

# Sri Lankan president sets out agenda of “economic war”

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse delivered the annual independence speech on Thursday, marking 62 years since the formal end of British colonial rule. Just a week after winning a second term of office, Rajapakse used the occasion to outline his government’s agenda. In the name of rebuilding the nation, he is preparing an economic offensive against the working class.

The whole affair was carefully stage-managed. The choice of the upcountry city of Kandy, rather than the capital Colombo, and the site—the Buddhist Temple of the Tooth, was designed to evoke the heritage of the Sinhala kings. Kandy was the capital of the last Sinhala kingdom that fell to British firepower in 1815.

Rajapakse again boasted of the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May. While promising to ensure “equality and equity among all ethnicities”, the entire tenor of his speech, along with its location, was to assert the dominant position of the Sinhalese elites over Tamils and other minorities.

During similar previous events, a parallel translation of the president’s speech in Tamil has been given. Rajapakse dispensed with that tradition, delivering his address in Sinhala except for a brief section read from the teleprompter in Tamil. Far from being an attempt at reconciliation with the island’s Tamil minority, it was more like a threat.

“One country, one people, one law. That is our way,” Rajapakse declared. But this dictum flies in the face of 62 years of systematic discrimination against the country’s Tamil minority that led to civil war in 1983. Rajapakse restarted the war in 2006 and waged it with particular ruthlessness, trampling on the democratic rights of

Tamils. From May to December last year, his regime incarcerated 280,000 civilians simply because they were Tamils who had lived in LTTE-held territory.

“Never forget the motherland. Never betray it. We consider no one in our country as a minority person. All those who love the country are children of Mother Lanka,” Rajapakse continued. By implication all those who fail to express sufficient patriotism toward “Mother Lanka,” particularly Tamils who challenge their second-class status, are traitors who will be treated accordingly.

Despite an orchestrated media campaign, there was little public enthusiasm for the event. The few ordinary working people who turned up were kept cordoned off from the official stage. Among Kandy residents, complaints were more common than approval. Small vendors criticised the fact that roads had been closed for the endless rehearsals of the military parade. Mothers told the WSWS that local schools had been closed for three days to house the thousands of police and military personnel.

Pride of place at the ceremony was given to the security forces. Contingents of the army, navy and air force were on display, together with various detachments of police and the Home Guard—an auxiliary force of 41,000 personnel formed by Rajapakse as an instrument of spying and coercion. The president “remembered those heroic soldiers who sacrificed their lives and limbs”. Most were economic conscripts, poor rural youth who joined the army because no other jobs were available.

The main thrust of Rajapakse’s speech related to the economy. He boasted that Sri Lanka was now the second fastest growing Asian economy after China and “cordially invited investors” to the island. He promised to use his

“fresh mandate” to “bring back all that was lost for the past 30 years due to the war”. In his election manifesto, he referred to it as his “economic war”.

In reality, the economy is heavily indebted as a result of the Rajapakse government’s huge spending on the military. To avoid a balance of payments crisis last year, the government had to take on a \$2.6 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan. The president delayed the budget until after the election to obscure the full implications of the IMF’s demands—further restructuring, privatisation and deep cuts to public spending.

Rajapakse’s speech left no doubt as to who would have to bear the burdens of the economic crisis. “An efficient advanced nation needs to be built to replace a country which is lazy, lethargic and lacks energy,” he said. The remarks echo his comment after the LTTE’s defeat, when he insisted that working people had to labour like the soldiers who had fought the war—without a thought to the number of hours involved.

The president made clear that his government is preparing a pro-market program to benefit the corporate elite and foreign investors. “The private sector has a responsibility similar to that of the public sector,” he said. “There is now a better environment for the private sector, which was at a standstill during the war. I expect a public service that can take quick decisions and which is people friendly.”

A public sector that is “a people-friendly” has nothing to do with improving health care, education and welfare for working people. Under the terms of the IMF loan, the Rajapakse government is committed to slashing the budget deficit from around 9 percent of GDP to 7 percent in 2009 and 6 percent in 2010. What Rajapakse is referring to is the restructuring of the state apparatus to better facilitate the making of private profit by the wealthy few.

The president made a careful mention in his speech of foreign policy. During his election campaign, Rajapakse postured as a defender of the Sri Lankan nation against an “international conspiracy”—a reference to the efforts of the US and European Union to exploit the issue of human rights to advance their influence in Colombo at the expense of their rivals—especially China.

Rajapakse declared in Kandy that Sri Lanka was “now entering the golden era of international relations”. He continued: “You all are aware that our foreign policy is independent and non-aligned... It is no secret that we have maintained close friendly relationships with our neighbours such as India, China, Japan and others. We also maintain close affinity with Africa, the West, the Middle East and the European countries.”

Pointedly, the US was not referred to. Last May Rajapakse relied on China and other allies to counter a move in the UN Human Rights Council by the US and European powers to establish an independent investigation into Sri Lankan war crimes. Since then a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee report recommended that Washington play down the human rights issue, saying that “a single agenda” was short-changing “US geostrategic interests in the region”.

Far from entering into a new “golden age” of Sri Lankan diplomacy, the small island is being swept up in intensifying rivalry between the major powers in South Asia and internationally. The US is intent on ensuring its dominance in Colombo by all the means at its disposal and sidelining China, which is seeking to use the island as part of its naval strategy for protecting key shipping routes to the Middle East and Africa.

Rajapakse is desperately seeking to manoeuvre and balance but that only enmeshes the country ever more deeply in major power competition and conflict. The potentially catastrophic consequences are already evident in the US-led wars underway in Afghanistan and Iraq and the widening proxy war in neighbouring Pakistan.

Rajapakse attempted to project the image of a powerful ruler who had brought peace, prosperity and world recognition to Sri Lanka. In fact, he showed himself to be a political representative of the venal Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, which in 62 years of independence has been subservient to imperialism and brought nothing but poverty and communal war for the working people of the island.



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