

One year of Sri Lankan President Sirisena's rule: Propaganda and reality

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January 8 marked one year since Maithripala Sirisena was elected Sri Lankan president, after defecting from the cabinet of his predecessor, Mahinda Rajapakse, in what was essentially a regime-change operation backed by Washington. To celebrate the anniversary, Sirisena's administration declared the first week of 2016 "Good Governance Victory Week," with official events being held around the country.

Early last week, speaking at a public meeting in southern city of Galle, Sirisena insisted that if someone asked whether he was satisfied with his first year, "my immediate and clear answer is 'yes.'" He added: "The decisions we made during the last year were not those felt in the belly [of the people]" but were taken to "safeguard freedom, democracy, human rights, eradication of corruption and ensure the good governance which are required for the people."

The president's contemptuous reference to his government's decisions not being "felt in the belly" reveals its contempt for workers, youth and the poor, who are demanding improved living and social conditions, including wage increases and the retention of subsidies on essential items. During the past year, a series of struggles have broken out over such demands. This is a country, moreover, in which about 25 percent of people live undernourished, not to mention Sri Lanka's many other social and health ills.

What is Sirisena's record on ensuring democracy? He promised to abolish the autocratic executive presidency but made only limited changes. He declared that its full abolition would have to wait until after his term ends in 2020. His administration's changes to the president's powers include the appointment of senior state bureaucrats to a "constitutional council," which is dominated by the government and opposition leaders, rather than the president.

The military occupation of the north and east is continuing. Under Sirisena, the government is using the same police-state methods used during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against working people. Troops were mobilised to replace strikers, including during the health workers' stoppage. Police framed up tea

estate workers who fought against increased workloads. Bank employees are the latest victims of court bans on protests against budget cuts. Police brutality was unleashed on students and farmers who protested in a southern rural town to demand clean drinking water.

What about the protection of human rights? A proposed international probe into the war crimes committed by the military was undermined with the help of the US. Former Rajapakse government and military leaders are accused of killing tens of thousands Tamil civilians during the final stage of the military campaign against the LTTE. Washington sponsored a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council that permitted Sirisena's government to conduct a so-called domestic inquiry, which will be used to whitewash the war crimes. More than 200 political detainees, mostly Tamils branded as "LTTE suspects," are still languishing in jails without trial.

Sirisena's pompous talk about "corruption-free," transparent rule is a sham. The country has been ruled alternatively for seven decades by Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP). These two parties have been mired in one scandal after another over bribery, corruption and nepotism.

Over the past year, the analysis presented by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* has been vindicated. Explaining the international implications of the presidential election, the WSWs warned on January 12, 2015: "The last thing the Sri Lankan working class and oppressed will gain from Sirisena's installation is peace, democracy and prosperity. The country will be turned into another arena of US intrigue against China. Under conditions of worsening global economic slump, the repressive laws imposed during the 26-year civil war and expanded by Rajapakse will be retained and used to enforce ever-deeper attacks on living standards."

Sirisena's election marked a turning point, not only for Sri Lanka but throughout the region. He was brought to power via a political operation instigated by the Washington,

assisted by Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who both have close relations with the US. The regime change was completed when the big business-backed UNP secured a parliamentary majority in last August's general elections.

The pseudo-left groups—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), United Socialist Party and Frontline Socialist Party—along with middle class organisations such as Purawesi Balaya (power of citizens), directly and indirectly channeled the opposition of workers and poor to the Rajapakse government's repression and attacks on living conditions behind the pro-US operation, giving it in a democratic façade.

Washington's intervention was part of its wider "pivot to Asia" to militarily encircle China and prepare for war in order to secure US domination over the Asia-Pacific region. The US was hostile to Rajapakse not because of his anti-democratic methods, but his economic and political relations with Beijing. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has systematically distanced the country from China, including by halting or placing restrictions on major Chinese investment such as the Colombo Port City Project, which Beijing considers part of its "Maritime Silk Route" project to protect and enhance its trade and energy sources.

Sirisena's administration has closely integrated the country into US war designs. Nearly a dozen senior US officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry and US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, have visited Sri Lanka to consolidate these relations. Listing US achievements in 2015, Kerry wrote in an op-ed piece on January 1: "The past year also marked important democratic gains in such countries as Nigeria, Burma, Sri Lanka and Venezuela." Kerry's talk of democracy is bogus. In each of these countries, the US has intrigued to install pro-Washington governments.

Last week, Sirisena's government announced that it would discuss joining Washington's Trans-Pacific Partnership, a US-led trade and investment bloc designed to economically isolate China. Colombo will also convene next month a "Dialogue of US-Sri Lanka Partnership," which will include security and maritime cooperation. The US intends to invest in a massive \$US2.4 billion oil refining project in the southern port of Hambantota, seeking to undercut China's plan for a similar project.

In his speech, Sirisena declared that the country's economic problems were not the present government's fault but it would resolve them. Confronted by global slump and rising debt, sections of the ruling elite are pointing to parallels with the economic turmoil in Greece and suggesting the need for similar austerity measures. The government has already indicated in its budget proposals

how it proposes to respond, including by slashing pension rights, cutting fertiliser and other subsidies, restructuring government enterprises and increasing taxes on essentials.

As an indicator of the economic crisis, the rupee has devalued by 10 percent during the year after the currency was floated on the instructions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government has decided to negotiate another loan from the IMF, which is insisting on sharp public spending cuts.

NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne, who helped bring Sirisena and Wickremesinghe to power, recently published a column in the Colombo-based Sinhala weekly *Lakbima Irida Sangrahaya* praising the government's "democracy." He cynically painted the struggles erupting in various sectors as a proof of democracy under Sirisena. Karunaratne wrote: "Working people have come to struggles over salary issues, privilege issues and work issues," adding that all social struggles needed to be conducted "in the environment of democratic freedom."

Karunaratne is shamelessly penning hosannas to Sirisena and the government, while covering up its repressive acts, which are a forewarning of the state violence that will be unleashed as intense class conflicts erupt. Likewise, the trade unions backed by the pseudo-lefts and groups such as Purawesi Balaya are talking about "democracy" under Sirisena, above all in order to cover up Sri Lanka's line up with Washington.

One year on from Sirisena's installation, the working class must take stock of the political situation. Sirisena's government is both intensifying the offensive against working class living conditions and tying the country to the war plans of the US, which pose the dangers of another catastrophic world war to workers internationally. A return to Rajapakse and his wing of the SLFP, deeply mired in Sinhala chauvinism, provide no progressive alternative. Workers and young people need to turn to SEP and the fight for an international socialist perspective against the Sirisena government and the entire capitalist order itself.



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