

Sri Lankan president falsely postures as champion of “national unity”

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Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake sought falsely to showcase his government as a champion of “national unity without racism” and “prosperity” during his recent visit to the war-ravaged northern district of Jaffna. The carefully organised visit centred on the inauguration of a national housing program and an anti-drug campaign.

Dissanayake chose January 15 and 16 for the visit, coinciding with the Thai Pongal festival, celebrated every year by Hindus as the dawn of the New Year. (The majority of Tamils in northern Sri Lanka are Hindus.) He participated in a festival event in Velanai, in Kayts Island, as well as meetings in Jaffna town and nearby areas. State and private media prominently featured images of the president posing for selfies, jogging with military officers and stopping to speak with residents at road junctions, promoting the image of an “easily accessible” leader.

Through these stage-managed interactions, the ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government mobilised several thousand people to boost the president’s and the government’s standing in the North, where public distrust remains deep.

In the 2024 parliamentary elections, the JVP/NPP won five seats while the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) seat tally dropped from six in 2020 to two, pushing back long-established Tamil bourgeois parties such as ITAK and the Tamil Congress-led Tamil People’s National Front (TNPF). This outcome reflected not a political endorsement of the JVP/NPP, but the collapse of traditional nationalist parties that have dominated Tamil politics for decades.

This was part of a broader breakdown of the island’s traditional bourgeois parties, including those rooted in the Sinhala-majority South over the past seven decades that intensified amid a deep political and economic crisis after Sri Lanka defaulted on foreign debt in 2022. A mass uprising of working people throughout the island forced President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign.

His replacement, Ranil Wickremesinghe, signed a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an emergency bailout loan on the basis of a harsh austerity program. The JVP, which had never held power, exploited the widespread opposition through its NPP front in the 2024 elections, falsely promising the defence of democratic rights and improved living standards.

Within just six months, however, the JVP/NPP government—having begun to implement ruthless austerity

measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), while expanding attacks on democratic rights—suffered a sharp electoral setback. In the May 2025 local government elections, its vote share fell by 18 percentage points nationally, with significant drops in the North and East. Having pledged to hold long-overdue provincial council elections, and facing growing social opposition nationwide, the government is now desperately attempting to build its credibility.

Addressing a gathering in Velanai, Dissanayake claimed that the past year under his government had marked a historic decline in “racially motivated conflicts,” and forces promoting racism had been “weakened.” Acknowledging widespread suspicion toward his party, he asked: “Even after one and a half years, do you still distrust us?”

Speaking in Kokuvil, the president alleged that communal tensions were being deliberately provoked by “some individuals [who] travelled to Jaffna during Poya days [full moon days], not for religious observance but to incite racism.”

He did not identify these “individuals.” His remarks were clearly directed at Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist groups, who provocatively mobilised their supporters to worship at the Tissa Vihara, built at Thaityadi village near Jaffna town. He covered up the fact that this Buddhist temple was expanded with the assistance of the military.

At the same time, however, Dissanayake accused Tamil racist groups of exploiting the temple expansion. He was referring to Tamils who have been protesting over the seizure of their lands for the temple. The president said he had instructed intelligence agencies to investigate the protests.

Dissanayake’s repeated appeals for Tamil trust in his government underscore the burden of the JVP/NPP’s own history of Sinhala chauvinism. The JVP emerged in 1965 as a party rooted in radicalism combined with Sinhala patriotism, branding Indian-origin Tamil estate workers as agents of “Indian expansionism.”

The JVP fully backed the decades-long communal war by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), unleashed in 1983 and which came to a bloody end in May 2009. Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were slaughtered in the final military offensives.

During the 2024 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, the JVP/NPP promised Tamil voters the release of all political prisoners, the return of civilian land seized by the military, and the provision of information to families of the tens of thousands of missing persons. These pledges have since been

abandoned.

The government now claims that political prisoners were convicted on criminal charges and therefore cannot be released. Some land has been returned, but an estimated 2,600 acres (about 1,050 hectares) still remain under military control, according to reports. Instead of revealing the fate of the disappeared, the administration simply proposes limited reparations to victims' families.

At the UN Human Rights Council, Sri Lanka has rejected any international investigation into wartime atrocities, continuing the stance of previous regimes in favour of domestic inquiries that have exonerated the military. Around 100,000 heavily armed troops still occupy the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Dissanayake further sought to recast the civil war as the product of abstract "racist politics" of previous rulers, claiming that both Sinhala and Tamil populations were manipulated by power-hungry politicians.

This deliberately obscures the chief responsibility of the Colombo ruling elites, which have systematically whipped up anti-Tamil communalism in times of crisis to divide the working class along ethnic lines since being transferred political power in 1948. The Tamil nationalist elite also played a decisive role in provoking communalism among the Tamil population.

At the same time, the president is trying to cover up the JVP's own reactionary communal record as an enthusiastic supporter of anti-Tamil racialist war.

Dissanayake's claim that racism has been "weakened" under the JVP/NPP administration is a lie. Sinhala chauvinist groups remain very active, seeking to provoke communal tensions. There is widespread opposition among workers and young people alike to communalism, shaped by the bloody disaster of the 26-year war. The JVP, through its broad NPP front, seeks to exploit this sentiment, but the party remains rooted in anti-Tamil chauvinism.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that, as working-class struggles develop and threaten capitalist rule, the JVP will once again whip up communal tensions to divide and weaken the working class. The Tamil nationalist parties, which do not represent the interests of the vast majority of Tamil working people, will respond with divisive Tamil nationalism to defend the interests of the venal Tamil elites.

At Chavakachcheri, 10 kilometres south of Jaffna, Dissanayake announced plans to construct just 2,500 houses for war-displaced families, allocating a pitiful 2 million rupees (\$US6,500) per unit. According to official figures, nearly 19,000 families in the Northern and Eastern Provinces remain without proper shelter, 16 years after the end of the war.

Tamil masses in the North and East continue to endure impoverished and insecure conditions that will only worsen as the Dissanayake regime imposes the IMF austerity measures. The World Bank reported that an additional 3.9 percent of the population fell into poverty in 2024 due to austerity, bringing the total to 23.4 percent, with conditions continuing to worsen.

Dissanayake announced proposals to renovate Palaly Airport, expand Kankesanthurai Port in Jaffna district with Indian assistance, and promote tourism along Jaffna's coastline. The government also intends to establish "special economic zones,"

including in the North and East. These projects are aimed at appealing to the Tamil elites to collaborate in opening up the region as a new ultra-cheap labour platform.

The ITAK earlier announced that it had decided not to participate in the president's program, even though it was officially invited. It accused the government of exploiting projects to sideline elected local councils, in order to strengthen the NPP/JVP's political presence in the North. In reality, the Tamil parties share the same agenda of encouraging foreign investment to jointly exploit cheap labour, but only differ on the terms.

The SEP insists that Tamil people cannot secure their democratic and social rights, obtain justice for war crimes, or end racist discrimination under the JVP/NPP or any other capitalist rule, as demonstrated by the bloody war and nearly eight decades of bourgeois governance. Likewise, the communal politics of the Tamil nationalist parties, including separatism—as preached by the LTTE—has proven to be a tragic dead-end for working people.

The SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), have from their inception explained that the reactionary capitalist class in belated capitalist countries cannot resolve democratic tasks, including ending discrimination against Tamil and Muslim minorities.

Based on Leon Trotsky's seminal theory of Permanent Revolution, we call for the unity of the working class across ethnic lines, rallying the rural poor in the fight for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic (a workers' and peasants' government), as part of a Federation of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally.

Only the SEP/RCL has consistently opposed racist discrimination and communal war, and called for the withdrawal of armed forces from the North and East—a campaign it continues to wage on the basis of a socialist program. A revolutionary party is required to fight for that perspective. We urge workers and young people to join the SEP.



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