

Tamil National Alliance backs Sri Lanka's Rajapakse regime on COVID-19

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The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has come out in open support of Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse as he strengthens the presidency's autocratic powers and relies ever more directly on the military amid the COVID-19 pandemic. TNA spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran made this unmistakably clear in his public statements, coming amid mounting working-class anger at the government's handling of the lockdown.

The TNA held a closed-door meeting on Monday with Mahinda Rajapakse, the former president, current prime minister and brother of the current president. He is despised for overseeing the massacre of defenceless Tamil civilians and defeated fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the final days of the 1983-2009 Sri Lankan Civil War.

Rajapakse is so hated that in the 2019 presidential elections, the TNA felt compelled to call for a vote for the right-wing United National Party (UNP) candidate, Sajith Premadasa, against him. This is because under Mahinda Rajapakse, there was a wave of abductions in white vans of opponents of the war, both Sinhalese and Tamil, who were murdered. So last year, the TNA called for a vote against Rajapakse, saying no one should vote for a dictator. This week, however, Sumanthiran and other TNA officials met with him and then demanded that the population submit to his will.

After the secret meeting with Mahinda Rajapakse, Sumanthiran proudly told the media: "Our position is in this situation, that everyone should cooperate and support the Government. That is first issue for us. We came to this meeting and give our full cooperation to the state. Under this situation, we cannot allow political opinions and differences. This must be done not only in our country but also throughout the world."

Sumanthiran's demand for total submission to the the Rajapakse brothers comes amid growing rumors and

fears of a military coup in Colombo, as they use the lockdown to extend the military occupation of the Tamil-majority north to the rest of the country. Rajapakse also dissolved the Sri Lankan parliament on March 2 and called new elections for April 25. After a curfew and lockdown were imposed on March 20, he then postponed the election until June 20.

Earlier, the TNA had signed a six-party letter demanding that he reconvene the parliament. The reopening of Sri Lanka's rubber-stamp parliament would have offered nothing to working people, and the TNA only proposed it to weakly posture as an opponent of the Rajapakses. However, it has now discarded even this pretence.

Sumanthiran is openly endorsing the Rajapakse regime as mass anger builds against it. Under the curfew and lockdown in force since March 20, in which they have received completely inadequate assistance, workers suffer from hunger and risk starvation. The lack of money to buy food items, jobs cuts, and discussion of moves to force a return to work amid the coronavirus pandemic create impossible conditions for working people.

Moreover, the government is preparing massive payouts to major investors and bailouts for the banks and major corporations. According to reports in the bourgeois press, the Sri Lankan state owes US\$72 billion in foreign and domestic debt, equivalent to 82 percent of Sri Lanka's GDP. Of these, US\$35 billion are in external loans. The government must pay on this sum US\$4.8 billion in debt servicing, the largest debt repayment in Sri Lanka's history, and it plans to place the debt burden squarely on the backs of the workers.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse is appointing generals and other officers in key state and administrative posts because he is again preparing a military machine and

death squads against the workers. This is why earlier this year he publicly pardoned Staff Sgt. Sunil Ratnayake, who in 2015 was found guilty of a 2000 atrocity in which he blindfolded eight Tamil civilians including three children, slit their throats, and dumped their bodies in a sewer.

Sumanthiran is unreservedly hailing the Rajapakse regime, however, because the TNA represents not the Tamil people, but a venal and corrupt layer of the bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka. It develops its policy in collaboration with the imperialist powers, particularly Washington, who are pressing for a return to work amid the pandemic and stepped-up attacks on working people internationally.

Class, not ethnicity, determines the reactionary policies of the Tamil bourgeoisie. Its wealth and privileges depend on access to global markets dominated by imperialism, and on exploiting workers on such low wages that it is virtually impossible for them to shelter at home from COVID-19.

Indifferent to human life, the TNA fears above the mounting anger in the international working class. The Trump administration is gloating that US workers should get used to thousands of deaths per day, and the European governments are sending millions back to work amid a raging pandemic. Mass protests erupted last year against reactionary anti-Muslim measures of the Hindu-supremacist government in India. Sumanthiran, however, demands that no political criticisms can be tolerated, not only in Sri Lanka but, as he said, “also throughout the world.”

In 2018, Sumanthiran proudly declared his close links with the imperialist powers, telling the media: “I am the person who knows its pulse, who maintains close contacts with the international community.” Events since the end of the civil war have made clear the class content of this remark.

In the 2010 presidential elections, the TNA supported General Sarath Fonseka, the military commander during the final months of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009. At the time, Gotabhaya Rajapakse was defence secretary and Mahinda Rajapakse was president. All three bear political responsibility for the murder of more than 40,000 Tamil civilians in the north of the country, and the forcible disappearance of thousands of people, mostly but not exclusively Tamil.

Already, the TNA hailed the coming to power in

2015 of a coalition government of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP), backed by US imperialism and installed in a regime-change operation. Washington intended to oust the Rajapakse brothers, considering them at that time to be too closely aligned with China. While the SLFP-UNP government provoked strikes and mass protests against its budget cuts, IMF-dictated austerity policies and its state of emergency targeting Muslims, the TNA supported it from the opposition benches.

Having pledged during the regime-change operation that a SLFP-UNP government would overcome ethnic conflict in the island, the TNA then turned 180 degrees. Its leader, R. Sampanthan, cynically declared in 2016 that he did not have the prison keys that would free Tamil political prisoners, while continuing to meet with Sri Lankan officials and visiting US military officers.

The TNA’s reactionary record comprehensively vindicates the Socialist Equality Party’s decades-long opposition to Tamil nationalism, while defending the democratic rights of Tamil people based on a struggle to unify the working class in struggle against capitalism and imperialism. The policies of the TNA, and its demand for total submission by workers to reactionary governments worldwide amid the pandemic, brand them as enemies of the working class.

Only the united struggle of the entire working class for socialism in Sri Lanka, the Indian subcontinent and globally can secure the resources necessary to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and secure basic democratic rights in former colonial countries.



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