

Evidence of India's involvement in regime change in Sri Lanka

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Fresh evidence has emerged pointing to a concerted international effort behind the defeat of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse in the country's presidential election on January 8. Reuters reported on Sunday that the Colombo station chief for India's external spy agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), was recalled to New Delhi before the election, following complaints by the Sri Lankan government that he was helping the opposition parties.

India rejected any suggestion that it meddled in the Sri Lankan election. External Affairs Ministry spokesman Syed Akbaruddin insisted that the diplomat was recalled as part of a "normal transfer" after a three-year tour of duty in Colombo. The Reuters report, however, based on "political and intelligence sources" in India and Sri Lanka, said Colombo asked New Delhi to recall the agent "for helping gather support for joint opposition candidate Maithripala [Sirisena] after persuading him to ditch Rajapakse's cabinet."

Sirisena, a senior cabinet minister, defected to the opposition in November, immediately after Rajapakse announced the date for an early presidential election. Sirisena declared that he would run as the joint opposition candidate. The move was prepared well in advance by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, head of the pro-US United National Party (UNP). UNP leaders discussed this "election strategy" with senior US and UK diplomats in Colombo during early November.

It is no surprise that India was also on board. Since the end of the communal war in Sri Lanka against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, New Delhi, like Washington, has been deeply hostile to the Rajapakse government's economic and strategic relations with China. In 2013, India supported a US-sponsored resolution in the UN Human Rights

Council to investigate war crimes in Sri Lanka as a means of pressuring Rajapakse to distance himself from Beijing.

According to Reuters, India was "stunned" when Chinese submarines docked twice in Colombo last September. An Indian security official told the news agency: "The turning point in the relationship was the submarines. There was real danger." Alarm bells would also have rung in Washington. As part of its "pivot to Asia" to secure its hegemony in Asia, the US has been preparing war plans against China, premised on American naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean that would enable the US to cut off Chinese imports of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East.

The first suggestion that India was intervening in the Sri Lankan election was a brief item in the Colombo-based *Sunday Times* on December 28. It reported that allegations that "RAW's Colombo station chief K. Ilango had links with the Common Opposition have cost him his job in Colombo." According to this report, Ilango's normal term of service was over, but New Delhi had extended it. However, he suddenly received transfer orders after the Sri Lankan government urged his recall.

The *Sunday Times* report was ignored during the election campaign. Both Rajapakse and Sirisena only hinted at their sharp differences over the alignment of foreign policy. They stifled a debate that could have alerted working people to the acute dangers posed by Sri Lanka's growing entanglement in geo-political rivalries. Rajapakse, who sought to whip up nationalist sentiment by portraying himself as the victim of an "international conspiracy," did not want to offend the India, the US and their co-conspirators by providing details of the plot.

Sunday's Reuters article cited an Indian official who said the then Sri Lankan defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, complained about "the agent's activities to Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval" when Doval visited Colombo in late November to attend a defence seminar. After Doval's return to New Delhi, the RAW station chief was recalled.

During his visit, Doval not only met with Mahinda Rajapakse and his brother Gotabhaya but also with Wickremesinghe, Sirisena and Kumaratunga. No details were reported, but undoubtedly Doval discussed India's concerns over Rajapakse's government, as well as the opposition's election plans.

Reuters provided details of the RAW agent's activities, without actually naming him. According to Reuters sources, he was involved in "facilitating meetings to encourage several lawmakers, among them Sirisena, to defect from Rajapakse's party." The agent also played a role in convincing Wickremesinghe not to stand against Rajapakse, in order to make way for "someone who can win." A Sri Lankan parliamentarian told Reuters: "They actively were involved, talking to Ranil [Wickremesinghe], getting those things organised, talking to Chandrika [Kumaratunga]."

Kumaratunga was the linchpin of the plot. A major figure in Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, she had strong links to Sirisena and other MPs who defected. At the same time, she had close ties in Washington, including to the Obama administration, through her lengthy association with the Clinton Foundation.

Wickremesinghe has not denied meeting with the RAW station chief, as well as the Indian High Commissioner in Colombo. His spokesman told the *Reuters* that "they discussed the current political situation" but denied the Indian officials had "advised" Wickremesinghe. Kumaratunga has remained silent on her discussions with the Indian agent.

New Delhi played a significant role in lining up political support for Sirisena via the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main party of the Tamil ruling elite in Sri Lanka. For weeks, the TNA held off making any announcement about the presidential election. But after a trip to New Delhi by TNA leader R. Sambandan, the party openly backed Sirisena, helping to swing Tamil votes in the North and East behind the opposition candidate.

Having won the election, Sirisena quickly shifted foreign policy to end Sri Lanka's "international isolation"—in other words, to move closer to India, the US and its allies. Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera's first overseas trip was to New Delhi this week. Sirisena is due to visit India next month.

In New Delhi, Samaraweera dismissed the Reuters report, declaring that "the people" toppled the Rajapakse regime in a popular uprising, which he compared to the "Arab Spring." In fact, what happened was a carefully planned operation, backed by the US and India, to exploit widespread opposition to the autocratic Rajapakse government by falsely portraying Sirisena as the "democratic" alternative. Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga represent layers of the ruling class hostile to Rajapakse's cronyism and pro-China tilt. They will be just as ruthless in attacking the basic democratic and social rights of working people.

The implications of the US and India intervention into the election are not limited to Sri Lanka. As geopolitical tensions intensify, the ousting of Rajapakse makes clear that Washington will not tolerate any opposition and will resort to any means to secure its objectives, as it intensifies its preparations for war against China.



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