

Sri Lanka: Fall of Kilinochchi marks turning point in civil war

By Sarath Kumara
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After months of heavy fighting, the Sri Lankan military announced on Friday the capture of the northern town of Kilinochchi, the administrative headquarters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The fall of Kilinochchi may be the prelude to military defeat of the LTTE, but, even if that proves to be the case, it does not augur a new period of peace and prosperity for the island.

Kilinochchi is situated on the A9 highway connecting the capital Colombo to the northern Jaffna Peninsula. The LTTE have held the town and most of the surrounding Wannu region for more than a decade, transforming it into a de facto capital, complete with courts, police and administrative offices. Its fall opens the way for a new thrust toward the LTTE's only remaining major stronghold—Mullaithivu on the north-eastern coast.

The capture of Kilinochchi is the culmination of more than two years of brutal fighting since President Mahinda Rajapakse effectively tore up the 2002 ceasefire and relaunched the war in July 2006. The army has exploited its superior numbers and greater firepower to wage a war of attrition aimed at wearing down the LTTE. Having driven the LTTE out of its strongholds in the East, the military focussed on the Wannu from mid-2007, capturing the western half of the region and cutting the LTTE's supply lines to southern India by late last year.

However, the fighting for Kilinochchi dragged on for months as the LTTE made a determined stand. Keen to show off its prize, the military escorted international correspondents around the town yesterday. Major General Jagath Dias, who led the offensive, told the media: "It was very difficult to walk into Kilinochchi. It took 1 1/2 months to breach the earthen bund and ditches of the Tigers [LTTE]."

The sketchy reports and photos revealed a bombed-out ghost town. Most of the civilians fled more than a month ago. The military has repeatedly used its artillery and air force to terrorise the population in LTTE-held areas. No accurate information is available on the fighting as no independent journalists have been allowed into the war zones. Both sides routinely distort casualty figures, but it is likely that hundreds of soldiers and LTTE fighters were killed and many more injured in the battle for the town.

The final blow to the LTTE came with the capture of the town of Paranthan on the A9 to the north of Kilinochchi last week. Surrounded on three sides, the LTTE leadership faced the prospect of being completely cut off, and retreated from the town. The Sri Lankan military has already indicated that there will be no respite.

The immediate target appears to be Elephant Pass on the southern Jaffna Peninsula, where the LTTE captured a major military base in 2000. The army is also pushing toward Mullaithivu.

Having staked everything on a military victory over the LTTE, the government is exploiting the capture of Kilinochchi for all it is worth. President Rajapakse gloated on Friday: "Whatever the words or language used to describe it, this is truly an incomparable victory." Using the same pretext as the Bush administration for its neo-colonial occupations, he declared: "What our heroic troops have achieved is not only the capture of the great fortress of the LTTE, but a major victory in the world's battle against terrorism."

The civil war in Sri Lanka, however, is no more a "war on terrorism" than the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The conflict is the product of entrenched anti-Tamil discrimination whipped up by the elites of the island's Sinhala majority as a means of dividing the working class and bolstering their rule. The LTTE, which emerged in the 1970s, is based on the bourgeois nationalist program of an independent statelet for the Tamil minority in the North and East of the island.

Despite the government's efforts to organise victory celebrations, there is no mood of elation among ordinary working people—Tamil or Sinhalese—who continue to pay the price for the protracted communal war. More than 70,000 people have died in 25 years of fighting. Many more have been injured and maimed. Hundreds of thousands have been driven from their homes and have lived from hand to mouth in squalid refugee camps for years.

While fighting may go on for months and sharp reversals are still possible, the army appears to be poised to seize the LTTE's remaining northern strongholds. But anyone who hopes that this "liberation" will bring peace to the island will be bitterly disappointed. Even without the capacity to hold towns and wage open battles, the LTTE may continue a guerrilla war for years.

More fundamentally, however, the government is organically incapable of addressing, let alone resolving, the political issues that produced the war. Announcing the capture of Kilinochchi, Rajapakse declared: "It is a victory over venomous separatism that sought to divide people on grounds of race and religion." But this stands reality on its head. For a quarter century, successive governments in Colombo have waged a reactionary communal war to entrench the power and privileges of the island's Sinhala elites. Having suppressed the LTTE, the communal conflicts will inevitably arise in another form.

Moreover, for the past two years, the government has placed the

full economic burden of the war on working people. As the defence budget has soared, funds for education, welfare and health services have been slashed and taxes increased. Rajapakse has accused critics, opponents and protesting workers, students and farmers of undermining national security and playing into the hands of the LTTE. While the government denounces the LTTE as "terrorists," the military is linked to death squads that have been responsible for killing or abducting hundreds of people since Rajapakse came to power in November 2005.

In his speech on Friday, Rajapakse called for more sacrifice. "Our motherland wants you to have this commitment and patience for a short while longer ... until the final act of this false Eelam struggle is played to its finish" and the LTTE "finally defeated". But the capture of the remaining LTTE strongholds will not end the demands for sacrifice. The cost of the war has compounded the impact of the global financial crisis on the island and will inevitably produce protests. The same military machine that was used against the LTTE will be turned on working people—Sinhala and Tamil alike.

The Rajapakse government has relied heavily on the military, which has increasingly put its own stamp on political life in Colombo. Expressing the Sinhala supremacism that imbues the security forces and the political establishment as a whole, army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka bluntly told a Canadian newspaper last September: "I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese. We being the majority of the country, 75 percent, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country. They [the minorities] can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things."

What the "liberation" of the North will look like is already clear from what has taken place in the East. The government has installed a provincial administration headed by the leader of a paramilitary militia, notorious for abductions, extortion and murder. This "elected" government is simply the façade for a military occupation that aims to transform the region into a cheap labour platform. The government and the military intend to repeat the process in the "liberated North". And if opposition emerges in the working class elsewhere, the same methods will be used.

As for the LTTE, its military setbacks are an expression of the bankruptcy of its political perspective. Its Tamil separatism is the mirror image of the Sinhala supremacism of the Colombo political establishment. The LTTE has not only failed to make any appeal to the ordinary Sinhalese working people, but driven a wedge between Tamil and Sinhalese workers by blaming the latter for the government's war. Its attacks on ordinary Sinhalese, such as the notorious bombing of the Central Bank in 1996, provided grist for the mill of Sinhalese extremism.

LTTE political wing leader B. Nadesan tried to put the best possible face on a bad situation, telling Reuters last week that the LTTE's strategy did "not centre on a town or a city" and "losing land and recapturing it is common". He added: "Our freedom struggle will continue to create war towns until our struggle reaches its goal". In a desperate attempt to bolster sagging morale, the LTTE carried out a suicide attack on Friday evening in Colombo near Air Force headquarters, killing 3 airmen and

injuring 30 others, including civilians.

The government and the military immediately seized on the incident as the pretext for a further crackdown. Another round up of Tamils in Colombo and surrounding suburbs took place over the weekend and all Tamils who arrived in the capital after 2003 have been ordered to register at police stations.

The LTTE's call for a separate mini-state of Eelam has always been based on seeking the support of one or more of the major powers, such as the US and the European Union, or India, the predominant regional power. However, after the collapse of peace talks in 2003, the LTTE has been effectively isolated internationally, in particular by the US. For the Bush administration, the peace talks were only ever a means for ending a conflict that threatened US interests in South Asia, especially in relation to India.

The LTTE's hopes that India would be more sympathetic have proven to be worthless. While the Indian government remains sensitive to popular anger in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, its overriding concern has been to prevent the LTTE's struggle from encouraging separatist movements in India. New Delhi has quietly been providing training, intelligence and supplies to the Sri Lankan military, in part to ensure that regional rival Pakistan does not gain any ground in Colombo.

As it has been driven back militarily, the LTTE has been reduced to pathetic appeals to the "international community" to intervene. While the major powers have mildly criticised the Sri Lankan military over the worst of its excesses, their stance was made absolutely clear early last year when the Rajapakse government formally withdrew from the 2002 ceasefire without a bleat of protest internationally. Following the fall of Kilinochchi, India announced that it would seek the extradition of LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran, if he were captured alive, over the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Whatever the immediate twists and turns ahead, none of the basic needs and aspirations of working people in Sri Lanka will be met through the victory of the military in this reactionary war.

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