

Tamil nationalist appointed opposition leader in Sri Lankan parliament

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In a closed-door manoeuvre, the Sri Lankan parliament last week installed Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader Rajavarthiam Sampanthan as the opposition leader. Parliamentary Speaker Karu Jayasuriya informed the House: “I recognise Rajavarthiam Sampanthan as the leader of the opposition.”

The appointment sought to undercut former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s influence and cement the Colombo regime’s close ties with American imperialism. Rajapakse was beaten in the January presidential elections by President Maithripala Sirisena, after a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington, which opposes Rajapakse due to his close relations to China. As part of Washington’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at China, Sri Lanka was brought forcefully into America’s geo-strategic orbit.

In the August 17 general elections, however, none of the parties won an absolute majority in the 225-seat parliament. Though Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP) won 106 seats, the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) led by the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), of which Rajapakse is a member, won 93 seats. The TNA received 16 seats. A highly unstable “national unity” government has been formed based on the UNP and a pro-Sirisena faction of the UPFA.

Before Sampanthan’s appointment as opposition leader, pro-Rajapakse loyalists in the UPFA, who did not join the government, wrote to President Sirisena and asked him to recognise them as an “independent” faction. This would have meant appointing Rajapakse supporter Kumara Welgama as opposition leader. Sirisena rejected the letter, preferring Sampanthan.

Sirisena’s aim was to install as opposition leader a political flunkey of Washington who will support

whatever International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measure or pro-American foreign policy initiative the Colombo regime requires. The TNA has unconditionally supported the US-engineered regime-change operation. In his speech after his appointment, Sampanthan pledged he would be “loyal to the country.”

Sections of the press openly praised Sampanthan as the ideal opposition leader. The *Daily Mirror* wrote: “The President would not want an Opposition leader who he fears might hamstring the affairs of his government. Instead, he would look to someone who does not oppose the government’s business in the traditional sense.”

The other main purpose of Sampanthan’s nomination is to cover up the war crimes committed by top officials of the current regime against the country’s Tamil minority during the 1983–2009 Sri Lankan civil war. The *Daily Mirror* wrote that the Colombo establishment promoted Sampanthan because it “believes the sections of the international community which are harsh on Sri Lanka on human rights issues would soften their voices after this appointment.”

Now that a pro-US regime is in place in Colombo, Washington, the new government and the TNA are all back-peddalling on promises to hold international war crimes investigations. These pledges were cynical manoeuvres designed only to pressure Rajapakse before his ouster (see: “US shift on Sri Lankan war crimes probe exposes Tamil nationalists”).

The TNA’s role in this exercise is to help provide a “democratic” façade to a fragile pro-American government that is deeply compromised by the bloodbath of the civil war and also preparing to implement savage IMF austerity measures against the working class.

The media also hailed Sampanthan's appointment as opposition leader, the first time a Tamil politician has held this position since 1977, as a historic milestone and the sign of a broad shift of the government's position in favour of the Tamil minority.

The Associated Press wrote: "Sampanthan's appointment despite early opposition by some ethnic Sinhalese leaders is seen as a reassurance to the Tamil community of their place in national politics. Tamils have long complained of discrimination in education, government jobs and governance."

Similarly, in a Lankasri Tamil radio interview, Jaffna University Professor K. T. Ganesalingam said: "There is a good governance transformation in the South. The opposition leader post could be used to make diplomatic inroads within the international community for articulating the interests of Tamils."

Claims that Sampanthan's installation as opposition leader means the Sri Lankan ruling class, with the aid of US imperialism, can overcome the Tamil-Sinhalese ethnic conflict are dangerous illusions. They are refuted by history, which shows that the various factions of the ruling class are incapable of resolving conflicts deeply rooted in capitalist rule in Sri Lanka. Only a fight to unify the Sinhala and Tamil working class in the struggle against capitalism and imperialist war, based on a socialist perspective, can put an end to ethnic conflict.

The last time that a Tamil politician was elected opposition leader—in 1977, when Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) leader A. Amirthalingam led parliamentary opposition to a UNP government—proved to be the prelude to the civil war.

The UNP government waged an all-out offensive against the social rights of the working class. Legislation was introduced giving primacy to foreign direct investment, establishing free trade zones, and slashing state spending through deep austerity programs. Working-class opposition to this assault culminated in the 1980 general strike.

The UNP government reacted by sacking 100,000 workers and banning trade unions. Relying on the bankrupt nationalist perspective of the TULF to help it divide the working class along ethnic lines, the UNP then escalated attacks on Tamils. Immediately after the 1977 elections, UNP leaders planned and organised communal attacks, killing more than 300 Tamils. In

1983, the UNP government organised the "Black July" riots against the Tamils, the worst in history.

After the 1983 riots, dozens of Tamil armed groups were formed, with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerging as the strongest among them. The TULF rapidly faded from the scene, as the country plunged into a civil war that ended in 2009 with the bloody annihilation of the LTTE in northern Sri Lanka.

Today, workers can place no political confidence in the political descendants of these forces, who are again preparing austerity and wars against the working class.



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