

Sri Lankan political parties hail US shift on war crimes probe

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31 August 2015

Almost all Sri Lanka's political parties have hailed Washington's shift last week on investigations into the war crimes carried out by the military in the final months of the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. Their stance not only exposes the pro-imperialist character of these parties but their involvement and complicity in the abuse of basic democratic rights, particularly of the island's Tamil minority.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Nisha Biswal announced in Colombo that the US would support the Sri Lankan government's call for a domestic, rather than international, investigation into allegations of human rights abuses. Biswal, along with Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Tom Malinowski, arrived in Sri Lanka after the right-wing United National Party (UNP) won the August 17 general election, making clear that the pronounced pro-US shift, which began with the election of President Maithripala Sirisena on January 8, would continue.

Washington pushed a resolution through the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in March 2014 calling for an international investigation into Sri Lankan human rights violations as a means of putting pressure on Colombo. Following President Mahinda Rajapakse's defeat and Sirisena's installation in January, the US called for a delay in releasing the report until September 30. Biswal last week announced that after the report was released, the US and Sri Lanka would jointly sponsor a new resolution.

In a statement issued on "The Day of the Disappeared" on August 30, Amnesty International secretary general Salil Shetty noted that in Sri Lanka "several commissions have been appointed by successive governments since 1990 implicating leading politicians and high ranking officers in the police and

security forces [in human rights violations]." But no one has been charged, let alone convicted, as a result of these commissions. In some cases, the reports were not even published.

A UN panel of experts estimated in 2011 that 40,000 civilians were killed in the final months of the Sri Lankan war through the military's indiscriminate artillery and aerial bombardment of LTTE-held territory, including of its own declared "no-fire" zones. Despite being informed of their locations, the army shelled hospitals, food distribution centres and International Red Cross ships bringing humanitarian supplies and picking up the wounded. The UN report also drew attention to other abuses of democratic rights, including abductions and extrajudicial murders by pro-government death squads.

The US about-face underscores again its cynical use of the banner of "human rights." The US, which backed Rajapakse's renewed war on the LTTE and turned a blind eye to the military's war crimes, only seized on the issue in 2009 as a means of pressuring Rajapakse to distance himself from Beijing. Any international inquiry would have been tailored to US interests. Now that Washington has a pro-US government in Colombo, it no longer has any interest in pursuing the issue, especially as it could uncover the culpability of Sirisena, a former minister in the Rajapakse government, for war crimes.

Both the UNP and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) headed by Sirisena have supported the US announcement. SLFP leader and former minister Mahinda Samarasinghe told the *Daily News* that the US proposal was very encouraging as it demonstrated the "confidence that the international community has in President Maithripala Sirisena."

Rajapakse's supporters within the SLFP also backed

the American move. SLFP media spokesman Dilan Perera, who campaigned for Rajapakse to become prime minister during the August 17 general election, did something of a political U-turn. He declared the US announcement to be “a victory” as opposition to the UNHRC report had been a theme of Rajapakse’s election campaign.

Perera, however, also added that Rajapakse had failed to “understand the reality in world politics”—an oblique reference to the former president’s ties with China. “In practice, the US is almost the owner of the UN,” Perera said. “The other fact is that when doing politics in our region, we have to have extremely close and cordial relationship with India.”

Champika Ranawaka, head of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and a UNP ally, also proclaimed a victory, because Sirisena and the UNP were able to pressure Washington to change its position and thus “protect the war heroes.” The Sinhala chauvinist JHU, which was part of the Rajapakse government, was a virulent advocate of the war and defender of the military.

The JHU habitually refers to the military as “war heroes” as a means of denying that the Rajapakse government and military chiefs were responsible for any war crimes. It remains deeply hostile to making any concessions to the Tamil minority.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents the island’s Tamil elites, was more equivocal. TNA parliamentarian M. K. Shivajilingam told a press conference last Tuesday that the party could not rely on a “domestic probe.” He pointed out, however, that a resolution put to the Northern Provincial Council (NPC) critical of a domestic inquiry had failed due to a lack of support. The TNA controls the NPC.

To date, the TNA leadership, which met with Biswal while he was in Colombo, has issued no statement on the US shift. However, the failure of the NPC resolution indicates that the TNA, despite some criticism in its ranks, has fallen into line with Washington on the issue and has heeded Biswal’s advice to work for “reconciliation” with Colombo.

The TNA’s attitude to the atrocities carried out by the military is just as cynical as the US. Its concern is not for justice for the many victims of the Sri Lankan armed forces, but to maintain US support for the

demands of the Tamil bourgeoisie for a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo for the joint exploitation of the working class.

The Colombo media is equally enthusiastic about Washington’s support for a domestic inquiry. *Daily Mirror* columnist Ameen Izaadeen said the world powers lacked trust in the Rajapakse regime due to its “foreign policy blunders”—that is, orientation to China. He declared that it was encouraging to see that the “West is opening up to Sri Lanka.” Izaadeen noted that Western leaders were inviting their Sri Lankan counterparts to visit and discuss trade and investment, and that a trip by Sirisena to Washington, or even Obama to Colombo, was being talked about.

An editorial in the *Island* was sympathetic to Rajapakse but nevertheless declared that he had made “a mistake” by pursuing pro-Chinese policies and making anti-Western remarks. It declared that Rajapakse “was no threat to the West as such, but the super powers do not tolerate irritants. So, on January 8, Rajapakse did not know what hit him! Now, the US has struck a conciliatory note.”

Rajapakse’s ouster as president in January and his defeat in this month’s general election has resulted in a decisive shift in foreign policy toward Washington by virtually the entire media and political establishment in Colombo. As a result, the island is being drawn ever more closely into the US “pivot to Asia” and its war preparations throughout the Indo-Pacific against China.

In return, the US is willing to give control over human rights investigations to the Sri Lankan government, which will undoubtedly whitewash the military’s crimes while using particular cases to further undermine Rajapakse and his supporters.



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