

UN Ambassador Samantha Power hails Sri Lanka as human rights champion

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At the recent US-Sri Lanka Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) Council Meeting in Washington, Samantha Power, the US permanent representative to the UN, took the time to promote the US “pivot to Asia” aimed at isolating and preparing for war against China. She hailed Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena’s government, whose coming to power in January 2015 was engineered by Washington as part of the “pivot to Asia,” for its human rights record.

Power said Sirisena’s regime has made “extraordinary progress,” claiming, “Sri Lanka has, since January 2015, emerged as a global champion of human rights and democratic accountability.”

Power is lying through her teeth. The Sirisena government is no such thing. In fact, its violations of democratic rights and its flagrant contempt for the workers and toiling masses of Sri Lanka make fairly clear what kind of local allies Washington is relying on to carry out its “pivot to Asia,” behind a veil of empty and hypocritical “democratic” rhetoric.

The Sirisena government is burying the war crimes committed by the previous Rajapakse regime. Thousands are still missing after the civil war ended with the massacre of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, killing tens of thousands. Many top Sirisena officials are deeply implicated in these crimes, with Sirisena himself having served as former president Rajapakse’s acting defence minister at the end of the civil war.

War victims’ families have protested, demanding that the government release their relatives disappeared during the war. The Tamil minority in the North and East of Sri Lanka are still under military occupation since the end of the civil war, and thousands are still living in makeshift camps in deplorable conditions.

Hundreds of political prisoners of all ethnicities have been held without trial in prisons for years.

All these demands have been brushed aside by Sirisena as well as his Tamil nationalist allies in the Tamil National Alliance. Even after Tamil political prisoners staged a hunger strike demanding their release, the Sirisena government brazenly insisted there are no political prisoners in Sri Lanka.

The Sirisena government has cracked down on opposition to its austerity agenda from workers, students and farmers. It resorted to legal frame-ups against tea estate workers protesting poor working conditions and obtained injunctions to prevent bank employees’ protests. When it faced large-scale protests by farmers against subsidy cuts and low prices for their products, and by students against education cuts, it ordered security forces to brutally attack the protesters.

Though Power and other top US diplomatic officials have repeatedly visited Colombo and are excellently informed of Sirisena’s attacks on democratic rights, Power claimed Washington’s hand-picked regime in Colombo is overseeing an unprecedented flowering of democracy.

Power stated, “When I visited in November, the change since my last visit in 2010 was palpable. People told me that it felt as though a repressive climate of fear had been lifted and that they could breathe again. Activists felt safe to work openly and, of course, to criticize the government with new fervor. Journalists reported freely; political prisoners were being released; land was being returned to the people; and the internally displaced were beginning to go home in new numbers. As part of its determination to deal with the abuses of the past, moreover, the government had committed to justice and reconciliation processes to try to serve all Sri Lankans.”

Who does Power think she is kidding? A broad and growing body of public evidence points to a surge in human rights violations after Sirisena's election, including abductions, torture and rape, in an unsuccessful effort to silence broad popular opposition through state terror.

Recently, the International Truth and Justice Project-Sri Lanka published a report based on interviews with 20 Tamils abducted last year.

Their testimony was confirmed by physical evidence of torture, including scarring, and by psychological symptoms of torture and sexual abuse. Torture methods included "beating, whipping, burning with cigarettes, branding with heated metal rods, water torture, asphyxiation in a plastic bag soaked in petrol or chilli and tied around their necks, hanging upside down, beating on the soles of the feet and the use of electric currents through their body."

One torture victim, originally from a village in Sri Lanka's east and now living in London, said he had signed a false confession to being a Tamil Tiger fighter after members of the security forces burned him repeatedly. "I don't think there has been change, I don't think there has been any change under the new government," he said.

As she sings the praises of the Sirisena government, with its torture chambers and detention camps, as an exemplar of democracy, Power is engaging in what she has made her particular specialty: the justification of US foreign policy under the fraudulent banner of "human rights." As the director of multilateral affairs and human rights on President Obama's National Security Council from 2009 to 2013, she was a leading advocate of the so-called R2P (responsibility to protect civilians) policy. It served as the justification for Obama's "humanitarian" wars.

Power was a leading architect of the US-NATO war for regime-change in Libya, which ousted and murdered Muammar Gaddafi, killing tens of thousands and devastating the country, claiming this was necessary to protect Libyans' human rights against Gaddafi.

At the UN in 2014, she backed the Israeli massacre of Palestinians in Gaza, blocking the UN Security Council's passage of any binding resolution imposing a ceasefire. She warned that any attribution of blame on Israel was a "red line" for Washington.

It is fitting therefore that she should be chosen to give Sirisena's reactionary policies a hypocritical "democratic" gloss, as Washington tries to ensure that Colombo serves as a reliable partner in preparing for war and suppressing opposition in the working class throughout Asia.



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