

Washington's intrigues against Sri Lankan president

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Just one day after President Mahinda Rajapakse last month announced a presidential election for January 8, Maithripala Sirisena, a key leader and cabinet minister, quit the government and announced that he would stand as the opposition's "common candidate." The announcement had been worked out well in advance in league with the opposition United National Party (UNP) and MPs from Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), with, at the very least, the knowledge and approval of Washington.

The move is a concerted attempt to remove the Rajapakse government, which is deeply discredited by its ruthless austerity measures, corruption and autocratic methods of rule. While Sirisena will mount a campaign under the banner of "fighting for democracy against dictatorship," the real aim is to install a president who will distance the country from Beijing and closely align with Washington in its "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining and militarily encircling China.

The linchpin in the sordid behind-the-scenes manoeuvring was Chandrika Kumaratunga, a former president and major figure inside the SLFP—her father founded the party and both parents served as prime ministers. Increasingly hostile to Rajapakse, Kumaratunga developed ties with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and, from early this year at least, has sought to tap into the seething discontent among leading government figures against the president. Sirisena, who was appointed SLFP general secretary in 2001 with Kumaratunga's blessing, was one of them.

At the same time, Kumaratunga has cultivated ties with the US and its allies, with the assistance of UNP leader Wickremesinghe. On leaving office in 2005, she declared that she was retiring from politics, but the following year joined the Clinton Foundation established by former President Bill Clinton and his wife and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Kumaratunga serves on the advisory board of the Poverty Alleviation Group of Clinton Global Initiatives (CGI), which is described as "one of the world's largest international bodies engaged in action for political, social and economic development in the third world

countries."

Kumaratunga's involvement in the CGI was not just a token gesture. She visited countries as part of the Clinton Foundation's fundraising campaigns and acted as a panelist at its annual gatherings. Kumaratunga undoubtedly held private discussions about Sri Lankan politics with the Clintons, who would have opened doors for her in US ruling circles, particularly inside the Obama administration. Organisations such as CGI are notorious as fronts for political intrigues on behalf of US imperialism. The Wikipedia entry on Kumaratunga describes the CGI as "a nonprofit organisation that offers, discreetly and confidentially, a range of experienced advisors to political leaders facing difficult situations."

As secretary of state during Obama's first term as president, Hillary Clinton spearheaded the "pivot to Asia" and was centrally involved in the diplomatic machinations throughout the region to undermine Chinese influence. As early as 2009, following the Sri Lankan army's defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Obama administration made clear its concerns about Rajapakse's ties to China. A Senate Foreign Affairs Committee report declared that the US could not afford "to lose Sri Lanka."

The US backed Rajapakse's war against the LTTE to the hilt, turning a blind eye to the military's atrocities, including the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians. However, in the final months of the conflict, the Obama administration began a hypocritical campaign over "human rights abuses" in Sri Lanka. Washington's real concern was that the Rajapakse government had become too close to China, which provided substantial military and financial aid to Sri Lanka during the war.

To send a warning to Colombo, Hillary Clinton, as secretary of state, instigated US-sponsored resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in 2011 and 2012 demanding action over human rights violations in Sri Lanka. This year for the first time, the US pushed through another resolution calling for an international inquiry and implicitly

threatening Rajapakse with charges if he did not break ties with China.

Kumaratunga has supported Washington's human rights campaign and criticised the Rajapakse government's relations with Beijing. When India voted for the 2012 UNHRC resolution, after voting against in 2011, she declared that "something must have happened in between for India to have voted against us, and I don't think India would have taken a decision lightly." Kumaratunga said she was "bewildered" by Rajapakse's foreign policy and criticised him for finding friends in China, Iran and Myanmar and "confrontational policies with the West."

After the US presented its resolution this year, Kumaratunga told journalists in Colombo on March 11 that "the country could be protected by international interventions only by the government upholding internationally accepted norms of democracy." She said "good governance underscored with democratic values is the best way to save Sri Lanka and its people from international pressure."

The previous day, Kumaratunga held a discussion with Wickremesinghe and several other top UNP leaders in her role as chairperson of the South Asia Foundation. While officially the meeting involved "dialogue between political parties and other groups in the country to promote interfaith coexistence," unofficially the main issue discussed was undoubtedly the Rajapakse government and what to do about it.

The intrigues got underway in earnest after Rajapakse rammed through a constitutional amendment to allow him to stand for a third presidential term and indicated in September that he would hold presidential elections in January, two years ahead of schedule.

Ceylon Today, a pro-government newspaper, reported on October 5 that Kumaratunga met with UNP leaders in September and insisted that Wickremesinghe and the UNP should support a common candidate. According to the same newspaper, Kumaratunga told Wickremesinghe "to concentrate on the move to field a common candidate" when she met him in London in early October.

Later developments show that Kumaratunga was able to convince Wickremesinghe. According to the *Daily Mirror*, three senior UNP leaders—Mangala Samaraweera, Ravi Karunanayake and Karu Jayasuriya—met with "influential" diplomats in Colombo on November 4. The WSWS has reliable information that these influential diplomats were none other than the US Ambassador and UK High Commissioner, who discussed "the party's strategy to win the presidential election" with the UNP delegation.

When a rival UNP faction wanted to field Wickremesinghe as its presidential candidate, Mangala Samaraweera

threatened to quit the UNP and join the government. Rajapakse, who knew nothing of the plot against him, met privately with Samaraweera and invited him to join the government. The *Sunday Times* reported that Samaraweera requested the post of foreign affairs minister and Rajapakse agreed.

After Kumaratunga heard about Samaraweera's plan, she pleaded with him "not to do that horrible thing. Give me some time. I will sort things out." According to the *Sunday Times*, on November 19, "Wickremesinghe and his close confidant Malik Samarawickrema were locked in a series of consultations with former President Kumaratunga at her Torrington Square residence ...

"The deal to form a new broad opposition front was wrapped up on Thursday [November 20] night at the meeting Wickremesinghe held with Kumaratunga. There, she handed to the UNP national leader a signed document from Sirisena assuring that Wickremesinghe would be the Prime Minister if and when he is elected President."

The following day, Kumaratunga chaired the press conference at which Sirisena announced that he would be the opposition common candidate. She was clearly acting with the blessing of the Clinton Foundation, and the knowledge of, if not active involvement of, the Obama administration, which is hoping that a split in the SLFP and the support of the UNP and other parties will be enough to remove Rajapakse from office.

The Sri Lankan working class needs to draw its own political conclusions. The sordid machinations that led up to Sirisena's announcement are the standard operating procedure not only for the opposition but the government as well. No one should believe Sirisena's phony campaign for "democracy" or Rajapakse's empty posturing as an opponent of "international conspiracies." Both candidates are committed to imposing the International Monetary Fund's austerity demands and neither candidate can prevent Sri Lanka being drawn into the mounting danger of a US war on China.

Workers and youth can only defend their own class interests by rejecting all factions of the ruling class and mobilising independently against austerity and war on the basis of the program of socialist internationalism, for which the Socialist Equality Party alone fights.



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