

Sri Lankan march to protest against Hussein's execution

Our reporters
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Thousands marched in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo last Friday to protest against the execution of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and to express their opposition to the continuing US occupation of Iraq. The demonstration was part of an international wave of revulsion over Hussein's hanging on December 30 and the manner in which it was carried out.

The march in Colombo was accompanied by protests in other parts of the island including Puttalam in the northwest and Beruwala other towns in the south following Muslim prayers. In several eastern towns, including Kanthakudy, Kalmunai, and Akkaraipattu, there was a general shutdown—public and private transport came to a halt, shops were closed and public sector employees stopped work.

More than 3,000 people joined the two-kilometre long march in Colombo that stretched from Maradana in the city centre to the US embassy at Kollupitiya. The protest was larger than previous antiwar demonstrations in Sri Lanka. It also cut across ethnic divisions and involved hundreds of Sinhalese and Muslims. Students, office workers and other young people joined the march.

The banners and handwritten placards reflected the anger of the crowd: “George Bush murderer”, “Unite against Bush and the US”, “Bush-Blair intervention in Iraq is criminal”, “U will be the next”, and “US—Hands off Middle East”. Some protesters thrashed a picture of Bush with sandals and sticks. Others burnt effigies of the US president and the American flag.

At the US embassy, hundreds of armed police were deployed and steel fences erected on the highway near the embassy. In the background, the police mobilised tear gas and water cannon squads. Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem and former deputy mayor of Colombo, Ashad Sally, handed a protest letter to the embassy condemning Hussein's execution.

Sensing the growing opposition, US ambassador Robert Blake issued a defensive statement the same day attempting to justify and distance Washington from the hanging. Saddam's trial, he claimed, was carried out by the Iraqis and met international standards. In fact, US occupation authorities ignored calls for Hussein to be tried in an international court, wrote the rules for the trial, monitored the proceedings from

start to finish and were no doubt closely involved in deciding the hanging.

A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team distributed thousands of copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board statement “The execution of Saddam Hussein” in Sinhala and Tamil and spoke to demonstrators.

Badil Faiz, secretary of the Al- Majid Welfare society, commented: “Who assigned Bush to establish democracy in Iraq? The whole world knows the real nature of his democracy. The recent election results showed what Americans think about Bush's democracy. I think Muslim sentiment alone can't defeat Bush's imperialist program. It is good sign that the people from different ethnic groups are participating in this demonstration.”

R.S.Perera, from the Open University in Colombo, explained: “This execution should be a warning for the whole world, not only for Muslims. That is why I participated in this demonstration. America invaded Iraq by making false allegations against Iraq. One of the main charges was weapons of mass destruction. Just a few months after the invasion, the whole world realised the falseness of the charges.

“Since the invasion, 2.5 percent of the Iraqi population has paid with their lives. From any angle, we can't agree with America's ‘war on terror’. It is a cover up for their atrocities all over the world.”

K.S.M. Naleem told the WSWs: “This [hanging] is an assassination against humanity. It is undemocratic and a terrorist act by America. The civilised people of the world cannot justify this killing. The motive behind the war against Iraq is oil. The supporters of the war against terrorism must be held responsible for this killing. The Sri Lanka government and the opposition parties support Bush.

“President Rajapakse came to office promising peace [in Sri Lanka]. Now war has started again and killings are going on daily. Thousands have been displaced in the north and east—Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese. As the American military bombs and kills civilians, so the Sri Lankan army bombs and kills civilians. The LTTE does the same thing. Innocent people have to pay the price of war with their lives and rising prices.

“The government talks about democracy and the freedom of the people. But you can't travel freely in the country or even

sleep in your house. The police and army come at night, wake people up and harass them. It is not only the government but also the JVP and JHU that are responsible for this situation. They are shouting for war.”

S.M.M. Naushad, secretary of the New Muslim Generation’s Welfare Association, said: “As Muslims we were deeply offended about the day that they chose for the execution of Saddam Hussein. It was our holy Hajj day. Choosing the Hajj day for the execution of a Muslim is an insult to the whole Muslim world. Bush and his allies have showed the whole world how they threaten other religions.

“I don’t say that Saddam was a democratic and innocent ruler. But if we compare Saddam with Bush, Bush is a thousand times more criminal. Bush must be executed a thousand times. Bush and his predecessors are responsible for the ongoing bloodbath in Iraq and the bloodbaths they have created in Afghanistan and many other countries. If they are justifying the execution of Saddam because of the slaughter of 148 Shiites, what do they suggest for Bush and his slaughters?

“It is very clear that America is dictating to the world and that the people all over the world must get together to defeat this war policy of America.”

The sentiments of those participating in the march were in marked contrast to the stance of the political parties who rushed to support the protest once it was called by Muslim organisations. A joint press conference on January 3 to express “concern” over the hanging was attended by virtually the whole line up of establishment parties from the right-wing United National Party (UNP) to the “lefts” of the Communist Party (CP) and Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and the Sinhala extremists of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The UNP, which has a long record of supporting US imperialism, was in power and backed the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The LSSP and CP are longstanding partners of the other main capitalist party—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party—which held the powerful presidency over the same period and registered no opposition to US aggression.

Foreign minister Mangala Samaraweera issued a muted statement last week expressing the “dismay” of the present SLFP-led coalition over the Hussein execution. He made no reference to the Bush administration, not wanting to risk continuing US support for his government’s intensifying war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka.

All of the major parties are deeply concerned about the growing opposition not only to the war in Iraq and also to the escalating civil war in Sri Lanka. As the comments of protesters indicate, people are starting to draw parallels between the reactionary character of the US-led occupation of Iraq and of the communal war being prosecuted by the Sri Lankan government. The joint press conference on January 3 was an attempt to contain the opposition and prevent the development

of an independent political movement.

JVP leader Wimal Weerawansa gave the most demagogic performance at the press conference. He praised the coming together of “all the Sri Lankan political parties to one table within a short period”. He then declared that America was in Iraq for the oil and concluded by asking, if Hussein was executed for killing 147 people, “who is going to execute George Bush” for the killings in Iraq.

Weerawansa’s anti-imperialist rhetoric is completely empty and hypocritical. Throughout the past four years, the JVP has remained almost silent on Bush’s criminal activities in Iraq in the hope that the US would back a renewed civil war in Sri Lanka. The JVP, which is currently demanding all out war on the LTTE, has praised the US for banning the LTTE as a terrorist organisation.

JVP leaders have held a series of meetings with top US officials in Sri Lanka. On December 8, US ambassador Blake, along with the embassy’s first secretary, paid a visit to the JVP headquarters in Colombo for discussions with JVP leaders on the “national question”—that is, the intensifying civil war. Details of the meeting have not been made public. In other words, while Weerawansa calls for Bush to be strung up, he and other JVP leaders are more than willing to hold closed door discussions with Bush’s officials in Colombo.

One final point should be made about the press conference. Wickramabahu Karunaratna from Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and Siritunga Jayasuriya from the United Socialist Party (USP) also took part. The NSSP and USP, which both posture as socialist parties and opponents of the civil war in Sri Lanka, have a long history of opportunist manoeuvres with the major capitalist parties. Neither leader had anything to say and certainly made no criticism of the pronouncements of the JVP and other representatives. Their presence, as always, was to provide some “left” decoration for this sordid and cynical exercise.



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