

Sri Lankan opposition candidate issues pro-US, pro-business manifesto

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Opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena has issued a 64-page election manifesto for Sri Lanka's presidential election on January 8 pledging to follow a pro-US foreign policy and to defend the interests of big business.

As soon as President Mahinda Rajapakse announced the poll, Sirisena quit the cabinet and announced his own candidacy with the backing of a coalition of opposition parties including the right-wing United National Party (UNP), the Democratic Party (DP) and the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

The US, which has mounted an aggressive "human rights" campaign against Rajapakse, was well aware of the plot being hatched. The chief architect of the opposition coalition, former president Chandrika Kumaratunga, has developed close relations with Washington via her involvement with the Clinton Foundation.

The opposition campaign is fraudulently promoting Sirisena as the democratic alternative to the "one-family dictatorship" of Rajapakse. However, Sirisena was part of the government that has been responsible for gross abuses of democratic rights. Moreover, all of the opposition parties supporting Sirisena previously backed Rajapakse's renewed communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sirisena's manifesto is not aimed at dismantling the police state apparatus built up in a quarter century of civil war and directed against the working class. Rather it proposes cosmetic changes to the structure of the state to reduce presidential powers in a bid to revive illusions in parliamentary democracy. In particular, he is seeking to repeal the 18th constitutional amendment, pushed through by Rajapakse, giving the president powers to make top level appointments including to the judiciary and the post of election commissioner.

To sugarcoat Sirisena's agenda, the manifesto promises a range of handouts: a pay hike for public servants, increased agricultural subsidies and greater spending on public education and health. Sirisena is also pledging financial assistance to the hundreds of poor families evicted from their homes in Colombo as part of Rajapakse's plans to "beautify" the capital. All of these promises are only to hoodwink voters.

Sirisena is no less committed than Rajapakse to imposing the burdens of the country's economic crisis onto the backs of working people. Indeed, his appeal for the formation of a government of national unity, including Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, is an indication of real fears in ruling circles of the growing opposition in the working class to the austerity agenda being demanded by the IMF and World Bank.

One of the central purposes of Sirisena's manifesto is to send a clear signal internationally that he will shift the country's foreign policy decisively towards the West. The preamble declares that the country's "image has been destroyed due to its [the government's] incorrect and naïve foreign policy and strategies." As a result, "Sri Lanka is rapidly getting isolated from the international community. Instead of becoming the miracle of Asia, Sri Lanka is becoming the battlefield of world powers."

The US and its allies have put the Rajapakse government under considerable pressure over the war crimes carried out against civilians during the war against the LTTE. Washington backed the war to the hilt and turned a blind eye to the Sri Lankan military's atrocities. The purpose of the bogus US "human rights" campaign was to pressure Rajapakse to distance himself from China and line up with Obama's "pivot to Asia" against Beijing.

Sirisena intends to do exactly that. His manifesto

proposes “equal relations” with India, China, Pakistan and Japan and also “improving friendly relations with emerging Asian nations such as Thailand, Indonesia and Korea without distinction.” In other words, Sirisena will end Rajapakse’s heavy political, economic and military dependence on China and establish “equal relations” with all of Washington’s key allies in the region—Japan, South Korea and India in particular.

The manifesto also calls for a “domestic investigation” into war crimes and human rights abuses in Sri Lanka. This is another clear signal to the US that Sirisena will meet its demands. Sirisena is well aware that as soon as he lines up with Washington’s foreign policy the US-led “human rights” campaign will rapidly fade away. At the same time, Sirisena has quietly signalled that the military has nothing to fear from an inquiry, as he will protect everyone who “contributed to the defeat of Tamil Tiger separatists.”

After issuing the manifesto, Sirisena and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe felt the need to spell out their policies to the Sri Lankan Business Forum. Wickremesinghe, who will become prime minister under Sirisena, bluntly declared: “The Rajapakse slant on foreign policy runs directly counter to Sri Lanka’s global economic interests. The US and European Union account for two-thirds of Sri Lankan exports. Sri Lanka has everything to gain from closer economic relations with India...”

Wickremesinghe referred to the role of the Sri Lanka ruling elite during World War II, saying: “[O]ur relationship with the West has been the longest... People don’t realise that in World War II it was Sri Lanka that stood by the Allies, not anyone else, and that’s something that the Americans, British and others have forgotten.”

Wickremesinghe is clearly suggesting, amid growing geo-political tensions in Asia, that the next government should reforge this wartime relationship with US imperialism and its allies, which will now be directed against China. During World War II, Sri Lanka was the command base for the British military operations in Asia. The Pentagon also views the island, strategically located near shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean, as crucial to its plans to cut off Chinese imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

Wickremesinghe is also committed to creating more

favourable conditions for big business and foreign investors. He lamented the fact that Sri Lanka was just one point above Rwanda in the Global Competitive Index 2013–2014. “If you want external policy to benefit internal trade and investment, then you have to be open to the markets,” he declared. Greater “competitiveness” means ruthlessly driving down the working conditions and living standards of working people.

In the presidential election, only the Socialist Equality Party and its candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena are advancing a socialist program to fight for the independent interests of the working class against all factions of the bourgeoisie and their representatives—Rajapakse and Sirisena alike. Neither candidate has any answer to the US drive to war. While Rajapakse tries to balance between the US and China, Sirisena advocates lining up completely with Washington. Both are committed to imposing the IMF’s austerity agenda on working people and crushing any opposition.

The SEP calls on workers and youth to support and participate in our campaign. We fight for a socialist alternative: the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.



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