

# Sri Lankan parties back imperialist war against Afghanistan

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One noteworthy casualty of the US war against Afghanistan has been the “anti-imperialist” rhetoric of the major parties in Sri Lanka. All of them have supported the US military action, the first direct imperialist intervention on the Indian subcontinent since the British granted independence in the late 1940s. Moreover, by backing the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism,” they have in effect signed up to ongoing US aggression to further its global interests.

With the exception of the conservative United National Party (UNP), the Sri Lankan parties for the past five decades have opposed imperialist interference and aggression—at least in words. In the 1990s, however, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus the ability of countries like Sri Lanka to balance between the two blocs, they increasingly accommodated to the interests of the US and other major powers. Their open support for the US war against impoverished Afghanistan marks the culmination of this protracted process.

When the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US took place the People’s Alliance (PA) regime of President Chandrika Kumaratunga was in power. The main party in the coalition is Kumaratunga’s own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), formed in the early 1950s as a “left” alternative to the UNP. Based on the promotion of Sinhala chauvinism, the SLFP routinely denounced the UNP as a “lackey” of the British and then of US imperialism.

Half a century later Kumaratunga has ditched the “anti-imperialism” of her father, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, and her mother, Sirima Bandaranaike, who was also a prime minister in the 1960s. Madame Bandaranaike was known for her criticisms of the US war against Vietnam and her role in the non-aligned movement. In the past, Kumaratunga herself postured as a radical. Even two years ago her PA government had to express its support for the US-led war in a roundabout way emphasising its “deep concerns” about “ethnic cleansing” in Kosovo.

But there was no hesitation after the September 11 attack. Kumaratunga immediately gave her full support to the Bush administration’s plans for war against Afghanistan and offered the use of the country’s air and naval bases to the US military. The opposition UNP, which has since come to power after elections last month, quickly followed suit.

The PA coalition includes two “left” parties, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (SLCP). In the 1940s, the Trotskyist LSSP led a powerful working class movement against British colonial rule and gained in political

stature as a result. In the 1950s, however, the party increasingly adapted to the Sinhala chauvinism of the SLFP and in 1964, openly betrayed the principles of Trotskyism and joined the SLFP government. In the subsequent years, however, the LSSP leaders continued to posture as Marxists and denounced imperialist machinations.

Today, the LSSP is no more than a bureaucratic shell, serving the needs of the ruling class and enjoying the petty privileges it receives in return. Signing up for Bush’s war against terrorism, the LSSP announced that it “has endorsed steps taken by Sri Lanka to cooperate with the international community in measures taken to weaken the capability of terrorist movements.” The party statement insisted that “terrorism in all its forms should be fought,” then added the legalistic caveat that “imperialism should not be permitted to assert its own interests under cover of making war against terrorism.”

In other words, the LSSP supported the US war against Afghanistan in so far as it was fighting terrorism but would not “permit” the US to intervene to assert its own interests. Such a separation is completely artificial and false. The Bush administration seized on the September 11 attacks to wage a war in Afghanistan in order to advance long-held US ambitions to dominate the oil and gas reserves of Central Asia—a subject on which the LSSP maintains a complete silence.

The LSSP leaders of the 1940s would have made political mincemeat of the arguments being advanced by the party today. Indeed the Trotskyists in Sri Lanka and India exposed the sophistry of the Stalinist SLCP which supported the British during World War II arguing that the conflict was a struggle for democracy against fascism. As the LSSP correctly explained at the time, Britain was cynically using “democracy” as the political cover for prosecuting its interests, including the defence of its colonies on the Indian subcontinent, in a war being waged between two imperialist camps.

The other left partner in the PA coalition, the Stalinist Communist Party (SLCP), was traditionally aligned to the Soviet bureaucracy and tailored its anti-imperialist rhetoric to suit the needs of Moscow. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the party continued to oppose US interventions—against Iraq in 1990 and Yugoslavia in 1999—but in ever more dilute forms. Following the September 11 attacks, however, all the past pretences were swept aside. The SLCP offered its complete “commitment and support for the eradication of terrorism from the face of the earth”—no

hesitation, no qualification, not even a mention of the word “imperialism”.

One of the consequences of the LSSP’s betrayal in 1964 was the emergence of radical organisations based on communal politics. In the south, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) espoused a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism, Maoism and Castroism and developed a base of support among unemployed rural youth. Its subsequent evolution has been sharply to the right, towards openly fascist politics and methods, but it has continued to portray itself as the “left of the left”.

Blood-curdling rhetoric against US imperialism has been one of the JVP’s trademarks. Just a few months before September 11, the JVP held a picket line in front of the US embassy in Colombo denouncing the continuing bombing raids against Iraq. But the party was among the first to support the US war against Afghanistan. It even offered some free advice to Washington on how to modify its foreign policy in “a good direction” so as to use America’s “scientific knowledge and economic capabilities for the good of mankind”. The party statement expressed its confidence that if the Bush administration followed these suggestions it could become “leader of the world without any effort.”

Since 1994, the JVP has steadily been brought into the political mainstream as an alternative to the increasingly discredited PA and UNP. At the core of its program is support for Sinhala chauvinism and demands for a military victory over the LTTE. In expressing its support for the US war against Afghanistan, the JVP expressed the views of sections of the military, state bureaucracy and business that are looking for US military assistance against the Tigers. As the party statement put it: “We need diplomatic subtlety to use the present world environment to protect the unitary character of the country and defeat separatism.”

The smaller Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) appeared to be an exception to the rule. To detail all the political twists and turns of this thoroughly opportunist outfit would require a small book. Suffice it to say that the NSSP was formed in a split from the LSSP in the late 1970s—its leaders supported the LSSP’s betrayal in 1964, remained in the party throughout the early 1970s as part of a government that brutally suppressed a JVP uprising and made inroads into the living standards of the working class, and only left after the LSSP faced growing hostility from ordinary workers.

The NSSP opposed the US war against Afghanistan but in doing so only revealed the bankruptcy of its politics. In a statement entitled “Yankee terror comes home to roost,” it supported the reactionary Islamic fundamentalists of Al Qaeda and the Taliban and eulogised the terrorist attacks in the US that killed thousands of innocent people. “The Afghan war,” it stated, “will only strengthen the fighting spirit among Muslims,” adding that September 11 demonstrated that “even a small group of people... can make a massive blow at its selected enemy.... The image of modern capitalism as a system that it is beyond challenge from the oppressed and discarded [has] now gone for ever.”

The NSSP’s support for the Taliban is not an aberration but the logical outcome of its radical politics. The party always rejected the struggle for the political independence of the working class in favour of various opportunist alliances and manoeuvres, which it claimed would offer a shortcut to socialism. In the past, the NSSP

hailed figures such as Mao and Guevara as well as the separatist LTTE, defending its communal politics and its terror tactics. Now it winds up supporting Al Qaeda and the Taliban—organisations that trace their origins to the US-backed Mujaheddin groups that waged a war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s—as the means of challenging modern capitalism.

The fact that all of these parties have reached a political dead-end has an objective significance that goes beyond the island of Sri Lanka. It points to the end of the period when layers of the radical middle class and even sections of the ruling class in backward capitalist countries could readily posture as “anti-imperialists,” or “socialists” that stood for the interests of the masses. Their capitulation to the Bush administration confirms a central tenet of Leon Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution—the incapacity of the national bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development to wage any consistent struggle against imperialist oppression.

There is no doubt that the resurgence of colonialism represented by the US war against Afghanistan will produce opposition in the coming period. The Sri Lankan parties are aware that they are treading on thin ice and for the most part have attempted to keep their grovelling before the Bush administration out of the public eye. Kumaratunga made no “address to the nation” to justify her support for Bush’s war against terrorism. No debate took place in parliament. After their initial statements, all of the parties kept a careful silence, with the complete acquiescence of a tame media. It is as if the whole political establishment in Colombo has come to a private agreement not to talk about a dirty secret for fear of inflaming the masses.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was the only party that opposed the war and campaigned in the December elections to explain the dangers confronting working people in Sri Lanka and throughout the Indian subcontinent. The party emphasised that the working class had to unify internationally around the struggle for socialism as the only means of countering the growing threat posed by US aggression. It is to these issues that workers, intellectuals, students and others opposed to the actions of imperialism should now turn.



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