

Sri Lankan government praises Bin Laden killing

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The assassination of Osama bin Laden on May 2 has been publicly welcomed by the Sri Lankan government, opposition and media. The Colombo establishment views the murder as a vindication of the Sri Lankan government's own war crimes and an opportunity to ingratiate itself with Washington.

The Bin Laden killing occurred as the Sri Lankan government was embroiled in its own crisis. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon had published a report that detailed the Sri Lankan military's slaughter of Tamil civilians in the final months of the protracted civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The government and military leaders are implicated in the killing of up to 40,000 people through the deliberate shelling of no-fire zones, hospitals and aid centres.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has flatly denied that the army killed any civilians and prevented the UN panel from interviewing officials and officers. At the same time, however, the government is concerned that the US and the European Union, which backed the UN inquiry, would exploit its findings to advance their own interests in Colombo.

As a result, the government has pounced on the Bin Laden assassination to reiterate its previous thinly-veiled accusations of double standards. If the US could invade Iraq and Afghanistan, or flout the national sovereignty of Pakistan, to kill "terrorists" and in the process civilians, the argument goes, then why criticise Sri Lanka?

Rajapakse has made no statement on Bin Laden's killing, leaving the task to other ministers. Speaking in parliament on May 3, External Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris congratulated the US, saying "the killing of the

terrorist leader [Osama] by US forces sends a warning to other terror groups as well."

Cabinet minister Nimal Siripala de Silva was more explicit in comments to the state-owned *Daily News* on May 9. Referring to the manner in which the unarmed Bin Laden had been summarily executed, he said that it "sheds a lot of light on how a ruthless terrorist organisation should be crushed."

Noting the US had "infiltrated Pakistan territory" to carry out the killing, Silva asked: "Has Sri Lanka done anything like that? Sri Lankan armed forces had to confront an armed [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran based in the Vanni, well within Sri Lankan territory."

While not directly referring to Washington, Silva insisted that "there cannot be double standards in connection with the mechanism of crushing terrorism". He urged the major powers to "understand the position of Sri Lanka" and "extend their support to us, sympathise with us, assist Sri Lanka to overcome challenges and walk forward towards development."

Silva made clear that the government had no objections to the US trampling on the national sovereignty of Pakistan to carry out an extra-judicial murder. His only request was that Colombo should enjoy similar rights within its own borders.

Those responsible for war crimes in Sri Lanka are certainly accurate in accusing the US of hypocrisy and double standards. The US and EU tacitly supported the Rajapakse government in renewing the communal war against the LTTE in mid-2006, in open breach of a 2002 ceasefire agreement, and turned a blind eye to the Sri Lankan military's gross abuses of democratic rights and

killings of civilians.

The US only began to raise human rights issues during the final months of the war, not because of the slaughter of civilians underway in northern Sri Lanka, but out of concern for the growing influence of China in Colombo. By holding the threat of war crimes charges over Rajapakse, Washington hoped to bring his government into line with American strategic interests.

When that tactic failed to work, the US adopted the approach advocated by a report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in November 2009 for a “multi-dimensional” strategy that was not driven “solely by short-term humanitarian concerns.” Declaring that the US could not afford to “lose Sri Lanka,” the report declared that US policy could not be dominated by a single agenda that short-changed “US geostrategic interests in the region.” Since then, the Obama administration, while not dropping the issue completely, has downplayed the abuse of democratic rights in Sri Lanka.

In Colombo, the opposition United National Party (UNP) was the first to issue a statement saluting Washington for killing Bin Laden. UNP spokesman Mangala Samaraweera declared that as Sri Lanka had “experienced the horrors of terrorism,” his party “can imagine the sense of relief people all over the world are feeling” over the news of Bin Laden’s death.

Unlike the government, the UNP has been careful not to even obliquely criticise Washington’s double standards. The UNP publicly opposed the UN report on Sri Lanka and defended the military against allegations of war crimes, but it has cautioned the government about gravitating toward China and generally favours a pro-Western foreign policy.

The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has supported the killing of Bin Laden in a backhanded way. The JVP leaders have made no statement. The party’s newspaper *Lanka* published a lengthy article entitled, “Wasting time in killing bin Laden,” that did not discuss the assassination, but denounced the Al Qaeda leader as “reactionary”—thus in effect backing the US operation.

The *Lanka* article was largely devoted to bolstering the JVP’s “anti-imperialist” credentials. It pointed to the US support for Al Qaeda in the guerrilla war against the

Soviet occupation in the 1980s and criticised the US invasion of Afghanistan from 2001—which the JVP has previously supported publicly. Like the Rajapakse government, the JVP’s anti-imperialist posturing is aimed solely at defending the Sri Lanka military’s war crimes.

The Colombo media has followed a similar line to the political parties. The *Island* editorial of May 3 entitled “Obama bags Osama” hailed the US military and intelligence agencies “for accomplishing their ambitious mission” and praised Obama for his “single-minded resolve to win [the war on terror].”

The *Island* concluded with a pointed call for Washington to drop its criticisms of Sri Lankan war crimes. “It is hoped that at least now America will abandon its duplicitous policy on terrorism and stop persecuting smaller nations battling their terrorists,” the newspaper stated.

The *Sunday Times* editorial on May 8 noted that US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake, who had been in Colombo at the time, had declared that the US had “a legitimate right” to kill Bin Laden in the way that it had. “How the US conducts the war on terror with impunity is not subject to international scrutiny, while Sri Lanka’s conduct is,” the newspaper complained.

The reaction in the Sri Lanka media and political establishment to the extra-judicial killing of Bin Laden is revealing of the contempt for the rule of law and basic democratic rights in Colombo ruling circles. The high praise from those politically responsible for horrific Sri Lankan war crimes also speaks volumes about the criminality and gangsterism of the Obama administration.



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