with police assistance” a new religious structure containing a Buddha statue was suddenly erected at the site. Officials said it was a deliberate act to “obstruct” the court order.

Trincomalee is a major city in the Eastern Province, where Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese live. The erection of a Buddhist shrine was a deliberate provocation with the potential to ignite communal tensions between Sinhala-Buddhists and the Tamil and Muslim communities that form a majority in the province.

The North and East were devastated by the 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which ended in May 2009. As part of the systematic discrimination against Tamils, successive Colombo governments established Sinhala colonies, particularly in the East, in a bid to change demographic patterns and foster communal tensions. Since the end of the war, Buddhist monks have been seeking to re-establish “their heritage” and expand their influence in the north and east.

Trincomalee District MP, Shanakiyan Rasamanickam, from the Tamil nationalist party ITAK notified authorities about the incident. Initially, Ananda Wijeyapala, the

public security minister in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government, instructed the police to remove the statue.

However, amid an outcry by Buddhist monks denouncing discrimination against Buddhism, Minister Wijeyapala immediately backtracked and instructed the police the next day to replace the statue. In parliament, he justified his decision to remove the Buddha statue by saying he had only done so for its protection having received information that it could be vandalised.

Sections of the Buddhist clergy condemned the removal of the statue as “an attack on the supremacy of Buddhism.” Uyangoda Maithrimurthi, the chief monk of the Amarapura Nikaya sect, said the temple had existed on the land in Trincomalee since 1951. He filed a court case to obtain a ruling declaring the area belongs to the temple.

On November 19, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, the monk who heads Bodu Bala Sena, which is notorious for provocations against Muslims, Tamil and Christian communities visited the site. He declared that “police have no authority to remove Buddha statues from any location” anywhere in the country, adding that no one can question the “supremacy of Buddhism” in Sri Lanka.

The phrase “supremacy of Buddhism” has a definite legal meaning. Sri Lanka’s constitution is a reactionary document which declares the priority of Buddhism and the Sinhala language, and discriminates against the Tamil and Muslim communities. The Buddhist hierarchy derive considerable material benefits that amounts to state sponsorship of the religion.

The Colombo political establishment has long used Sinhala supremacist ideology and anti-Tamil chauvinism to bolster their support and divide the working class, particularly in times of crisis. All of the opposition parties immediately joined the fray, condemning the removal of statue as an attack on Buddhism.

Speaking in the parliament, the opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, from the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), demanded that the government uphold the constitution and the supremacy of Buddhism. Sections of the establishment media joined in the filthy communal campaign.

In response, the Tamil nationalist parties opposed the government's actions on the basis of their own communal politics. ITAK spokesperson M.A. Sumanthiran called on all Tamil members of the government to resign immediately, declaring that the government's support for the placement of the statue exposed its claims to be fostering equality for all.

Tamil National People's Front leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam condemned the government, saying incident reflected the long history of state-driven demographic change in the "Tamil homeland." He warned that conflict inevitably arises "when the state manipulates to disadvantage the region's historically-rooted Tamil-speaking population."

These Tamil parties mirror the communal politics of the dominant Sinhala ruling elites. They have no concern for the democratic rights of Tamil working people but exploit the outrage caused by such incidents to push for greater powers and privileges for the Tamil elites.

Amid the ongoing furore, President Anura Kumara Disسانayake appeared in parliament on November 18. The Buddha statue, he said, had been "replaced" at the original location and "everything related to this issue has now been resolved." The government would act according to the verdict of the court to be delivered on December 26.

"We do not allow communalism," Disسانayake lyingly declared. "If someone is trying to revive old communalism, they will not be allowed at present or in the future." In fact, the JVP has been steeped in Sinhala supremacism since its formation in 1966 and an aggressive and violent "patriotic" defender of the "Sinhala nation," particularly during the protracted communal war against the LTTE.

However, as it sought to win power for the first time last year, the JVP—together with its electoral front, the NPP—drawn from layers of the upper middle class—attempted to put on a democratic and liberal face and whitewash its past. The aim was to boost its vote among Tamils and Muslims and get the backing of sections of big business.

A year on, the government's promises about democracy and reconciliation have been jettisoned. The North and

East of the island are still under military occupation. The political prisoners are in jails despite JVP/NPP's pledge to release them. Those responsible for war crimes and atrocities of the Sri Lankan military have not been held accountable.

Earlier this year, another incident demonstrated that the JVP/NPP is mired in Sinhala racist politics: the expansion of a Buddhist temple in Thayitti village in the Jaffna Peninsula. Tissa Viharaya was built illegally by the Sri Lankan army on private land belonging to 14 Tamil families displaced during the war. The government has simply ignored the ongoing protests of the families who are demanding the return of their land.

Now the JVP/NPP government has caved into the demands of the Sinhala Buddhist supremacists over the statue in Trincomalee. Disسانayake's "opposition" to communalism is empty political posturing.

The Sri Lankan ruling class confronts a deepening political and economic crisis. The JVP/NPP government is intensifying the implementation of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) demands for devastating austerity measures. It will resort to anti-Tamil chauvinism to whip up communal provocations and divisions as it faces mass opposition from workers and the rural poor to the destruction of jobs and their living conditions.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes all forms of racialism and nationalism and urges Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers to learn the lessons from the bloody consequences of the past—above all the 30-year communal war that cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

It is only the working class in the fight for socialism that will defend the basic democratic rights of all. Workers need to unite and rally the rural poor and oppressed in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government that will restructure society from top to bottom to meet the needs of the vast majority, not the profits of the wealthy few—that is, along socialist lines.



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