

# Sri Lanka: Opposition presidential candidate to implement austerity

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Around 36 political parties and groups signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena on Monday. The joint platform for the Sri Lankan presidential election, scheduled for January 8, is a cynical exercise aimed at duping voters into believing that Sirisena will end the onslaught on living standards and democratic rights.

This alliance, based on “A Common People’s Agenda for Just, Democratic and People-friendly Governance,” is committed to continue President Mahinda Rajapakse’s ruthless austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). At the same time, it is closely aligned with the US and its aggressive “pivot to Asia” against China.

Those signing the MoU included the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and the Democratic Party of former army chief Sarath Fonseka, who stood as the common opposition candidate against Rajapakse in the 2010 election. Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is a leading figure in the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and took the initiative to organise the alliance, also signed up.

In a political conspiracy instigated by Kumaratunga, assisted by UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sirisena quit as health minister on November 21, along with several ministers and parliamentarians, and announced he would stand as the common opposition candidate against Rajapakse. The US, which is hostile to Rajapakse’s ties with China, certainly knew of and approved the intrigue to install a new president (see: “Washington’s intrigues against Sri Lankan president”).

Aiming to exploit anti-government anger among workers and the poor, the opposition alliance declares that its main concern is to end the “breakdown of the rule of law,” “erosion of democratic rights,”

“unprecedented widening of social disparities” and “severe strains on coexistence between different ethnic and religious communities and increasing disharmony and distrust.”

The alliance pledges to abolish the country’s executive presidency, which gives wide powers to the president, and the 18th constitutional amendment, which Rajapakse enacted to extend his powers to appoint top government officials and to enable him to run for a third term of office. Previously, presidents were limited to two terms.

The MoU also presents a long list of promises: to increase public and private sector salaries to reduce “the oppressive burden of the cost of living,” strengthen all sectors of the economy and reestablish the welfare state by developing “an effective social safety net for marginalised groups and the poor and, in particular, for women and children, the elderly, pensioners and disabled persons.”

The document says a new government will “create a civilised and moral society and in particular reform the political culture of the country that has sunk to unprecedented depths.”

All these promises are bogus. Sirisena served as a minister for nearly a decade under Kumaratunga and then Rajapakse. He backed their systematic attacks on the social rights of the working people and supported every crime, in particular during the vicious communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The UNP has a similar anti-working class record. It introduced the pro-market structuring agenda during the late 1970s and deliberately provoked the protracted civil war to promote anti-Tamil communalism and divide the working class. The opposition alliance will be even more ruthless in its attacks on the democratic

and social rights of working people than the Rajapakse government.

Sirisena promises to “re-establish the welfare state” but has not spelled out his economic policies. At a press conference in UNP headquarters on November 29, he declared: “The economic policy when we form a government will be an open economy.” This is an assurance to the corporate elite that if he takes office, he will continue to make deep inroads into the living standards of the working class and poor, while boosting the profits of big business and foreign investors.

This is the agenda of every section of the Sri Lankan ruling class as the continuing global economic breakdown hits the country’s vulnerable economy. The opposition is speaking on behalf of those in the political and business establishment who feel marginalised by Rajapakse’s cronyism and autocratic methods of rule.

Significantly, the MoU makes no mention of foreign policy, which is the subject of sharp disagreement between the opposition and Rajapakse’s government. Although fully supporting Rajapakse’s renewed war against the LTTE in 2006, the US has cynically used the government’s responsibility for war crimes to pressure it to distance itself from China. The opposition represents a considerable section of the Sri Lanka ruling elite that fears that Rajapakse’s alignment with Beijing could result in punitive measures, including economic sanctions and the loss of major export markets in the US and Europe.

Journalists asked Sirisena about possible war crimes charges being laid by the UN Human Rights Council and the international inquiry resulting from this year’s US-sponsored resolution. He promised to “implement the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC).” Rajapakse set up the LLRC to whitewash the Sri Lankan military’s war crimes and deflect international criticism, then ignored its limited recommendations.

By declaring that he will carry out the recommendations, Sirisena signalled a shift in foreign policy toward Washington, plus an appeal to the country’s Tamil elite. One of the LLRC’s proposals is for a “political solution” that would involve a power-sharing arrangement with the representatives of the Tamil bourgeoisie.

At the same time, Sirisena signed a separate MoU with the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), the Sinhala-

Buddhist extremist party that recently quit Rajapakse’s ruling coalition. He promised to maintain the communal clause in the Sri Lankan constitution giving priority to Buddhism and to oppose a federal system of government—in other words not to make any significant concessions to the Tamil elite. In aligning himself with the JHU communalists, Sirisena made clear that he has no intention of ending the “severe strains on coexistence between different ethnic and religious communities.”

The opposition agreement calls for an “all-party government” to be formed for two years. The proposal to include all parties—including those currently in Rajapakse’s coalition—underscores the depth of the political crisis in Sri Lanka. The fear in ruling circles is that the imposition of harsh new economic burdens on workers and youth will result in widespread protests and social unrest. “A government of national unity” means bringing the Colombo political establishment together to suppress any resistance in the working class, including by police-state methods.



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