

# Who is Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena?

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Maithripala Sirisena, the new president of Sri Lanka, is being showered with praises by his political proponents as a “common man,” the “son of a peasant,” “compassionate” and a political hero who defied all to end the corrupt, nepotistic and dictatorial rule of former President Mahinda Rajapakse. Tributes are being authored about him by the same Colombo media that was sycophantically lauding Rajapakse just weeks ago.

The pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) has hailed Sirisena as a “giant” who fought against the domination of transnational companies over Sri Lanka while holding a cabinet portfolio in Rajapakse’s government. In reality, he is a man committed to defending the interests of the bourgeois elite and imperialism. He came to power in the January 8 presidential election in a regime-change operation instigated by pro-US former president Chandrika Kumaratunga and United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, with the blessing of the Obama administration.

Sirisena’s political career began in the late 1960s, when, as a rural youth from a peasant family in Polonnaruwa district, he briefly joined the youth wing of the Maoist Communist Party of Ceylon led by N. Shanmugadasan. Maoist groups were able to thrive among rural youth in Sri Lanka and India because of the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which had repudiated Trotskyism and international socialism and entered into a coalition government with the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was formed in the wake of the LSSP’s betrayal of Marxism, promoting Sinhala nationalist populism and channelling the disaffection of rural youth into the bankrupt Maoist perspective of “armed struggle.” Sirisena was arrested during the suppression of the JVP’s adventurist insurrection in 1971, during which the military

slaughtered as many as 15,000 rural youth.

It is not clear whether Sirisena was a member of the JVP at the time. When he left prison in 1972, however, after 15 months in detention, he immediately joined the SLFP and committed himself to one of the key institutions of bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka.

Sirisena’s loyal service to the SLFP enabled him to rise through its ranks. From being appointed a district youth league secretary in 1979, he became president of the SLFP youth movement in 1983. In 1989, he was nominated as a SLFP candidate and won a seat in parliament in that year’s general election. From 1994 to 2001, he served as minister in the SLFP-dominated government of then President Kumaratunga. Just prior to the December 2001 parliamentary elections, in which the UNP won back control of the parliament, Sirisena was installed as the SLFP’s general secretary. He held the post for the next 13 years until he deserted Rajapakse on November 21, 2014, and announced he would challenge for the presidency.

For all the sympathy he feigned during the election for working people, Sirisena defended and helped implement the attacks on living standards and democratic rights carried out by the Kumaratunga and Rajapakse governments. He is thoroughly complicit in the promotion of Sinhala chauvinism and the crimes committed against the Tamil population during the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Under Rajapakse, who became president in November 2005, Sirisena served as the minister for various agricultural portfolios and, after 2010 and until his presidential challenge, health minister.

In an interview with the *Daily Mirror* on January 2, Sirisena boasted that he was acting defence minister on six occasions after Rajapakse broke a cease fire with the LTTE in 2006 and resumed the war with intensified ruthlessness. Most significantly, Sirisena stated: “I was

the minister in charge of defence during the last two weeks of the war [in 2009], in which most of the leaders of the LTTE were killed with General Fonseka at the helm of the Army.”

According to United Nations investigators, at least 40,000 Tamil civilians were massacred in the final stage of the war, the majority during the two weeks when Sirisena was acting defence minister. LTTE leaders and fighters who attempted to surrender were summarily executed and civilians slaughtered by indiscriminate shelling.

For all the promotion of Sirisena as the “son of a peasant,” his political record is that of hostility to any attempt to alleviate the appalling poverty and lack of facilities endured by the rural poor. As agriculture minister, he presided over policies that favoured rich farmers and did nothing to challenge the control exerted by transnational companies over agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizers.

When thousands of rice farmers protested in March 2012 for higher prices, Sirisena, then minister of health, denounced them as part of an “international conspiracy” to “punish the president [Mahinda Rajapakse] and the war heroes.”

The “conspiracy” was the US and European-sponsored campaign for war crimes investigations into the slaughter at the end of the civil war, which was the means by which the major powers were seeking to pressure Rajapakse to stop developing political and military relations with China. Three years later, Sirisena has been installed as president, with the backing of the imperialist powers, to shift Sri Lanka decisively away from Beijing and into alignment with the aggressive US “pivot” to Asia against the Chinese regime.

As health minister from 2010 to November 2014, Sirisena sought to suppress every struggle by health workers for better conditions. He sought court orders to ban strikes and protests. In August 2014, in response to a strike by health workers for higher pay, he deployed the police and military into the hospitals.

There are more than one million people with kidney disease in the rural areas of Sri Lanka, most of them paddy farmers. Sirisena rejected proposals by the World Health Organisation (WHO) that the Colombo government take action to address the crisis, such as improving the supply of clean water and banning some toxic chemicals that are linked with kidney disease.

Sirisena’s was selected by Kumaratunga, the UNP’s Wickremesinghe and by Washington as the front man for

the campaign to oust Rajapakse because of this record. He is, in every sense, a tested servant of the bourgeoisie and imperialism. His challenge last November is the outcome of protracted discussions and preparations. As early as 2011, there is evidence of the US embassy seeking to cultivate relations with him. In June 2013, Sirisena travelled to the US to receive the Harvard University “Health Leadership Award”—after being nominated by the US embassy in Sri Lanka and US State Department agency USAID and clearly identified as a figure they could work with in the Sri Lankan establishment.

In his interview with the *Daily Mirror*, Sirisena partially explained his motives for deserting Rajapakse. “Parliament is under this [Rajapakse] family” he declared. “The ministries are under this family, the judiciary is under this family, the military and the entire state sector and business and investment come under the direct control of this family.”

Such recriminations were not limited to government ministers. Transnational investors and the local business elite bitterly resented the amount of wealth dominated by the cabal around Rajapakse. In the election campaign, this intersected with the drive by US imperialism to refashion Sri Lankan foreign policy in the form of denunciations of major Chinese-funded investment projects from which the Rajapakse clique were rumoured to be benefiting handsomely.

Now that Sirisena has been elevated into power, Washington, the International Monetary Fund and foreign capital expect him to deliver. His regime will not bring peace, prosperity or democracy. Its taskmasters are demanding intensified free market restructuring to further open up Sri Lanka to imperialist investment and deeper austerity attacks to drive down the living standards of the working class and rural oppressed.

Above all, Sirisena’s administration is tasked with incorporating Sri Lanka into the web of US intrigues in the Asia-Pacific to undermine China’s diplomatic and economic influence, and collaborating with Washington’s overt preparations across the region for a military confrontation and war.



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