

Sri Lankan government celebrates “victory” after army seizes the East

By Nanda Wickremasinghe
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The army’s capture of the last eastern stronghold of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at Thoppigala on July 11 became the occasion for the Sri Lankan government to stage a grotesque “victory” celebration last Thursday to whip up jingoistic sentiment. Far from evoking popular support, however, the ceremony exposed President Mahinda Rajapakse’s increasing reliance on the armed forces and the growing militarisation of every aspect of society.

The “Dawn of the East” ceremony to “salute the armed forces” took place under heavy security. Police and soldiers sealed off Independent Square, the capital’s main official venue, and its surroundings. Regular roadblocks and checkpoints in Colombo were supplemented by heavily-armed foot patrols deployed on every street.

Aspects of the ceremony took on the character of a feudal ceremony presided over by the monarch. The commanders of the armed forces and police all presented *sannasas* or parchments to the president, proclaiming “mission accomplished”. The triumphalism stripped away the government’s threadbare pretense that the military offensives of the past year had been “defensive” and conformed to the 2002 ceasefire agreement.

Rajapakse’s address to the nation was preceded by a 21-gun salute, a military parade involving artillery, tanks and multi-barrel rocket launchers, and a fly-past by warplanes. The president eulogised the military, declaring that a “glorious chapter” had opened up after the armed forces had brought “liberation to the people of the East”. He attacked the ceasefire, declaring: “There is no country other than Sri Lanka, where the criminal act of conceding a legal control to terrorists has been implemented through an agreement.”

Rajapakse absurdly boasted that the military campaign had been concluded with “minimum harm to the people and least harm to the security forces”. The military’s offensives have been marked by the indiscriminate use of

aerial and artillery bombardment. At least 4,500 people died in the renewed conflict, including many civilians, and nearly 300,000 people have been driven from their homes.

The military campaign has been accompanied by hundreds of disappearances and murders, and the arbitrary detention without trial of many more “LTTE suspects”. The government has imposed de facto media censorship and savagely attacked political opponents as traitors. Rajapakse bitterly attacked opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe for suggesting that the capture of the Thoppigala jungle area might prove to be illusory. Do not “belittle” or “insult” the armed forces and their sacrifices, which “have won these victories for our motherland,” he declared.

The government ordered most schools and state institutions to hold their own ceremonies, but its efforts to manufacture enthusiasm for the war fell completely flat. Appeals for residents and businesses to fly the national flag went largely unheeded. Even the Colombo media noted the lack of support for the glorification of a war that has heaped economic burdens on working people and undermined democratic rights.

Last weekend’s *Sunday Times* commented: “Despite days of propaganda that tried to whip up a patriotic fervour over the event, it is clear that the euphoria was missing. Thus, Thursday’s *tamasha*, the celebration of military victory at Thoppigala, which the government wanted to equate to the grandeur of an Independence Day celebration, clearly failed to achieve that objective. There was just not enough public enthusiasm.”

Rajapakse declared at the ceremony that he had “no desire to enter history as a popular politician” or one who was dependent on elections. In other words, the president is prepared to ride roughshod over any political opposition and, if need be, ignore basic constitutional and legal processes—a recipe for the establishment of a police

state.

The government plans to open up the “liberated East” for investors and has established a huge, heavily-guarded Special Economic Zone. “Please come to the East,” Rajapakse implored foreign investors. The military occupation in the East will be bolstered by 9 major police stations and 42 police posts.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse told the *Island* on July 14 that “the task of the armed forces [was] to keep the areas and strategic strongholds... which were captured from the LTTE terrorists, safe from infiltration”. Plans are in place to boost the total strength of the armed forces by another 50,000 personnel. Retired Air Force commander Harry Gunatileke estimated that the extra salaries alone would cost \$US62 million.

President Rajapakse has made clear that the government will accept nothing short of the LTTE’s surrender and disarming. He told the state-owned *Daily News* last Wednesday: “War or peace, we are ready... It is now up to the Tigers to decide which path they want to tread on.”

While supporting the war, the major opposition parties, well aware of widespread popular opposition, kept their distance from the government’s victory celebrations. The United National Party (UNP) declared that the capture of Thoppigala should have been marked by religious ceremonies. Opposition leader Wickremesinghe criticised the government for allowing 800 LTTE fighters to flee and warned of future guerrilla infiltration into the East.

The JVP-sponsored Patriotic National Movement (PNM) held its own meeting last Wednesday to pay homage to the armed forces, insisting that national celebrations should be postponed until the final defeat of the LTTE in the North. The JVP has criticised the government for not waging war on the LTTE vigorously enough.

Even the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), which is part of the ruling coalition, expressed reservations about the ceremony. While attending the event, SLMC leader Rauf Hakim told parliament on Thursday evening that he only did so with “much reluctance”. He warned: “War rhetoric at such ceremonies will not promote harmony. In fact they only add insult to injury to the Tamils by giving the impression that they are a conquered people.” The Muslim population in the East has been hit hard by the fighting.

The major powers that preside over the so-called international peace process were caught in a bind. For all their attempts to appear even-handed, the Donor Co-chairs—the US, EU, Japan and Norway—have turned a

blind eye to the Rajapakse government’s flagrant breaches of the 2002 ceasefire. Their envoys diplomatically declined to attend the ceremony, as to do so would have been interpreted as open support for the war. The studied silence on the victory celebrations simply confirms that the major powers will not object as the Sri Lankan military goes on the offensive against the LTTE’s northern strongholds.

The military has already begun probing operations. On July 16, the LTTE said it had killed four special commandos at Paalamodai in Mannar district and also reported an army artillery attack on a hospital in LTTE-held Puliyankulam. Last Thursday, the LTTE reported another artillery attack at Puliyankulam, which is the main entry point into its territory in the Vanni area. Last Friday, the army lost at least three soldiers repelling an LTTE attack in Mannar district. The LTTE claimed to have killed 10 soldiers in an assault on a small army camp at Neelachcheanai. The military insisted that its troops had killed nine LTTE fighters and injured scores.

While the government claims to have “cleared” the East, the assassination of Chief Secretary Herath Abeyweera on July 16 indicates that the situation is far from stable. The government immediately blamed the LTTE for the murder—an accusation that the LTTE denied. The LTTE may have been responsible, but there are many other armed groups in the East, including pro-government militias, that could have carried out the killing. In particular, the Karuna group, which broke from the LTTE in 2004, has been vying to assert its political predominance in the “liberated” East.

The government’s “victory” in the East is as hollow as its grandiose celebrations. Rajapakse’s decision to whip up communal tensions and plunge the island back to war following his election in November 2005 was a desperate attempt to divide working people and divert attention from deteriorating living standards. Even if the army were able to inflict a comprehensive military defeat on the LTTE—something it has failed to do in more than two decades—it would simply set the stage for further political and social convulsions.

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