

Sri Lankan president pledges to block rival

Wasantha Rupasinghe**18 July 2015**

In a lengthy speech on Tuesday evening, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena assured critics that he remained completely opposed to former President Mahinda Rajapakse. He declared that he would use his presidential powers to block any attempt by Rajapakse to become prime minister through the August 17 parliamentary election.

Sirisena defeated Rajapakse in the January 8 presidential election in what amounted to a regime change operation backed by the US and India which are hostile to Rajapakse's close ties with China. Sirisena, who had been health minister, resigned to stand for the presidency with the backing of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and United National Party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, both of whom have close ties with Washington.

Sirisena was not expelled from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and, as the country's president, has also assumed the post of SLFP leader. He has, however, been increasingly marginalised within the party by Rajapakse supporters as the country's economy has continued to deteriorate and opposition has grown over the minority UNP government's broken promises.

Sirisena won the January 8 election with the support of a layer of academics, liberals, non-government organisations and pseudo-left groups such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) which denounced the Rajapakse "dictatorship," hailed Sirisena as a "democrat" and the election outcome as a "democratic revolution."

The announcement on July 3 that Sirisena had agreed to allow Rajapakse to stand as a candidate in the August 17 election for the SLFP-led United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) provoked bitter recriminations from these upper middle-class layers.

Nirmal Ranjith Devasiri, a spokesman for the Federation of University Teachers and a leader of

Purawesi Balaya (Citizens' Power) declared: "We brought Maithripala Sirisena to power by helping to defeat Mahinda Rajapakse. He is now bringing him back... The one who was defeated and the winner are going to work together."

An editorial in the *Sunday Times* on July 5 was headlined "President waves the white flag and capitulates." A prominent Purawesi Balaya leader Gamin Viyangoda denounced Sirisena for "paving the way for Rajapakse to come to the parliament," declaring it to be the "greatest betrayal by a Sri Lankan state leader since independence."

These comments underscore the thoroughly anti-democratic character of these social layers. In effect, they were demanding that Sirisena use his position as SLFP president to prevent the party from nominating Rajapakse and his supporters as candidates in the parliamentary election.

Sirisena's speech on Tuesday was aimed at reassuring them that Rajapakse would not head the next government. He hailed "the democratic revolution that occurred on January 8" and pledged "to spend the next five years following election performing my duties by keeping the promises I made on January 8."

Sirisena provided a lengthy self-justification, saying that he had tried to retain control of the SLFP but had ultimately failed and was compelled to allow Rajapakse's nomination. He also claimed that by calling the election he had thwarted an SLFP conspiracy to use its parliamentary numbers to oust the minority UNP government and appoint Rajapakse as prime minister by providing him with a national list seat.

In answer to his critics, Sirisena declared: "I must state very clearly that in the upcoming election I have no association with Mahinda Rajapakse," adding that his opposition towards Rajapakse "still remains the same." He then insisted that he would not appoint

Rajapakse as prime minister even if the UPFA won the election.

The willingness of Sirisena, like Rajapakse, to use his sweeping presidential powers against a rival underscores the absurdity of the claim that a “democratic revolution” took place on January 8, as well as the declaration in his speech that he would “remain in a neutral position during the upcoming election.”

Sirisena’s speech was above all addressed to Washington, which, having backed the intrigues to oust Rajapakse in January, has no intention of allowing him to return as prime minister. The removal of Rajapakse was part of the US “pivot to Asia” to isolate China, encircle it militarily and ensure American hegemony throughout the region.

The displeasure in Washington over Rajapakse’s nomination was reflected in the reaction among diplomats reported by the *Sunday Times* political columnist on July 5. “Members of the Colombo-based diplomatic community, particularly those from the West, were shocked and even shaken [by Rajapakse’s nomination],” he wrote.

The bitter power struggle in Colombo has nothing to do with the defence of “democracy” but is bound up with Washington’s intensifying war preparations against China and the country’s deepening economic struggle.

Rajapakse represents sections of the ruling class who benefitted from the Chinese investment that flowed into the country after the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. Rajapakse has already criticised the government for blocking Chinese projects in Sri Lanka and has promised to restore them if he becomes prime minister.

Rajapakse is seeking to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism, criticising the government for allowing the revival of the LTTE and calling for “the protection of the motherland.”

Sirisena and his backers represent layers of the political establishment that are deeply concerned about the consequences of alienating the US and its European allies which Sri Lanka’s largest export markets. They fear that as US-China tensions sharpen, Sri Lanka could become the target for American retaliation if it does not distance itself from China.

The fact that Rajapakse is able to make another bid

for power reflects the growing popular hostility and opposition with Sirisena and the UNP-led government. Sirisena came to power promising a 100-day action plan to ease the pressure on living standards, but has broken many of his pledges. He calculated that distancing Sri Lanka from China would open the door for financial assistance, but the International Monetary Fund turned down the government’s application for a new loan and insisted on further austerity measures.

In his speech, Sirisena declared that “democracy is blossoming” but he had no compunction in deploying the military into hospitals to try to break a recent strike by 47,000 health workers. Police commandos have been repeatedly unleashed against protests by university students. Similar crackdowns have taken place against Tamils protesting the ongoing military occupation in the North of the island. Last week Sirisena invoked the Press Council, which could be used to take action against the media and journalists.

Sirisena’s speech bluntly declaring his determination to thwart Rajapakse and his faction will only further fuel acrimony within the SLFP. Neither faction of the ruling elite represents the interests of the working class. Whatever the outcome of the August 17 election, the next government will not hesitate to use autocratic methods to impose the austerity demands of the IMF and international finance capital.



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