

Australian PM defends torture, hails Sri Lankan regime

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Throughout last weekend's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM)—a gathering of former British colonies—in Colombo, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott went out of his way to heap praise on the authoritarian regime of the host country, President Mahinda Rajapakse.

"Sri Lanka has come through many troubles but today there is more freedom and more prosperity," Abbott declared. Hosting CHOGM showed its "commitment to democratic pluralism and freedom based on law," he added, which ought to assure all its citizens of a better future.

Abbott was speaking about a country where working people live in fear of forced abductions in white vans, torture and extrajudicial killings by state forces, land seizures by the military, assassinations of journalists (at least 15 since 2006) and oppression of political opponents. Striking workers and protesters have been fatally shot by soldiers or police.

Far from the government's bloody victory over the separatist Tamil Tigers in 2009—accompanied by an estimated 40,000 civilian deaths in its final stage—leading to peace and prosperity, the Rajapakse government has entrenched a police state. More than 300,000 Tamils were herded into detention camps after the war. Since then, the government's repression has been directed not just against the Tamil minority but the working class as a whole, as Rajapakse implements the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

Abbott went further. Asked by journalists about allegations of torture conducted by the Sri Lankan authorities, he said that while his government "deplores the use of torture, we accept that sometimes in difficult circumstances difficult things happen."

Such a public endorsement of torture openly violates the International Convention Against Torture, that stipulates that there are "no exceptional circumstances whatsoever,"

justifying it, including war, internal political instability, public emergency, terrorist acts, violent crime or any form of armed conflict.

Abbott's embrace of torture at an international forum underscores the readiness of the political establishment to dispense with fundamental political and democratic rights in pursuit of its strategic and commercial interests. Murdoch's *Australian* today praised Abbott for pursuing a "grown-up policy on Sri Lanka," instead of "grandstanding" about human rights.

Abbott did not stop there. He committed the Australian government to stepped-up collaboration with the Rajapakse regime to prevent its victims from escaping the island. This breaches another global instrument, the international Refugee Convention—which recognises a right to flee persecution.

Abbott announced a gift to the Rajapakse government of two naval patrol boats to assist in intercepting asylum seekers. These, he claimed, would be used for the "humanitarian" purpose of stopping people endangering their lives by boarding boats organised by "evil people smugglers." In reality, the boats will help Rajapakse's authorities capture anyone trying to leave the island, Tamils and Sinhalese alike. The Sri Lankan navy has intercepted more than 4,000 people since 2009 and there is a documented record of detention, interrogation, torture and disappearances.

Abbott's policy is a bipartisan one. Bob Carr, the previous Labor government's foreign minister, stridently defended the donation of the boats, lauding it as "sound policy" that the Labor government had been contemplating. In fact, Abbott was following closely in the footsteps of Carr, who visited Sri Lanka last December to announce direct military cooperation, training, intelligence-sharing and additional resources to strengthen "the Sri Lankan navy's on-water disruption capacity."

Abbott's Liberal-National Coalition is also building on the record of the previous Greens-backed minority Labor government in deporting hundreds of Sri Lankan asylum seekers en masse back to Colombo, after they are arbitrarily "screened out" of the refugee application process. Via intelligence-sharing arrangements with Rajapakse, this process relies on misinformation supplied by the very government that people are fleeing.

Abbott's stance is driven, in the first instance, by domestic political calculations, bound up with making Sri Lankan and other refugees scapegoats for rising unemployment and deepening cuts to education, health and other basic social programs. Throughout the campaign for the September 7 election, Labor and the Coalition were locked in a xenophobic bidding war over who would take the most draconian measures to "stop the boats."

More fundamentally, however, a broader geo-strategic agenda is driving Canberra's approach. Sri Lanka sits adjacent to the shipping lanes across the Indian Ocean, on which China depends, in particular, for its access to oil and other raw materials. Enhanced military collaboration with Sri Lanka gives the Australian government, a key ally of the US, greater penetration of the Indian Ocean, under the cover of monitoring and intercepting refugee boats.

The Obama administration, as part of its military and strategic "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific to combat China's rising influence, is intent on pulling Rajapakse away from his close relations with Beijing, which has offered him desperately needed investment, including in ports at Hambantota and Colombo. In this push, the US has feigned concern for "human rights" in Sri Lanka, threatening at times to support calls for an international inquiry into the killings and abuses perpetrated by the Sri Lankan military.

At CHOGM, Abbott's posture seemingly contradicted with those adopted by other US strategic partners, notably his counterparts from Canada and India, who boycotted the gathering, ostensibly over "human rights," and British Prime Minister David Cameron, who demanded that the Sri Lankan government announce a credible investigation of its own by March, or Britain would call for an international inquiry. (See: "Commonwealth summit heightens Western pressure on Rajapakse government").

There are indications, however, that Abbott and Cameron played, as the *Australian's* Amanda Hodge commented, a "good cop, bad cop" routine, with Abbott's hand of friendship acting as a counterweight to

Cameron's criticism. Questioned by reporters, Cameron himself praised Abbott, describing him as "a politician of immense stature and ability" and insisting that they both agreed on "talking up the potential" of Sri Lanka. Both are attempting in different ways to wean Colombo away from Beijing.

Whether Abbott's foray into Sri Lanka was specifically discussed with Washington or not, his role was in accord with Washington's recent efforts to offer Rajapakse "carrots" as well as "sticks" in its pressure on Colombo. Last year it removed a ban on selling maritime and aerial surveillance equipment to the Sri Lankan military. While Washington has cynically exploited the "human rights" card to threaten Rajapakse, it has also sponsored carefully-crafted UN Human Rights Council resolutions that effectively stalled abuse allegations against Sri Lanka. (See: "UN body passes further resolution on Sri Lankan human rights").

Concerns have been expressed in Washington that the administration needs to do more to prise Rajapakse away from Beijing. In September, Lisa Curtis of the right-wing Heritage Foundation wrote: "China has become Sri Lanka's largest donor; has provided fighter jets, weapons, and radars to the Sri Lankan military; and made a billion-dollar investment to develop the southern port at Hambantota. Despite frustration with the Rajapakse government, there are sound reasons to remain engaged with the country, particularly to avoid it becoming overly dependent on China."

Rajapakse, who is precariously trying to balance between Beijing and Washington, has been keen to respond to US overtures. No doubt with those considerations in mind, he publicly thanked Abbott for his support at CHOGM last weekend, stating that Abbott's "very practical" approach was more likely to win a response in Colombo than a confrontational one.



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