

Insider's book sheds light on Sri Lanka's regime-change operation

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November 21 marked the second anniversary of Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena's defection from former President Mahinda Rajapakse's government to contest the January 2015 presidential election as the opposition's "common candidate." Sirisena, who was Rajapakse's health minister and secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), defeated the incumbent and formed a coalition government with the United National Party (UNP), appointing its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

The mainstream media and pseudo-left groups hailed Sirisena's election victory as a "democratic revolution." Only the *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party explained that Sirisena's cross-over was part of a reactionary regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington against Rajapakse's pro-China tilt.

A recent book by a SLFP parliamentarian, Malith Jayathilake, titled *The January 8th Revolution: As I Have Seen It*, contains some inside information on how leading figures in Sri Lanka's ruling elite conspired to oust Rajapakse. Jayathilake was a former advisor for Rajapakse's ruling cabal, but later became Sirisena's election propagandist.

While the book was written to glorify Sirisena and others who backed him, it confirms aspects of the WSW's detailed analysis of the regime-change operation. Jayathilake deliberately avoids mentioning Washington's intervention. Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and their cohorts fear that revealing US imperialism's connection to their installation would be politically suicidal.

Jayathilake portrays former President Chandrika Kumaratunga as the chief actor in Sirisena's defection from Rajapakse. Her central role, however, was principally determined by her US connections, highlighted by the WSW. After her presidency ended in 2005, Kumaratunga joined the Clinton Foundation of former US President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary Clinton, who became secretary of state during the Obama administration's first term.

Under Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, the US

instigated its "pivot" to Asia to isolate and militarily encircle China and to undermine Beijing's influence in the region. In her efforts to align countries in the region behind Washington, Clinton bullied the Rajapakse government to distance itself from China. After attempts to pressure Rajapakse over Sri Lankan war crimes failed, Washington systematically worked toward regime change. Former US ambassador in Colombo, Michele Sison coordinated these activities, having connections with Kumaratunga, Wickremesinghe and middle-class groups such as the National Movement for Social Justice (NMSJ).

The book reveals that Kumaratunga began tapping Sirisena as a possible presidential candidate in 2013, sending feelers to see his views. According to the book, Sirisena initially replied: "I cannot agree to this [proposal]."

Kumaratunga started to exploit discontent within the SLFP against Rajapakse and his cabal, who had concentrated political power in their hands and marginalised senior party figures. Rifts within the SLFP were such that several MPs wanted Kumaratunga to become a "common opposition" candidate to defeat Rajapakse.

Kumaratunga told her close circle she would not contest a presidential election, giving various reasons. The book covers up the real political reason for her reluctance. Kumaratunga was well aware that she ended her presidential term thoroughly discredited because of her government's attacks on living conditions and democratic rights and its resumption of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Kumaratunga continued her intrigues, sending emissaries to Sirisena. According to Jayathilake's book, Kumaratunga established direct contact with Sirisena by June 2014, on the pretext of discussing problems with a hospital established in her late husband Vijaya Kumaratunga's name. She also used the Viber messaging system to contact Sirisena and others. Facing the intrigues of his political opponents, Rajapakse set up phone-tapping equipment to seek information on the plotting.

In July 2014, Rajapakse indicated he was planning to call

an early election. The book explains that Kumaratunga intensified her efforts. She advised her personal friend and current MP Jayampathy Wickramaratne and her chief of staff P. Dissanayake to start secret negotiations for Sirisena's defection.

Kumaratunga and UNP leader Wickremesinghe had already started talks to coordinate efforts to oust Rajapakse. Her aim was to enlist a section of the SLFP and get the support of the UNP leader to field Sirisena as a common opposition candidate.

While agreeing to the proposal, Wickremesinghe was planning to contest the election himself. However, the view of prominent UNP leaders, including Mangala Samaraweera, Ravi Karunanayake and Malik Samarawickrama, and also Kumaratunga and those opposed to Rajapakse in his party, was that Wickremesinghe should not be the common candidate.

At a secret meeting held at her house on November 6, 2014, Kumaratunga told Wickremesinghe he could not become the candidate. One reason was the unwillingness of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) to support him. "They think your image has collapsed," she said.

Underscoring the capitalist elite's communal considerations in selecting a candidate, Kumaratunga also pointed to the lack of confidence about Wickremesinghe among the Sinhala communal parties.

In this meeting, for the first time she revealed Sirisena's intention to defect and reportedly told Wickremesinghe: "If you agree, I'll get him [Sirisena] to agree." Wickremesinghe finally agreed to give way to Sirisena, just two weeks before the latter's defection.

Kumaratunga had conducted talks with the TNA for a "common candidate" since September 2014 without divulging Sirisena's name. She conveyed the idea to TNA MP M.A. Sumanthiran and he agreed. In October, in a discussion at her house, Kumaratunga told TNA leader R. Sambandan that Sirisena would be the candidate and he was enthused. The TNA, representing the Tamil capitalist elite, lined up with the regime-change plot.

As the WSWs explained in January 2015, the TNA's decision to back Sirisena was not a last-minute decision. It was a carefully prepared move, fully endorsed by Washington and New Delhi. The main tactical calculation in delaying announcing the TNA's support until late December was to avoid Rajapakse's communalist accusations that Sirisena had caved in to Tamil parties.

For some time, Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe held discussions with the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a partner in Rajapakse's government, and the communalist opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)

to rally them behind their plot.

This account again demonstrates that there was not a grain of "democracy" in presenting Sirisena as the "common presidential candidate." Everyone involved conspiratorially schemed behind closed doors in Colombo, monitored by Washington.

While a propaganda drive was drummed up against Rajapakse's anti-democratic rule and corruption, nothing was said about Sirisena's role as one of Rajapakse's ministers or the autocratic methods of the UNP while in power.

Professors and pseudo-radicals initiated the NMSJ and Citizen's Power campaign against Rajapakse's "corruption and nepotism." Many of them had already lined up behind the bogus US human rights campaign against Rajapakse. When Sirisena's candidacy was announced, they were jubilant.

This exercise was not limited to a presidential election. If the operation had failed to defeat Rajapakse in the election, it would have culminated in a Washington-instigated "colour revolution" to oust him.

Nearly two years of rule by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government have proved that this regime change was not conducted out of concerns for the democratic rights of workers and poor. The government's major move has been to deepen political and military ties with the US.

As the WSWs and the SEP warned, this government—which came to power under the false banner of "good governance"—has imposed savage austerity measures, deepened the attacks on workers and democratic rights, and steadily dragged Sri Lanka into the maelstrom of US war preparations in the Indian Ocean.



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