

Sri Lankan president boasts at UN of “new era of democracy”

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena delivered a speech last week at the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly as part of his efforts to boost international support for the new Colombo government and strengthen its ties with US imperialism.

Sirisena’s visit to the US was the first since he came to power by defeating Mahinda Rajapakse in January’s presidential election. He told the UN last Wednesday that after he assumed the presidency, “a new era of democracy dawned in Sri Lanka ushering in justice, freedom and equality.”

In reality, Sirisena’s installation as president was the outcome of an anti-democratic regime-change operation backed by the US. Washington was not opposed to Rajapakse because of his autocratic methods of rule or his government’s crimes during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but because of his close ties with Beijing.

In outlining his government’s “new policies,” Sirisena said nothing about the main policy change—that is, the shift away from China and toward the US and its strategic partners such as India. As a result, Sirisena received a warm welcome from US Secretary of State John Kerry and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, and also met US President Barack Obama.

Addressing the UN, Sirisena declared that his government introduced “essential amendments to the constitution in order to strengthen democracy,” adding that “those amendments have reinforced the foundations of good governance through institutional reforms that strengthened pluralism and democracy.” He claimed that through his personal intervention some executive presidency powers were transferred to the parliament.

All this is just window-dressing. After taking office,

Sirisena abandoned his promise to abolish the executive presidential system, transferring only some of his powers to the prime minister and the cabinet. The 19th amendment to the constitution established a Constitutional Council (CC) to appoint “independent commissions” such as the bribery commission and election commission.

Though these measures have been hailed by Washington as strengthening “good governance,” the CC is comprised of persons appointed by the president, prime minister and parliament and is headed by the Speaker of the House. The prime minister and opposition leader are ex-officio members. This is a refashioning of state institutions, which remain firmly under the control of the Colombo political establishment.

None of the police-state institutions built up in a quarter century of brutal civil war have been abolished. The armed forces have not been cut in size since the LTTE’s military defeat in 2009 and large areas of the North and East of the island remain under tight military occupation. Moreover, the war crimes of successive Colombo governments and the military are being covered up.

Sirisena told the UN that his “new vision for the country” involved “sustainable development and reconciliation.” Fundamental to this process was “dealing with the past honestly” and following “a process of truth seeking, justice, reparation and non-recurrence.”

While Sirisena was in New York, US and Sri Lankan officials were collaborating in Geneva to push a resolution through the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) session to do exactly the opposite. Having engineered Rajapakse’s removal, Washington has dropped its demand for an international human rights

inquiry and supported a bogus “domestic inquiry” by the Sri Lankan government that will exonerate the perpetrators of war crimes.

A report recently released by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights detailed the slaughter of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of civilians by the military during the last phase of the war, as well as extra-judicial killings and disappearances. Sirisena was not only a minister in Rajapakse’s cabinet but acted as defence minister in the weeks immediately preceding the LTTE’s defeat.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Sirisena said Sri Lanka would appoint courts to investigate war crime allegations, but only after “careful consultations with religious leaders, politicians and military officials.” These mechanisms will be carefully contrived so that most, if not all, of those responsible for war crimes will be exonerated.

At the same time, Sirisena fully backed the US “war on terror,” which has been the pretext for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and now for the expanding US-led war in Syria and Iraq. “All forms of war and terrorism are a disgrace to humanity,” he said, adding: “Whatever their root cause is, the challenge of this era is to find ways and means to defeat such brutality against humanity.”

Like Rajapakse, Sirisena justified the war against the LTTE, declaring: “We defeated one of the world’s most ruthless terror outfits.” While the LTTE resorted to brutal methods during the civil war, the chief responsibility for the conflict rests squarely with successive Colombo governments, which have whipped up anti-Tamil communalism and systematically discriminated against the island’s Tamil minority ever since formal independence in 1948.

Sirisena used his visit to strengthen Sri Lanka’s collaboration with the US and its allies. Speaking at a leaders’ summit on so-called UN peacekeeping, he pledged about 5,000 troops, including two combat transport companies, two field engineering platoons, an infantry battalion and two Special Force companies, to such UN operations.

Sirisena was jubilant about the “success” of his US visit. He boasted to the *New York Times* that his main challenge had been to “win over the international community” and “these efforts have borne fruit.” The Sri Lankan ambassador to the US, Prasad

Kariyawasam, noted that Sirisena had been offered a seat at the head table at a lunch with Ban Ki-moon, Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Sri Lanka’s state-owned *news.lk* reported that Obama praised Sirisena for his “commitment and actions taken for the strengthening of democracy and good governance.” Ban Ki-Moon told Sirisena that he had “won the grace of world leaders” because he was “leading the country towards a correct path.” Such declarations are nothing more than signs of Washington’s approval for the new regime in Colombo.

During his UN speech, Sirisena bragged that one of his achievements had been “uniting the two major political parties” in Sri Lanka for “consensual governance.” He declared that the alliance would change the “confrontational political culture that prevailed in the country for six decades.”

In fact, the “national unity government” brings together the country’s two main bourgeois parties in order to take on the working class and rural poor amid a worsening economic and social crisis. The government is already holding talks with the International Monetary Fund about the austerity measures needed to gain a major loan, and will not hesitate to use police-state measures to suppress the resistance by working people.

This is the “new era of democracy” being implemented by Sirisena and applauded in New York by all his imperialist backers.



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