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Tamil nationalists support US-backed factions in Sri Lankan political crisis

On November 3, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) announced that it would vote for the United National Party's (UNP) no-confidence motion against Mahinda Rajapakse in parliament. An official TNA statement described President Maithripala Sirisena's sacking of UNP Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and his appointment of Rajapakse as prime minister as "illegal," "unconstitutional" and an "undemocratic" violation of "parliamentary supremacy."

Mavai Senathirajah, who leads the Federal Party, the dominant component of the TNA, said four days earlier that the alliance would decide on who to support in the ensuing political crisis after consulting with the "international community" and India.

The TNA's decision to support Wickremesinghe has nothing to do with defending democracy. Rather, the organisation is pursuing the same pro-imperialist course that saw it support the US-sponsored regime-change operation that brought Sirisena and Wickremesinghe to power in 2015. That operation was aimed at installing a pro-US government in Colombo in line with Washington's war preparations against China.

Against the Tamil nationalists and other middle-class "left" organisations, the SEP (Sri Lanka) was the only political party that rejected fraudulent claims that the regime would result in democratic rule. The SEP warned about the danger of a US-led war against China and the IMF-dictated social austerity attacks on the working class, and laid out a political program to unify Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in struggle against the Colombo regime. Recent events have comprehensively vindicated the SEP.

Sampanthan campaigned for Sirisena in 2015, insisting that his election would produce a “revival of democracy.” While Sirisena has now unilaterally sacked the prime minister and dissolved the parliament, the TNA is again on a crusade for “democracy”—this time against the man it hailed as Sri Lanka’s leading “democrat.” Underlying the shift in the TNA’s position is the Tamil bourgeoisie’s determination to maintain its close political alignment with US foreign policy demands.

Both Washington and the TNA seek to use the vicious state repression of the Tamil workers and oppressed masses after the 1983–2009 Sri Lankan civil war as a political pretext to pressure the regime in Colombo under the phony banner of defending “human rights.”

Less than 24 hours after Rajapakse’s installation as prime minister, the US State Department’s Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs tweeted: “We expect the Government of Sri Lanka to uphold its Geneva commitments to human rights, reform, accountability, justice and reconciliation.”

The tweet indicated that if Rajapakse was installed as prime minister and pursued a pro-China policy, Washington could again threaten Colombo with war crimes investigations over the 2009 massacre of the Tamils—threats it used to remove Rajapakse from office in 2015.

Not accidentally, the TNA’s statements are virtually indistinguishable from those of the Western powers in “defending” democracy in Sri Lanka. TNA leader M. A. Sumanthiran told a party meeting that “we are the deciding factor,” stressing the TNA’s leading role in mobilising “forces” to defeat Rajapakse in 2015.

The TNA’s cynical claims to be fighting for democracy and against the oppression of the Tamil masses since 2009 are exposed by Sumanthiran’s recent meeting with a delegation from the Sinhala-chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and headed by party leader Anura Kumara Disanayake.

Attacking Sirisena, Sumanthiran declared that, “the TNA and the JVP decided to resist these moves jointly and join hands with all opponents of such unlawful and undemocratic practices.” Disanayake reciprocated, stating, “We, as the JVP, and people in the north have both faced the repercussions of anti-democratic situations.”

This posturing has no credibility among workers in Sri Lanka. Since its foundation in 1966, the JVP has been a champion of racist politics targeting Tamils. During its first insurrection in 1971, which ended in the bloody death of thousands of Sinhalese youth at the hands of the Colombo regime, the JVP denounced Tamil plantation workers as a fifth

column of Indian influence in Sri Lanka. The JVP is infamous for its active support of the Sri Lankan military against Tamil nationalist forces during the civil war and its murderous political violence against political opponents, including the SEP.

This document draws the critical lessons of the Fourth International's 75-year struggle for Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution in South Asia. It traces the rise, decline and ultimate betrayal of the LSSP, which joined the 1964 coalition government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike, abandoning the struggle to unify the Tamil and Sinhalese working class, and opening the road to the bloody 25-year civil war from 1983 to 2009.

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The alliance of the racist JVP and the TNA nationalists in line with US imperialist foreign policy is a warning to the working class. These parties are fully integrated into the Sri Lankan ruling elite's drive towards dictatorship and are bitterly hostile to the workers.

What is the balance sheet of the TNA's three-year support for the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime?

TNA parliamentarians voted for the government's IMF-dictated austerity budgets which have drastically worsened the living conditions of the working class and the masses.

The TNA promised in 2015 that Sirisena's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and Wickremesinghe's UNP would unite and solve the Tamil national question but none of the consequences of the Sri Lankan civil war have been addressed.

Tamil political prisoners have not been released, no investigation of war crimes has occurred, the whereabouts of the missing are still unknown and military-held private lands

have not been returned. Homes destroyed by the war have not been rebuilt, and the war wounded and widows are still suffering without assistance.

In 2016, Sampanthan dismissed growing popular anger over the plight of the Tamil masses, saying: “After travelling a long journey, one cannot hastily break contact with the government.”

Immediately after last month’s political coup, Sirisena announced that he would grant no concessions to the Tamils and never allow Tamil-majority areas “to be merged nor allow the country to be a federal state.” I would “have to be killed,” he declared, for before such a devolution of power was implemented.

Despite this, Sampanthan led a TNA delegation to meet Sirisena on November 7 and issued a press release in which he pledged to “extend to the President its fullest support with regard to any future steps taken by him to stabilise the political situation in the country with the cooperation of all political parties.”

Tamil nationalist critics of the TNA are supporting the organisation’s parliamentary manoeuvres and calling for more detailed promises from Washington and the other powers to protect Tamil bourgeois interests. As political analyst S. A. Jothilingam told a press conference in Jaffna, “Mahinda Rajapakse is supported by China, Western countries support Ranil Wickremesinghe. The best thing that can be done in this situation is to keep these countries as witnesses and obtain written promises from these parties.”

The stark shift to the right of the ruling parties is their reaction to the growing movement of protests and strikes among workers of all ethnicities in Sri Lanka. Two days before Sirisena’s political coup, 5,000 young Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers protested in Galle Face Green, demanding that daily wages for plantation workers be doubled to 1,000 rupees. In several cities in the Tamil-majority North and East, workers and youths have spontaneously joined street protests in support of the plantation workers.

The last three years have once more proved that there is no national path for the democratic aspirations of Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Tamil nationalists’ alignment with imperialism originates in the bourgeois class interests they represent and which are hostile to the workers and oppressed masses.

Amid an upsurge of the class struggle, the only way forward is on basis of the struggle being waged by the SEP to unify the working class of all nationalities on a socialist and revolutionary perspective. The support of Tamil workers from the North and East for strikes and protests in Colombo and Sinhalese workers’ sympathy for the year-long

protests of the relatives of missing people in the North point to the growing unification of the working class.