

Sri Lanka's JVP government commemorates 17 years since "victory" in racist anti-Tamil war

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May 18 marked 17 years since the Sri Lankan state declared military victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), bringing nearly three decades of civil war that devastated the island's north and east, and claimed the lives of tens of thousands, to a bloody close.

The following day President Anura Kumara Disanayake presided over the "National Victory Day Commemoration" at the Ranaviru (War Heroes) Memorial in Battaramulla, next to parliament, where the names of thousands of soldiers killed in the war are engraved in concrete.

Speaking at the event, Disanayake repeatedly praised military personnel as "war heroes" for their "immense sacrifice" to liberate the "motherland" from "terrorism." Seeking to cover up the anti-Tamil communal character of the war, he said the military fought against "separatism" and "not against any ethnic community." The successive governments led by the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) who carried out racist war, and parties which supported it, including Disanayake's JVP, have all used this characterisation to justify the slaughter.

The genocidal conduct of the Sri Lankan state during the war completely undermines Disanayake's claim. During the last stages of the war alone, between January and May 2009, investigations by human rights bodies, including the United Nations Panel of Experts, concluded that tens of thousands of civilians were killed, largely by government shelling, including attacks on hospitals and humanitarian facilities. The International Crisis Group estimated even higher civilian casualties and presented evidence suggesting the deliberate shelling of civilian areas. UN-authenticated video footage also appeared to show Sri Lankan soldiers executing bound Tamil prisoners. Despite subsequent investigations, no senior military official or political leader who authorised or oversaw these crimes has ever been prosecuted.

LTTE leaders, including those attempting to surrender, were killed despite assurances of safety from the Colombo government. In the aftermath of the war, around 300,000 Tamil civilians were confined to militarised camps, where reports emerged of harassment, sexual abuse and enforced

disappearances. Protests by families of the disappeared have continued for years in Jaffna and elsewhere, with relatives demanding information about loved ones who vanished during the war's final phase. Even today, thousands of acres of land in the North and East belonging to Tamil people remains occupied by the Sri Lankan military.

The bloody end of the war also proved the utter bankruptcy of the LTTE's separatist program. As the WSWS wrote: "[T]he debacle suffered by the LTTE was the outcome of a perspective that lacked any progressive economic or political rationale: that the answer to government-backed anti-Tamil discrimination was the carving out of a separate ethnically based state for the Tamil minority on one section of the small island of Sri Lanka."

Notwithstanding Disanayake's rhetoric about "communal harmony," his party was an enthusiastic supporter of racist war against the LTTE. The JVP used to boast that it had pushed then-president Mahinda Rajapakse of the SLFP to resume the war in 2006. Disanayake's JVP/National People's Power (NPP) government continues to uphold the same communal politics, which has been used by all bourgeois parties to divide the working class along ethnic lines.

The UNP government of president J.R. Jayawardena initiated the war in 1983. This was the culmination of decades of anti-Tamil racist discriminatory policies, carried out by successive governments since Sri Lanka became formally independent in 1948, in order to block a united movement of the working class against capitalism. Fearing a unified struggle by Tamil and Sinhala workers, the 1948 UNP government moved to strip around one million Tamil-speaking plantation workers of citizenship shortly after independence. Whenever the working class displayed increased militancy, the ruling elite responded by deepening communal divisions, most notably through the Sinhala-only policy introduced in 1956.

This process was facilitated by the historic betrayal carried out by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), a party that had claimed adherence to Trotskyism, when in 1964 it joined the bourgeois government led by the SLFP. That betrayal deprived Tamil people of what many had regarded as a crucial political

instrument capable of uniting workers against the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist state apparatus. Colvin R. de Silva, an LSSP leader, directly participated in drafting the reactionary 1972 constitution, which entrenched Sinhala as the state language and Buddhism as the state religion. Tamil workers and youth were driven further into political alienation and desperation, creating conditions for emergence of Tamil separatist movements in the north and east.

The shift to open-market restructuring after 1977, alongside the brutal suppression of the 1980 general strike, marked decisive turning points. The bourgeoisie, unable to address the burning social and democratic aspirations of the working class and oppressed people, turned sharply to chauvinism and repression—culminating in the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom and the eruption of full-scale civil war.

Throughout the nearly three-decade-long conflict, the Sri Lankan ruling elite extensively exploited the communal war to suppress the class struggle. Successive capitalist governments and parties backed the war effort, while their affiliated trade unions acted to prevent the emergence of any united movement of Tamil and Sinhala workers.

Dissanayake and other JVP leaders were among the strongest proponents of the war, insisting that the Sri Lankan military pursue its campaign to the end. Along with the rest of the capitalist political establishment, JVP leaders bear political responsibility for the immense human cost of the conflict, including the deaths of thousands of Tamil civilians.

The United States and other Western imperialist powers, along with their allies such as Israel and India, backed Colombo's war against the LTTE by providing political and diplomatic support, as well as military intelligence and equipment. Following the end of the war in May 2009, the US and Western powers began raising allegations of war crimes and serious human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan military, advancing a series of resolutions at sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

These initiatives were not driven by concern about the atrocities against Tamil people, but by broader geopolitical calculations. They aimed to pressure the government of then-president Mahinda Rajapakse to align more closely with the US-led strategic offensive against China. Colombo had strengthened ties with Beijing through China's support for the war against the LTTE and through substantial Chinese investments and loans following the conflict.

Against the triumphalism of the Colombo state, against the cynical exploitation by imperialist powers, and against the nationalist diversions of both Sinhalese and Tamil bourgeois politics, there stands one political tendency that has maintained an unbroken, principled struggle against the war: the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL).

It was the RCL that, in the late 1980s, advanced the bold and scientifically grounded slogan of the Socialist Republic of Sri

Lanka and Eelam, as part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia. This program was aimed at the revolutionary unification of the working class throughout the region, cutting across the communal and national divisions whipped up by all the bourgeois parties.

This program cut through the false choice between Colombo's chauvinism and the LTTE's separatist nationalism. It recognised that the root of Tamil national oppression lay not in the Sinhala people as such, but in the Sri Lankan capitalist ruling class and the communal state it constructed and sustained.

The RCL and the SEP consistently exposed the war crimes and human rights violations committed by the Sri Lankan military, demanded the unconditional withdrawal of military forces from the north and east, and fought against every attempt to subordinate the Tamil masses to bourgeois nationalist organisations like the LTTE. This principled stance earned the SEP the hatred of both sides of the communal divide—successive governments in Colombo along with other Sinhala racialist forces and the LTTE.

In opposition to both the Colombo's racialist war and the reactionary Tamil separatism advanced by the LTTE and other Tamil nationalist parties, the SEP advanced a socialist and internationalist perspective, insisting that Tamil workers and rural poor could defend their interests only through uniting with Sinhala workers in a common struggle against capitalism. The party's call for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam was rooted in this program. It argued that Sinhala-speaking workers could not defend their own democratic and social rights without opposing the war against the Tamil people.

The capitalist state cannot tolerate the political unity of Tamil and Sinhala workers, which threatens a system based on the exploitation of labour and communal division. The SEP warns that whatever phrases Dissanayake uses about "national unity" and opposition to racism, the JVP/NPP government will respond to growing struggles by workers against its IMF-dictated austerity measures by reviving anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism. Working people must oppose this agenda by taking up the fight for the unification of the working class under the banner of international socialist revolution.



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