

Sri Lanka's new government signs up for US "war on terrorism"

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The United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), which came to power in Sri Lanka after the April 2 election, has dropped its limited criticisms of the US invasion of Iraq and, under the guise of supporting the "war on terrorism", given its full backing to the Bush administration.

Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar made a four-day visit to Washington in mid-May for a series of talks with senior US officials on a range of issues including trade, investment, defence and security. The trip came amid a popular anti-US uprising in Iraq and revelations of systematic US torture of Iraqi detainees, but Kadirgamar voiced no criticisms of US policy.

Instead, speaking at the Brookings Institute, Kadirgamar was effusive in his support for the Bush administration. "Sri Lanka was a victim of terrorism long before September 11. Now it is a worldwide phenomenon. We share your anguish at terrorist atrocities. The US has admirers all over the world. We will remain firm friends of the US," he said.

In return for backing the US "war on terror", Sri Lanka expects US support in dealing with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which the Colombo political establishment routinely brands as "terrorists". Washington is pressing the Sri Lankan government to restart stalled peace talks with the LTTE. Colombo is looking for the Bush administration's assistance in forcing the LTTE to talk on its terms.

Kadirgamar's comments do not reflect a huge shift on the part of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). In 2001, her previous ruling coalition—the Peoples Alliance (PA)—extended its full support to the US ousting of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan—the first imperialist military intervention on the Indian subcontinent in

more than half a century. The PA government declared its readiness to provide the US military with air and port facilities.

At the time of the Iraq invasion, the PA was out of office. The ruling United National Front government declared its unequivocal support for the war. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe summed up the UNF's attitude during a speech at the UN last September. He justified the US occupation of Iraq by blaming the UN, declaring that the "failure of the United Nations" created a situation where Washington had no other "choice but to intervene" in Iraq as a "world policeman."

Neither Kumaratunga nor her "left" allies—the Lankan Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Sri Lankan Communist Party—condemned the US-led invasion, the lies told to justify it, or the illegal neo-colonial occupation of this oil-rich country. In order to capitalise on the antiwar opposition, Kumaratunga expressed some cautious reservations and criticised Wickremesinghe. Some SLFP leaders joined the antiwar protests.

Kumaratunga's stand, however, was limited to supporting the call by France and Germany for UN approval for any invasion. Speaking at a Non-aligned Movement conference in Kuala Lumpur last February, she declared: "Sri Lanka's stand is non-intervention in a sovereign state, without due approval by the UN systems." In the course of her speech, she failed to even mention the US or its plans in Iraq. Now back in office, Kumaratunga has dropped even these muffled criticisms.

More significantly, however, the SLFP's main partner in the UPFA—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—has raised no objections to the government's stance or the strengthening of military ties with the US.

The JVP, formed in the 1960s on the basis of a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and Castroism, still on occasions postures as “anti-imperialist” and is often falsely described in the media as “Marxist”.

At the time of the US invasion, the JVP declared its opposition to the war and hailed France and Germany as the champions of peace. But after Bush declared the fighting over and France and Germany rubberstamped the continuing US occupation of Iraq, the JVP’s “opposition” faded away.

Now part of a bourgeois government with the SLFP, the JVP is seeking to cement its place in the political establishment. Its antiwar rhetoric is strictly reserved for ceremonial speechifying. One of the JVP’s resolutions at this year’s May Day rally called for foreign armies to “exit” Iraq, but the party has no intention of demanding that the UPFA government adopt and campaign for such a policy.

The UPFA is supporting Washington’s military operations in the region, not only in word, but also in deed. The new government is proceeding to strengthen military ties with Washington that will facilitate the growing US presence in the Middle East and Central Asia. The island of Sri Lanka is strategically located in the Indian Ocean aside important sea routes and offers a convenient supply point for US operations in the Middle East, Central Asia and potentially South Asia.

During Kadirgamar’s visit, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage hinted at a press conference about the growing importance of Sri Lanka to US strategy. “Sri Lankan assistance to the US is given in all matters ... with regard to the war on terror,” he declared without elaborating.

The UNF government had already begun discussions with the US over an Access and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA) to allow US warships and aircraft to use Sri Lankan facilities for refuelling and other services. While in Washington, Kadirgamar indicated the UPFA’s willingness to proceed with such an arrangement, which is part of a plan for an extensive US military supply network in the region.

A US embassy spokesman cited in the *Sunday Island* of May 23 emphasised that Washington expected the new government to proceed rapidly with the ACSA. He explained that the agreement “is more than providing refueling facilities to visiting US aircraft and ships. We have that facility even now.”

A similar agreement signed by the Philippines in 2002 indicates the extent of what is being asked by the US. The Military Logistics and Support Agreement provides the US military with extensive supply and storage facilities, including support services such as access to billeting, communications and medical care.

While the UPFA is not about to send troops to Iraq, Sri Lanka is currently staging a US-sponsored training exercise for “peacekeeping” forces. For the first time, troops from Bangladesh, Nepal and Mongolia are engaged in a multi-platoon exercise (MPE) at an undisclosed location in the south of the island under the auspices of the South Asia Peace Keeping Initiative.

In a recent issue of *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, Sri Lanka’s military chief, General Lionel Balagalle, stated: “Initially, for two or three years, we want to be involved only in peacekeeping operations. Later, we could move on to the peace enforcement.” These comments indicate that Sri Lanka is preparing to assist the US in its predatory military operations across the globe—all in the guise of peacekeeping.

The US has had a long history of involvement with the Sri Lankan military, including training its special forces units. But these developments indicate that the UPFA is forging closer military ties with the US. While in the US, Kadirgamar inspected the Coast Guard ship, *Courageous*, which the US navy is selling to Sri Lanka. The Pentagon also invited the Sri Lankan military to observe the US-sponsored joint military exercises, *Cobra Gold*, held in Thailand in May.

All of this would of course be impossible if Sri Lanka bluntly opposed the US occupation of Iraq and demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops—something Kumaratunga, the SLFP and the JVP are not going to do.



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