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Why the Sri Lankan Tamil parties appeal to the UNP and SLPP presidential candidates

Led by the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Tamil parties have submitted 13 demands to Sajith Premadasa and Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the respective presidential candidates of the ruling United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the two main capitalist parties.

Signatories include the TNA's constituent parties—Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Front—and the Tamil People's Forum (TPF).

The 13-demand front was initiated by student unions at the Jaffna and Eastern universities. It calls for a “federal constitution,” direct investment by diaspora and international agencies, and for finance and development activities in the North and East to be controlled by “elected representatives.” This is an abject appeal for a power-sharing deal with the Colombo ruling class that secures the privileges of the Tamil elite in the joint exploitation of the working class.

This call is combined with legitimate demands related to the nearly 30-year bloody communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

These include the establishment of an international mechanism to investigate war crimes, repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), the release of political prisoners, justice for those affected by enforced disappearances, release of land occupied by the military,

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and a halt to “Buddhist and Sinhala colonisation” of the North and East. More than 100,000 people were killed in the brutal conflict, with the UN estimating that at least 40,000 Tamil civilians died in the final months of the war in May 2009.

Why are these discredited Tamil bourgeois parties making these desperate appeals to the two main capitalist party candidates?

It is not because they are determined to fight for the democratic rights of Tamil workers and the poor, but because Tamils in the North and East constitute a considerable vote bank whose can determine the next president.

Tamil workers and youth must reject this reactionary attempt to use them as electoral bargaining chips and turn towards a genuine socialist perspective, which is the only way to win their democratic and social rights.

The Tamil bourgeois parties are seeking to divert the growing hostility of workers and poor against the entire political establishment into reactionary nationalist channels. Like its counterpart in Colombo, the Tamil elite is nervous about rising working-class opposition to the government’s International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

Over the past year, Tamil workers in the North and East have taken joint action with their class brothers and sisters in the South, in the face of a communal campaign to divide them along Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim ethnic lines. These struggles are part of a global resurgence of the working class.

Tamil people have been engaged in ongoing protests to demand the release of political prisoners, answers about the fate of their missing loved ones, and for the punishment of war criminals and for decent living conditions. Thousands of Tamils displaced by the war are still living in makeshift huts without basic facilities.

Appealing to the UNP and SLPP presidential candidates is thoroughly cynical. Sajith Premadasa and Gotabhaya Rajapakse have categorically rejected these demands, declaring that they have their own “solutions.” Their parties are not only responsible the decades-long ethnic discrimination against Tamils and Muslims since Sri Lanka’s formal independence in 1948 but also for the prosecution of the almost 30-year communalist war.

Over the past month leaders of the Tamil parties met several times to decide which presidential candidate they would support but these talks ended “inconclusively.” When postal voting began last Thursday, they announced a “tentative decision”— Tamil voters

should back the candidate of “their own choice.” Yesterday, however, ITAK, led by R. Sambandan, called for Tamils to vote for Premadasa, as its main concern is keeping the pro-US ruling UNP in power.

Irrespective of their tactical differences, the Tamil parties are united in their appeals to the so-called international community—mainly US imperialism and its regional partner India—to assist in their nationalist endeavours. In other words, the Tamil bourgeoisie hopes to secure its privileges by backing US geopolitical interests.

Tamil workers and youth should not forget the 2015 presidential election. The TNA and other Tamil parties helped divert mass anger over then President Rajapakse’s war atrocities and attacks on social rights. They claimed that if Maithripala Sirisena was elected president he would address the problems facing the Tamil people.

The UNP and other capitalist parties in Colombo, with the help of the JVP, academics and pseudo-left groups, did likewise and mobilised their support for Sirisena.

All these parties supported the US-orchestrated operation to oust Rajapakse and the political manoeuvres to bring Sri Lanka into line with Washington’s geo-political and military build-up against China.

Over the past four years, the TNA has acted as a de-facto partner of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration, endorsing its budget and IMF austerity measures and other repressive actions, including Colombo’s efforts to suppress any war crimes probe. Only when mass protests demanded action over the disappearances, the release of political prisoners and the return of land seized by the military, did the TNA feign concern.

Denunciations of the TNA’s perfidy by various Tamil parties and politicians, such as C.V. Wigneswaran, were, however, aimed at whipping up Tamil nationalism. Wigneswaran, a former TNA leader and Northern Provincial Council chief minister, and several TNA constituents, formed the Tamil People’s Forum (TPF) and revived the reactionary *Eluka Tamil* (Rise up Tamils) movement.

The 13-demand front’s attempt to divert Tamils along communalist channels is matched by the actions of the Colombo-based parties of the ruling elite and Sinhala racist groups, which falsely claim Sri Lanka faces a revival of “LTTE terrorism” and Tamil separatism.

Facing mounting debt and a growing economic crisis produced by a global downturn, the Sri Lankan ruling elite fears the eruption of a unified movement of the working class and is increasingly turning towards police-state forms of rule. When Sirisena exploited the

April 21 terrorist attacks to impose draconian Emergency Regulations and to deploy the military, all official political parties, including the Tamil outfits, immediately gave their full support.

Under the same pretext, the UNP and the SLPP and their presidential candidates call for a strengthening of “national security” and even more repressive legal powers and more “modern” police and military weaponry.

The TNA and TPF have no qualms about Colombo’s police-state preparations. Significantly, none of the 13 demands call for a withdrawal of the military from the North and East. After the April 21 terrorist attack, they called for a stronger military presence both regions, declaring, “This is not the time to withdraw forces!”

The Socialist Equality Party urges Tamil workers, youth and poor to reject the TNA-led parties’ bankrupt and reactionary nationalist agenda. The bitter experiences of the Sri Lankan working class, including the defeat of the LTTE, contain vital political lessons. The Tamil parties defend capitalism and therefore cannot oppose anti-Tamil oppression and discrimination by appealing to the workers and exploited masses in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally. This is why these formations turn to one or another imperialist power for support.

The root cause of the decades-long anti-Tamil discrimination is the capitalist profit system and the oppressive unitary state established in Sri Lanka as part of the imperialist partition of the Indian sub-continent from 1947–1948. Communal division was used to weaken the working class and defend capitalist rule. The fight for the democratic rights of Tamils is therefore bound up with the struggle to overthrow capitalism and imperialism.

The SEP, and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, has an unblemished record of fighting for socialist internationalism against anti-Tamil communal discrimination and war. It has consistently demanded the withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the North and East and the abolition of the unitary state constitution and its entrenched discrimination. This requires the unification of the entire working class against capitalism and the common class enemy.

We urge workers and youth to join the struggle to build a movement of the working class across ethnic lines, independent of every capitalist party, to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies and establish democratic rights. This government would take the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and for world socialism. This

is the program of the Socialist Equality Party. I urge you to join and build it as the mass party of the working class.

4 November 2019