

Sri Lankan opposition parties line up behind US regime-change agenda

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8 January 2015

The seven weeks since the announcement of today's presidential election in Sri Lanka have witnessed an unprecedented crossover of parliamentarians to back pro-US candidate Maithripala Sirisena against President Mahinda Rajapakse and Rajapakse's China-oriented policies.

As it intensifies its diplomatic, economic and military pressure against China, the US is pressing all governments in the region to back its aggressive "pivot to Asia." Accordingly, it has thrown its weight behind regime change in Sri Lanka, to end Rajapakse's attempts to balance between Washington and Beijing. The US will accept nothing less in Colombo than a government that collaborates in its preparations for war with China.

Just the day after the election was announced, Sirisena, a senior cabinet minister and general secretary of Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), deserted to the opposition and declared he would challenge for the presidency. His defection was part of a carefully prepared plan, supported in Washington and developed by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of the pro-US United National Party (UNP), to assemble the forces necessary to oust Rajapakse. Kumaratunga has extensive relations with the Obama administration through the Clinton Foundation.

The right-wing UNP is the main political party backing Sirisena and the US agenda. It has been joined by the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala-Buddhist extremist party, and the Democratic Party (DP), led by former army commander and 2010 presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka.

The two Muslim-based capitalist parties, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC), and the Tamil National

Alliance (TNA), have also enlisted with the opposition coalition. The SLMC has sought Washington's support against anti-Muslim attacks instigated by Buddhist extremist groups that have been nurtured by Rajapakse, such as Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Brigade) and Ravana Balaya (Ravana Brigade). The TNA, the political front for the ethnic Tamil elite, is seeking US support for a power-sharing deal with the Colombo government.

Before the election announcement, Rajapakse had the support of 161 members of parliament—more than two-thirds of the 225-member parliament. Twenty-five parliamentarians, including eight ministers, have since deserted to join Sirisena's campaign. The president can now only claim 138 members, after two opposition politicians—Tissa Attanayake, the general secretary of the UNP, and one member of Fonseka's DP—crossed over to join his ruling coalition.

Media reports indicate that several more ministers and parliamentarians planned to break with the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), but Rajapakse used intimidation and various inducements to prevent them from leaving.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party (CP), both of which are thoroughly bourgeois and right-wing formations, continue to serve as appendages of Rajapakse's SLFP. Their leaders hold ministries in his cabinet. Both parties are now internally divided, however, with sections openly backing Sirisena's campaign.

The lineup of opposition parties behind Sirisena demonstrates that a significant section of the Colombo political establishment has decided to decisively shift the country's foreign policy behind Washington. Sirisena's election manifesto pledges to end Sri Lanka's "isolation from the international

community”—a euphemism for the US and other Western powers. Significant sections of big business are backing his campaign out of fears that Rajapakse’s maneuvering with China could cost them access to the country’s largest export markets in the US and Europe.

The promotion of anti-Chinese sentiment has been a feature of the opposition campaign. The UNP has accused Rajapakse of turning Sri Lanka into a “satellite of China.” Sirisena has vowed that a range of Chinese investment projects will be “reviewed.” Over the past five years, China has become the number one aid donor to Sri Lanka and its largest foreign investor, seeking closer military relations in return, provoking concerns in the US, Europe and India.

The opposition parties are seeking to cloak their line-up with US interests with cynical denunciations of “Rajapakse’s dictatorship” and “family bandism”—a reference to the installation of his family members into key political and business posts.

Since coming to power in 2005, Rajapakse has certainly used the autocratic powers of the presidency, built up during the country’s 26-year civil war, against his political opponents and above all to suppress social struggles by workers, youth and the poor. He did so, however, with the support of all the parties which comprise the opposition. They fully backed the brutal methods used to suppress the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during the civil war and the brutal repression of working people to implement austerity measures dictated by International Monetary Fund.

The pseudo-left middle class organisations, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), United Socialist Party (USP) and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), along with numbers of academics and artists, have rallied behind the pro-US opposition.

The NSSP is openly campaigning for Sirisena. The USP has made mild criticisms of Sirisena’s history, but asserted that the primary question is to defeat the “Rajapakse dictatorship.” The FSP rhetorically states that there is no difference between the main presidential candidates, while opposing any “split” in the vote for Sirisena on the grounds that the dictatorial rule of Rajapakse must be ended. In one way or another, the pseudo-left milieu is seeking to give “democratic” credentials to the opposition candidate and lining up with US imperialism and its war preparations.

If Rajapakse manages to cling to office in today’s election, the pseudo-left formations will use the fraudulent banner of “democracy” to fall in behind the next stage of US-backed intrigues, which include the possibility of fomenting the type of “colour revolution” that Washington has instigated in other countries.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its presidential candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena, is fighting for a perspective in the interests of the working class, not only in Sri Lanka but throughout Asia and internationally. As stressed in the WSWS perspective, “The international significance of the Sri Lankan presidential election,” the SEP alone has insisted that the working class can only combat the danger of war by fighting for its political independence from all factions of the ruling class, including both the Rajapakse and Sirisena camps, on the basis of socialist internationalism.

The author recommends:

Vote for SEP candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena! Fight for a socialist program against war and social counterrevolution!

[15 December 2014]



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