

Sri Lankan government rams war budget through parliament

K. Ratnayake

23 November 2007

The Sri Lankan government pushed its war budget through the parliament on Monday with a majority of just 16 votes—118 to 102. Although the opposition parties formally voted against, the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) both made clear their support for the intensifying war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

President Mahinda Rajapakse, who also holds the finance and defence portfolios, presented a budget on November 7 that boosted defence spending by another 20 percent to a record 166 billion rupees (\$US1.5 billion). Since winning office in November 2005, Rajapakse has been responsible for destroying the 2002 ceasefire through the launching of military offensives to seize LTTE-held territory in the East and now the North.

The budget places the full financial burden for the war onto the backs of working people through the imposition of numerous new indirect taxes that will further increase prices. To find money for the military, the government has cut back on services and subsidies. To fill the remaining budget holes, it simply runs the printing presses, further fuelling inflation.

The government was desperate to secure the support of the JVP, which has rabidly supported the war. While not part of the ruling coalition, the JVP has backed the government in parliament, increasingly exposing its empty populist, and occasionally socialist, posturing as a defender of workers and particularly the Sinhala rural poor.

Speculation was rife that the JVP might vote with the government or abstain. In either case, however, the JVP would have been seen as lining up with the government and its relentless assault on the living standards of the masses. Obviously torn internally, the JVP vacillated up until the last minute before voting against the budget, together with the UNP and pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA). A vote giving final approval for the budget is scheduled for December 14.

Leading up to the November 19 vote, Rajapakse was distinctly worried that his unwieldy coalition of 13 parties and groups would not hold together. So blatant was the

behind-the-scenes horse-trading that cabinet minister Rauf Hakeem warned in parliament on Tuesday: “The masses are seeing parliamentarians as commodities with price tags that can be bought.” Every MP in the ruling coalition has some form of ministerial post as a pay-off to keep them on side.

On November 14, Wijedasa Rajapakse, a parliamentarian from President Rajapakse’s own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), crossed the floor to the opposition. He was chairman of the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE), responsible for investigating corruption in government institutions. He called for a reduction in the size of the current cabinet to 30 and the sacking of two cabinet ministers charged with corruption by COPE.

UNP MP Mahinda Ratnatilleke switched to the government side, declaring that everyone should back Rajapakse and his conduct of the war. Two days after the budget vote, Ratnatilleke was sworn in as the 109th minister in the Rajapakse government.

Rajapakse has waged a hysterical campaign to whip up patriotic fervour to justify the budget and intimidate any opposition, including in the government ranks. Taking a leaf out of US President Bush’s “war on terrorism”, Rajapakse and his ministers routinely brand any opposition to the war as support for “Tiger terrorism”.

The president told unemployed graduates last Friday: “We brought this budget to destroy terrorism while developing the country ... The Tigers as well as others want to defeat this budget.” When Wijedasa Rajapakse crossed the floor to join the opposition last week, he was greeted with government howls of “Tiger”.

The government and its allies did not hesitate to make more direct threats. Three prominent UNP MPs were hauled in by the police department’s Criminal Investigation Division (CID) for questioning over alleged corruption. The TNA complained on Monday that three of its MPs had received warnings from a pro-government paramilitary group known as the Tamileela Viduthalai Makkal Pulihal (TVMP). A TNA MP, T. Kanagasabai, was not present for the vote after a relative was abducted, then “found” after the

budget vote.

Sections of the media joined the communal campaign. The right-wing *Island* entitled its editorial on November 19 “Mahinda vs Prabhakaran”—that is, the president versus LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The *Island* acknowledged that the budget had “all the characteristics of a war budget”. It accused opponents of the budget of joining forces with opponents of the war “in all but name to bring down the government”.

The *Island* editorial put its finger on the duplicitous position of the UNP and JVP, which back the government’s reactionary war but try to posture as defenders of working people by opposing the budget.

UNP speakers accused the government of corruption and vigorously criticised the economic aspects of the budget—its reliance on huge loans and the imposition of new taxes that will fuel inflation. But they assiduously avoided any criticism of the huge military expenditures or the war.

The UNP, which was responsible for first starting the civil war in 1983, certainly is no opponent of war. In 2002, however, reflecting concerns in ruling circles about the impact of the war on the economy, the UNP signed a ceasefire and began peace talks with the LTTE. Having lost the presidential election in 2005, the UNP has largely fallen into line with the Rajapakse government’s renewed war. At the same time, the UNP reflects the continuing concerns of the corporate elite that the government is generating a massive economic and political crisis, not least because of growing popular hostility to the war.

The JVP’s balancing act was even more tortured. It voted for Rajapakse’s last two budgets, which have increased defence expenditure dramatically and imposed huge burdens on working people. This time, after a great deal of vacillation, it voted against the budget, criticising the lack of public sector wage increases and the government’s failure to direct the private sector to raise salaries. JVP MPs also criticised rising prices, government corruption and huge ministerial expenses.

The JVP is deeply fearful of being discredited in the eyes of working people by its close association with Rajapakse and his government. In 2004, it capitalised on broad disaffection with the SLFP and UNP to significantly boost its parliamentary numbers. Recently, however, the JVP opposed any calling of a mid-term poll by the government, knowing full well that it will lose parliamentary seats in any fresh election.

While posturing in parliament as defenders of living standards, the JVP’s demands on the government as the price of its support were all about intensifying the war. Prior to the budget, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe presented four conditions: the formal abolition of the 2002

ceasefire, dissolution of the All-Party Representative Committee (APRC), which was established to find a political solution to the war, a ban on UN visits to Sri Lanka and a formal government pledge to Sri Lanka’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

None of the measures targeted by Amarasinghe has anything to do with ending the war. Rajapakse has not formally pulled out of the ceasefire agreement, but it has not stopped the military seizing most LTTE territory in the East and launching new offensives in the North. The government established the APRC in order to maintain the pretence that it would negotiate with the LTTE and keep the major powers on side. As for the UN, the JVP has bitterly opposed its limited criticisms of the military’s appalling abuse of democratic rights.

The JVP is particularly sensitive to government criticisms over its failure to support the war budget. At a press conference on Tuesday, Amarasinghe dismissed accusations that the JVP was “not patriotic”, declaring the party voted against the budget because it had placed tax burdens on ordinary people and increasing debt.

Significantly, Amarasinghe held up the record of the British prime minister Winston Churchill as the model that the Sri Lankan government should emulate. “He got support from all sections of the country because he set an example by sacrificing his personal benefits,” the JVP leader said.

In other words, far from slashing military spending, Rajapakse should make gestures of “shared sacrifice” like the conservative leader of British imperialism to appease the anger of the masses. If the Sri Lankan president were willing to adopt such a posture, Amarasinghe explained, the JVP would be ready to vote for the war budget on December 14.

To defend their basic rights and living standards, working people are being propelled into a struggle against the war and the government. But as the budget debate has demonstrated, they cannot rely on any of the parliamentary opposition parties.



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