

Sri Lankan reaction to Bush victory: a declaration of dependence

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The Sri Lankan political establishment has sent a series of congratulatory messages to George W. Bush on his reelection as US president that go far beyond the routine diplomatic greetings dispensed on such occasions. The display of subservience reflects the cowardly attitude of the ruling elites throughout the so-called Third World. Confronted with naked US military aggression, each seeks to avoid the fate of countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, while at the same time exploiting the “war on terrorism” for their own purposes.

In her message to Bush, President Chandrika Kumaratunga effusively declared that “the unprecedented [election] results reflect the trust the American people have placed in your policies and leadership.” Commenting on US-Sri Lanka ties in Bush’s first term, she added: “Our bilateral relations have witnessed a discernible movement towards the consolidation of a partnership based on close cooperation on trade, investment, defence and political issues of common interest, particularly in combating terrorism.”

The specific mention of “combatting terrorism” is, in the Sri Lankan context, a coded reference to Washington’s efforts in strongarming the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to drop its demand for a separate Tamil state and to reach a negotiated solution to the country’s brutal 20-year civil war. “The government and people of Sri Lanka deeply appreciate the principled stand taken by your excellency’s government that the integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka would be upheld in any negotiated settlement of our ethnic conflict,” she went on to state.

Her prime minister Mahinda Rajapakse heaped further praise on Bush. “You have given hope to many countries saddled with the menace of terrorism.... By being elected for the second term of your presidency you have established that some day honesty, dedication, and commitment will overcome all obstacles,” he said. “You have created history through out the world standing firm in the cause of peace and eradicating terrorism.”

Neither Kumaratunga nor Rajapakse alluded to the real character of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”—a ruthless drive by US imperialism for world domination that has already witnessed the neo-colonial subjugation of Afghanistan and Iraq. Even as their obsequious congratulations to Bush were being issued, the US military was reducing the Iraqi city

of Fallujah to rubble—an operation that ranks, along with the bloody Nazi reprisals in occupied Europe, as one of the most heinous crimes of modern warfare.

When she addressed the UN General Assembly in September, Kumaratunga, while certainly not condemning the US invasion of Iraq, adopted a mildly critical tone. “We are deeply saddened at the violence, instability, loss of life and human suffering in Iraq,” she declared and cautioned: “Security measures alone will not suffice to end violence and create stability and peace.” Following the reelection of Bush, however, not even the slightest hint of criticism could be allowed, as the Sri Lankan ruling class understands that everything depends on “consolidating a partnership” with Washington.

The opposition United National Front (UNF) adopted the same grovelling approach. In his message to Bush, opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe stated: “I greatly value the relationship that we were able to establish during my term as prime minister. It was as a result of your steadfast personal encouragement that we were able to bring together the international community help negotiate a successful [Sri Lankan] ceasefire, and despite many challenges lay the foundation for a peace process in my country. It is my earnest wish for you and for the US under your leadership, that during the next four years you will be able to achieve your vision of making the world more secure for those who believe in democratic ideas and ideals.”

The United National Party (UNP), the main UNF constituent, has been closely aligned with US imperialism since the party was formed in the 1940s. When Wickremesinghe addressed the UN last year he blatantly backed the illegal US invasion of Iraq saying that the divisions in the UN left no alternative to the Bush administration.

In contrast to the UNP, Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the largest component of the ruling coalition—has in the past resorted to anti-imperialist and populist rhetoric to rally support. Kumaratunga’s mother—former prime minister Sirama Bandaranaike—played a significant role in the non-aligned movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Cold War framework ended the ability of the ruling class in Sri Lanka and

other Third World countries to balance between the Stalinist regime and imperialism. In the 1990s, the SLFP rapidly abandoned its anti-imperialist posturing. Today there are no fundamental differences between the UNP and SLFP on any major issue, especially the need for close relations with the US.

The other main party in the ruling UPFA is the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a party that is based on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and populist, even socialist, demagoguery. While it organised limited anti-war protests prior to the Iraq invasion, the JVP has abandoned any opposition to the US occupation. Now in government for the first time, the JVP certainly did not object to Kumaratunga's fulsome praise for Bush and his "war on terrorism".

An editorial in the *Sunday Times* on October 31, immediately prior to the US election, summed up the attitude of the political establishment to the Bush administration. After noting that the new UPFA government had "quickly realised that shouting anti-US slogans is one thing but keeping the economy pumping without the US is another," it pointed out approvingly: "President Bush's ruthless, often brutish war on terror, especially in Iraq, has had positive effects on our own war on terror."

In other words, the ruling elites in Sri Lanka recognise that support for Bush's criminal activities in Iraq has been essential in ensuring Washington's assistance in pressuring the LTTE to the negotiating table. Colombo's own "war on terrorism" has been a bloody two-decade attempt to suppress any opposition to entrenched discrimination against the country's Tamil minority. Sections of the corporate elite in Sri Lanka now want an end to the conflict which has become a barrier to their ambitions to integrate the island into global productive processes and take advantage of the increasing flow of foreign investment into India.

For most of the last two decades, the US has ignored the Sri Lankan civil war. Washington now wants an end to a conflict that is a dangerous destabilising influence on the Indian subcontinent where the US has growing economic and strategic interests. While officially advocating a negotiated solution to the war, the Bush administration has repeatedly refused to remove the LTTE from its terrorist list. The threat is all too clear: if it does not accede to US demands, Washington will not hesitate to deal with the LTTE as with other "terrorist" organisations.

Sections of the Sri Lankan establishment openly backed Bush precisely because of his administration's ruthlessness in pursuing its "war on terrorism". They calculated that Bush, rather than Kerry, would be most effective in bludgeoning the LTTE into peace talks on Colombo's terms, and, in the event of a return to war, more likely to provide military backing. Under Bush, there have been a series of visits to Colombo by top US military officials and military assessment teams.

The right-wing *Island* newspaper argued in its editorial the day after the US election: "President Bush will serve this

country's interests best because no other world leader, since the problem of terrorism emerged in this country, had come out so hard against terrorism here. He and his officials such as the deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage have minced no words in telling the LTTE: Give up terrorism in word and deed if US is to take the LTTE off the list of prescribed foreign terrorist organisations. This is in marked contrast to the namby-pamby attitude of the European Union nations which have been soft on the continuing acts of terrorism of the LTTE."

Clearly Bush's own contempt for international law and democratic rights is in accord with the views of the *Island* and the country's ruling elites, which have long seized on the LTTE's terrorist acts to justify a reign of terror against the Tamil minority and to deny any legitimacy to Tamil grievances. Well before the Bush administration established its Guantanamo Bay detention centre, the Sri Lankan state arbitrarily detained, and in some cases tortured, thousands of Tamil "terrorist suspects".

Yet the *Island* editorial, which was pointedly headlined "The known devil is preferable", also contained a note of apprehension. Even though the reckless policies of the Bush administration appear to coincide with the immediate aims of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, there are nevertheless fears that the "war on terrorism" is a dangerous destabilising factor on the Indian subcontinent and internationally.

The newspaper observed that Bush was "one of the most unpopular US presidents ever. A global sample of world opinion has revealed that 77 percent of those consulted preferred Kerry to Bush. In Sri Lanka too President Bush with his interventionist policies, wielding the big stick as the global policeman is as unpopular."

But as the ruling elite in Colombo is well aware, it has no choice but to pander to US imperialism whatever the dangers. For all of Kumaratunga's talk of "a partnership" with the US, the real relationship is one of slavish subservience in all spheres—economic, political and military. More than half a century after the British colonial rulers departed the island; the president's grovelling to Bush is a declaration of dependence on the most powerful imperialism of the day.



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