

Sri Lankan government jails former minister on trumped up charges

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has initiated a police and judicial witchhunt against two top leaders of his own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Both were senior ministers in his cabinet, until he sacked them on February 9. The persecution of Ports and Aviation Minister Mangala Samaraweera and Ports Development Minister Sripathi Sooriyaarachchi not only underlines the fragile nature of Rajapakse's government, but is a sharp warning of the methods that will be used against any political opposition.

National Heritage Minister and SLFP treasurer Anura Bandaranaike was also sacked. Bandaranaike, brother of former president Chandrika Kumaratunga, has since mended his differences with Rajapakse and has returned to the fold. But the other two men have publicly criticised Rajapakse for his autocratic methods of rule, corruption and for reaching a deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) before the November 2005 presidential election.

This last accusation is particularly damaging as Rajapakse narrowly won the poll after the LTTE called for an election boycott. Many of the Tamils who observed the boycott would have voted for Rajapakse's United National Party (UNP) opponents and may have tipped the balance. In Sri Lanka's communally charged political climate, an allegation of colluding with the LTTE is tantamount to treason. Rajapakse is especially sensitive to the allegation as he has adopted the stance of a Sinhala patriot over the past year and plunged the island back into civil war.

Samaraweera and Sooriyaarachchi have no fundamental political differences with Rajapakse. Both were close political allies and frontline campaigners during the November 2005 election. Samaraweera was foreign minister before being effectively demoted in January when Rajapakse gave posts to key UNP

opposition members who crossed over to the government, giving it a parliamentary majority. It was only in the aftermath of these manoeuvres that Samaraweera and Sooriyaarachchi began to voice their opposition.

Sooriyaarachchi was detained on March 17 by police on charges on misusing a vehicle belonging to the Post and Telecommunication Ministry. The arrest was carried out by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) following a complaint from the secretary of the Post and Telecommunication Ministry on February 26—just 10 days after Sooriyaarachchi's dismissal.

Despite the relatively minor character of the charge, Sooriyaarachchi has been refused bail and is being held in a remand prison. The magistrate's court has extended his detention in three separate hearings. Various media reports indicate that Samaraweera may have been arrested also, on similar corruption charges.

Rajapakse's actions have nothing to do with cleaning up government corruption, which is endemic in Sri Lanka. If he were serious about ending ministerial abuse of government property, most of his cabinet would be in the same prison. In fact, Rajapakse has relied heavily on handing out ministerial posts—along with the various perks—to keep his unstable ruling coalition together.

The trumped up charge of misusing a government vehicle is the means for silencing political opposition. Rajapakse is concerned to prevent Samaraweera, Sooriyaarachchi or anyone else becoming the focus for far broader popular opposition to the war and declining living standards. Since Rajapakse came to office, more than 4,000 people have been killed in renewed fighting and over 250,000 people in the north and east have been displaced. The inflation rate has reached double digits, amid huge increases in military spending,

causing hardship for broad layers of working people.

The widespread opposition is clearly creating sharp tensions within Rajapakse's unwieldy coalition, which includes the open warmongers of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) alongside SLFP members and UNP "crossovers" who favour a negotiated end to the war. Increasingly, Rajapakse is playing the role of a Bonaparte, balancing precariously between various factions and increasingly imposing policies by presidential fiat. He personally holds the key posts of defence and finance. His brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse holds the top administrative post of defence secretary.

After his dismissal, Samaraweera claimed that he had raised differences last year with Rajapakse's conduct of the war. In a letter to the SLFP secretary in late February, he stated: "I made a request from the President last October for an appointment to meet him to discuss the human rights violations in the country and the unfavourable response received from the international community, especially due to the fact that the LTTE, which was till then isolated by the international community, was gaining ground once more."

As foreign minister, Samaraweera was clearly concerned at the international protests against the Sri Lankan military's flagrant abuse of democratic rights, including numerous "disappearances" and murders. "The international community believed that the moves by the government till the taking over of Sampur were correct. However, the killing of five students in Trincomalee and the killing of 17 aid workers attached to ACF [French-based aid organisation] in Muttur turned everything upside down," he declared.

Samaraweera's worry was not with the war as such, which the entire political establishment in Colombo backed, but that the government might lose international support. As he commented: "Even if one of the accusations [of military atrocities] were confirmed, then it would pose a great threat to the fight against terrorism." In fact, the US and the rest of the "international community" have been silent on the government's obvious breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement by launching a series of military offensives last July to seize LTTE-held territory. Even such incidents as the brutal execution-style murder of ACF aid workers in August provoked only muted protests.

Rajapakse has hit back at Samaraweera, accusing him

of failing to support the Palestinians by abstaining as Sri Lankan foreign minister in a UN vote last November on a resolution sponsored by the Palestinian National Authority against Israel. The issue only highlights the completely unprincipled character of the political differences between the two men. For Rajapakse or Samaraweera to posture as defenders of the oppressed is absurd from a government that backs the Bush administration's phoney "war on terror" and the neo-colonial occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

As Samaraweera explained the dilemma to the *Sunday Leader* in February: "On the one side we had the Palestinians who had been our traditional friends, and the Arab world has been extremely close to us, and on the other hand we had the request from the US, which also has been a steadfast friend, especially in our fight against terrorism.... I managed to forge very good relations with Dr Condoleezza Rice and other officials in order to fight the terrorist menace in Sri Lanka as well."

In the end the choice was not so difficult. Samaraweera explained: "The US has always helped us and was an important partner and an asset in our fight against terrorism." This, however, is not simply the stance of Samaraweera, or even just the Rajapakse government, but rather the Colombo political establishment as a whole, which has supported Washington's crimes in order to get US support for its own criminal "war on terror".

Neither Rajapakse, Samaraweera nor any of the SLFP factions represent the interests of working people in Sri Lanka, the Middle East or anywhere else in the world. The willingness of Rajapakse to contemplate arresting a man who until recently was one of his closest allies, is the sharpest warning of the police state methods being prepared by the government against the population as a whole.



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