

# Tamil party complicit in detention of Sri Lankan political prisoners

By K. Nesan  
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The ending of the Sri Lankan political prisoners' hunger strike and their continued detention by the government is a political indictment of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). They are complicit in the defeat of the campaign to end the longstanding policy of arbitrary, indefinite detention.

For the second time in a month, the prisoners launched a hunger strike on November 10 which was ended after seven days following the intervention of TNA leaders. Likewise during the previous hunger strike which began on October 12, the TNA leaders desperately worked to call it off. The TNA's main concern throughout was to defend the government in Colombo.

The TNA turned the prayer wheel again and again to praise the US-led regime-change operation that led to the election of President Maithripala Sirisena in January. It promised Tamil voters that Sirisena would bring about a "democratic restoration" in Sri Lanka and a "political solution" to the country's long-running civil war.

In the parliamentary elections in August, the TNA took the same stance, unconditionally backing the United National Party (UNP) alliance that underpins the Sirisena government.

Many of the prisoners are Tamils who have been accused of being supporters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which was defeated in 2009. Throughout the hunger strikes, the TNA functioned as a servant of the government, by deceiving the prisoners and their families.

Six days after the first hunger strike began on October 12, a delegation of TNA officials led by Opposition Leader T. Sambandan visited the Magazine prison in Colombo, urging the political prisoners to end their protest. Sambandan declared that Sirisena and

Justice Minister Wijeydasa Rajapaksha had personally assured him that the detainees would be freed by November 7.

Sambandan issued a statement pledging that the prisoners would be released on bail. This also proved to be another political fraud. The TNA delegation brought the hunger strike to an end by cynically promising to join a fast until death if the prisoners were not released by November 7.

The deadline passed and the prisoners resumed their protest on November 10, but none of the TNA delegation honoured its pledge to join the hunger strike. In fact, Sambandan left for India and washed his hands of their fate. Prior to leaving, he declared that "the decision of the prisoners is theirs, we can't guide them. Guiding them is wrong. Nothing more can be said regarding the prisoners."

The TNA did call a one-day hartal [a strike and general closure] on November 13, claiming to express "solidarity with the hunger strike of political prisoners" and demanding their immediate release. The TNA's bogus posturing was to deflect growing popular anger over the continued detention of the prisoners, while covering up its ongoing behind-the-scenes dealings with the government.

Just one day after the hartal, the government cynically arranged bail for 31 detainees. However, they were required to present two separate bonds of one million rupees (\$US7,029) each. None of their relatives could afford such a sum, so all the detainees were sent back to prison. Had they been released on bail, they would still have had to report to the Terrorism Investigation Department every other Sunday and would have been barred from leaving Sri Lanka.

The government later bailed out another eight prisoners on similar conditions while considering

sending some prisoners for “rehabilitation”—another form of detention, in this case combined with “brainwashing.”

Prior to resuming their hunger strike, the detainees issued a statement declaring that they now suspected the TNA of working with the government. They indicated they had information that the TNA never directly requested a general amnesty from either the president or prime minister.

The TNA’s Northern Province chief minister C. Wigneswaran, who occasionally criticises the government, played a particularly insidious role. He and three of his ministers paid a visit to Sirisena on November 12. Wigneswaran said afterwards that the president personally agreed to release all detainees in a general amnesty but that “certain political issues” prevented him from doing so.

Before ending the November hunger strike, prisoners wrote a letter to prison authorities, stating that they were suspending their struggle based on the promises of Wigneswaran. He had visited them on November 16 and told them that all the prisoners would soon be released. If the government failed to release them by December 15, they indicated they would resume the hunger strike.

The government’s refusal to free the political prisoners exposes the entire charade that Sirisena and the UNP, orchestrated by the US, would defend democratic rights. Washington backed the ouster of previous president Mahinda Rajapakse, not because of his autocratic methods of rule, but because he was too closely aligned with China.

The government installed after the August parliamentary elections was declared to be a “national unity government” that would ensure “good governance.” Justice Minister Rajapaksha and Commissioner General of Prisons Rohana Pushpakumara have, however, repeatedly denied that there are any political prisoners in Sri Lanka.

This is an outright lie. Apart from the officially-acknowledged detainees held as “LTTE supporters,” a recently published report by the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights cited repeated allegations that the security forces continue to run secret detention camps, and called for an investigation.

In fact, in prisons throughout the country, there are people of all ethnicities detained without trial due to

their political ties. They demand to be recognised as political prisoners, so as to facilitate their immediate release or the expediting of their cases.

At least 250 people are detained on charges of associating with the LTTE. Some have been detained for more than 20 years, others since the end of civil war in 2009. They were arrested under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism act (PTA), which provides for indefinite detention without trial.

The government’s contempt for the political prisoners is a clear indication that its planned inquiry into crimes committed during the island’s communal war will be a cover-up. All parties of the Colombo establishment are responsible for the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, as well as “disappearances” and extra-judicial killings, torture, rape and other gross human rights abuses.

The continued detention of political prisoners is not only a sign of the regime’s hostility to the Tamil people. Its policies make clear that it will employ brutal and anti-democratic measures against workers—be they Sinhala, Tamil, or Muslim—to crush opposition to austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

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