

Sri Lanka: Chauvinist response to large Tamil protest

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12 October 2016

A large protest in the Sri Lankan town of Jaffna, involving thousands of working people and youth, took place on September 24 against the continued suppression of the democratic rights of Tamils and the military occupation of the island's north.

The demonstration triggered a hysterical response by the Sinhala-dominated political and media establishment in Colombo. All the Sinhala political parties, along with the Buddhist hierarchy, vociferously condemned the Jaffna action, branding it as an attempt to revive the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated militarily in 2009.

The protest, named *Ezhuka Tamil* or Tamil upheaval, was organised by the Tamil People's Council (TPC), comprised of several parties of the Tamil elite, led by Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran.

Wigneswaran was elected to his post as a candidate of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which supported the campaign, backed by the US and India, to oust Mahinda Rajapakse as president at the 2015 election and install Maithripala Sirisena. Washington regarded Rajapakse as too closely tied to China. Sirisena, with the TNA's backing, has tilted Sri Lankan foreign policy toward the US.

Although Sirisena postured during the election as a democrat and an advocate of "reconciliation," the military occupation and state-sponsored Sinhala colonisation of the north and east of the island—where Tamils are in a majority—continues unabated.

The Jaffna protest demanded the removal of the military camps and the return of land occupied by the military to its legitimate owners, the release of political prisoners and an end to the forcible establishment of Sinhala colonies and Buddhist cultural icons in Tamil neighborhoods.

Wigneswaran, who is still a TNA leader, initiated the protest in a bid to contain growing opposition. Support for the TNA has fallen due to its close association with the Colombo government. TNA leader R. Sampanthan, who is the official leader of the parliamentary opposition, supports the government, without occupying a cabinet post.

Speaking at the rally, Wigneswaran highlighted the continued military presence in the north and the worsening social problems facing Tamils. He called for further powers to be devolved to the North and East of Sri Lanka, declaring it the "Tamil people's homeland." This call for "self determination" and greater devolution has nothing to do with addressing the democratic and social rights of the Tamil masses but rather is an appeal for a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo for the mutual exploitation of the working class and poor.

WSWS reporters spoke to some of the protesters, most of whom expressed their anger at the government and the TNA, as well as their distrust and skepticism toward the TPC.

Many participants spoke bitterly about the bogus campaign waged by the major Western powers, with the US in the forefront, that threatened the Rajapakse regime with human rights charges before an international criminal court. Protesters condemned the illusions that continue to be spread by the TNA and TPC that these same powers, who are engaged in brutal wars around the world, will pressure the Colombo government to become benevolent.

As soon as the Jaffna protest wound up, the political and media establishment in Colombo unleashed a barrage of Sinhala chauvinism against Tamil people and the demonstration's organisers, Wigneswaran in particular. The call for "self determination" and a

Tamil homeland is bitterly opposed by the major parties, which are thoroughly steeped in Sinhala supremacism.

Both parties of the ruling coalition—Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP) of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe—along with the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Rajapakse-led group vied with each other to demonstrate their Sinhala communal credentials.

At a weekly media briefing, government minister Nimal Siripala de Silva from the SLFP declared: “Now, we have to think anew about the devolution of power to the Tamil areas. What sort of a situation could arise if a chief minister of this sort [Wigneswaran] comes to power? My personal opinion is that we have to give thought to these issues when formulating a new constitution.”

De Silva demanded that Wigneswaran withdraw his statements at the protest rally and called on the TNA to “take disciplinary action” against him.

State Minister of Defence Ruwan Wijewardene from the UNP declared that the government would not remove the army camps in the North. Stressing that his government was not afraid of protests, he added: “They can shout all they want, but we reiterate that we will not remove the camps.”

JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva deliberately twisted the demand of the protesters to stop the military-sponsored Sinhala colonisation, giving it a vicious racist slant. “Calls to keep the Sinhalese away from the North are unacceptable,” he said. In the same breath, Silva endorsed the provocative erection of Buddhist temples under the patronage of the government and military. “Citizens living in any part of the country have the right to construct places of worship,” he said.

Rajapakse’s faction of the SLFP and its allies in the Joint Opposition (JO) exploited the situation to escalate its ongoing chauvinist campaign to claw back political power. It portrayed the Jaffna protest as a “clear sign” of the revival of the separatist LTTE, due to the spinelessness of the government. JO spokesman Udaya Gammanpila, leader of Pivithuru Hela Urumaya, declared he was hopeful that “Wigneswaran would be arrested and remanded.”

Former president Rajapakse made clear that he would

have suppressed the Jaffna demonstration, saying: “If I still ruled the country, such things wouldn’t have happened.” Rajapakse’s government was notorious for its brutal prosecution of the final 2009 phase of the civil war, during which thousands of Tamil civilians were killed, hundreds “disappeared” and others were imprisoned without trial as “LTTE sympathisers.”

The government and the political establishment as a whole—Sinhala and Tamil alike—are whipping up communalism in order to divert and divide the working class amid a deepening economic and social crisis wracking the island. The International Monetary Fund is demanding ever more insistently that the government implement harsh austerity measures that will impact heavily on the living conditions of workers and the poor.

The ruling elites are terrified that a movement of Tamils in the North demanding their basic democratic and social rights will link up with the developing class struggles of workers, students and the poor in the South, particularly with the ongoing protest actions by tens of thousands of Tamil-speaking plantation workers, demanding higher wages.

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