

Sri Lankan government calls “all-party conference” to appease communal forces

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena called a conference last month of all the political parties represented in parliament. The stated purpose was to discuss “how the government should proceed” on the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) proposal for a domestic inquiry into the war crimes and human rights violations committed during the final phase of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The “all-party conference” was not a one-off event. Sirisena informed the participants that similar discussions would be held in the future.

At the October 22 meeting, the United National Party (UNP), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, Jathika Hela Urumaya and several plantation unions participated from the ruling coalition. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), National Freedom Front, Stalinist Communist Party (CP), Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) were among the opposition parties in attendance.

The real purposes of the meeting were to assure the military leaders that they will not face war crime charges and to appease the Sinhala communalist constituency on which both Sirisena’s SLFP and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe’s UNP are based.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe also do not want to leave any room for their political opponents, including former president Mahinda Rajapakse, to accuse the government of “betraying the war heroes and the sovereignty of the country” in order to boost their Sinhala chauvinist base. The government and the opposition parties all refer to the military as “war heroes.”

In Geneva on October 1, the UNHRC passed a resolution jointly presented by the US and Sri Lanka. It

called for a “local inquiry” to be convened with “international help” on the abuses committed in 2009 during the final months of the 26-year-long war.

Sirisena told the October 22 gathering that “the proposals in the current resolution were not as intrusive as once proposed in previous ones”—referring to US-sponsored resolutions in 2012, 2013 and 2014. “Sri Lanka had to face this and could not run away from the responsibility,” he said.

It is certainly true that the latest UNHRC proposal is not “intrusive.” In fact, it represents a move by Washington, in a conspiracy with the Sri Lankan government, to cover up the war crimes. In 2014, the US ratcheted up its pressure on the previous Rajapakse government by sponsoring a resolution calling for an “international inquiry” into the violations.

Washington’s pressure on Rajapakse had nothing to do with holding Colombo’s war criminals to account. The US was exploiting the issue of “human rights” to push Rajapakse to end his close relations with China, which the Obama administration is aggressively confronting throughout the region.

Rajapakse enjoyed US backing for his prosecution of the war but turned to Beijing to obtain investment and loans as the economic lifeline for his government. In this January’s presidential election, Washington conspired with ex-president Chandrika Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe to install Sirisena, one of Rajapakse’s ministers, in office.

Sirisena, who has shifted the country’s foreign policy in line with the US “pivot” against China, assured the assembled party leaders that “the government is firm on taking whatever action it deems appropriate to meet the Geneva proposals within the framework of the Sri Lankan Constitution.” This is just a façade behind which those responsible for war crimes will be let off

the hook.

R. Sambandan, the leader of the TNA, which represents the interests of the Tamil capitalist elite, responded by requesting “the full implementation of the recommendations.” This is a fraud. The TNA helped shape the final US-backed resolution. Another TNA leader, M.A. Sumanthiran, acted as a go-between Colombo, London and Washington, in the backroom intrigues.

Having earlier backed the call for an “international investigation” and praising the US for sponsoring it, the TNA has fallen into line with the US shift. While Sirisena and Wickremesinghe assure the military and their communalist constituency of their protection, the TNA is telling Tamil people that the same government will address their problems. This Tamil bourgeois party is, in reality, seeking a power-sharing arrangement in the island’s north and east, in order to secure privileges for the venal Tamil elite with the assistance of the US and India.

At the all-party meeting, the JVP was desperate to display some differences with the government over the resolution, in order to appease its Sinhala chauvinist followers. JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva said “the government should not accept everything told to us by the international community” but “carefully study the proposals, as some clauses infringe on the country’s constitution.”

The JVP backed the anti-Tamil war to the hilt and is equally responsible for the war crimes. During the military offensive it supported the Rajapakse government, urging it on to suppress opposition to the war. Then, sniffing the political winds, the JVP indirectly campaigned for Sirisena to take office.

All parties at the conference, except the UNP and TNA, were partners in Rajapakse’s ruling coalition. The CP, MEP and LSSP still back Rajapakse. Except for the TNA, all the parties supported the 26-year war.

Whatever the differences expressed by the opposition parties, including the Sinhala chauvinist parties, the main feature of the conference was their unanimity in seeking to cover up the military’s war crimes. Thereby, they displayed their hostility to the democratic rights of the working class and poor—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike.

The whole process of concocting a mechanism to supposedly redress the human rights violations

committed during the war is an attempt to deceive the population, which suffered from all the brutal consequences of the protracted war, while firmly integrating Sri Lanka into the US strategic agenda against China.

Addressing the army’s Colors Awarding Ceremony at Army Headquarters in Panagoda on October 26, Sirisena again assured the military high command that it would not be harmed. “I will not let the quality and standards of the Armed Forces deteriorate in any way, nor would I allow any forces to degrade the image of the hard-earned dignity of the Sri Lankan armed forces,” he promised.

US officials are continuing to heap praise on Sirisena. Addressing the “Open Government Partnership Global Summit” in Mexico City on October 28, Samantha Power, the US Ambassador to the UN, accused the Rajapakse government of governing “largely through divisiveness and fear” and “persecuting critics.” She hailed Sirisena’s administration for moving “swiftly to show it was serious about living up to its commitments, from stopping harassment of human rights defenders and journalists, to exposing rampant corruption.”

“Human rights” is simply a convenient cover for the US to pursue its imperialist interests. Washington ignored the Rajapakse government’s abuse of democratic rights for years before turning against him. It will do the same with Sirisena if he falls out of step with US foreign policy. The only “commitments” that interest the Obama administration are those made by Sirisena to support the US and its allies against China.



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