

Sri Lankan government withdraws from UN resolutions in order to boost the military

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In a significant political move, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government has withdrawn from a UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution adopted in 2015 and a related resolution from last year. The government's aim is to protect the military from any investigation of its war crimes committed during the suppression of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Rajapakse has come to power amid deep social unrest. He depends on the military as his main power base to take on the working class.

Rajapakse, an ex-colonel, was defence secretary during the last phase of the communal war under his older brother, President Mahinda Rajapakse, during 2005–2009. In the final weeks of the war, tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed and many who surrendered disappeared. As well as the military, Rajapakse has been implicated in the war crime allegations.

On February 26, Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena announced the withdrawal decision at a UNHRC meeting in Geneva, after the cabinet had approved the move on February 17.

The October 2015 UNHRC resolution was co-sponsored by Colombo and Washington after Maithripala Sirisena was installed as president in January that year via a regime-change operation orchestrated by the US to oust Mahinda Rajapakse.

Washington supported Mahinda Rajapakse regime's anti-democratic rule and the war. However, it considered him too close to Beijing, against which the US was moving economically and militarily. The US wanted Sri Lanka, which is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, to line up with its military drive against China.

After taking office, Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe shifted Sri Lanka's foreign policy in favour of the US and its ally, India. The Colombo government also began integrating Sri Lanka's military

with the US Pacific Command, which is focused against China.

Washington, which had earlier presented international war crimes investigation resolutions in the UNHRC to pressure the Mahinda Rajapakse regime, changed tack. It co-sponsored the 2015 resolution to establish a "domestic" inquiry on war crimes, allowing Sirisena's government to let the military and political leaders off the hook. The resolution called for "reconciliation" and constitutional changes in order to enlist the support of the Tamil bourgeois parties for the pro-US Colombo government.

After withdrawing from the UNHRC resolutions, Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government said it "envisaged devolution of power beyond the present constitutional framework, establishment of hybrid courts to try military personnel accused of human rights violations, abolition of the executive presidency, repealing of the Prevention of Terrorism Act [PTA] and establishment of an office of missing persons."

Gunawardena told the UNHRC that its resolutions had "dictated changes in the country ... undermined the national interest and compromised security, including weakening intelligence operations." To pretend that the government has some concerns on human rights, he said Rajapakse would appoint a presidential commission to review previous past commissions' reports and take action.

These statements point to Rajapakse's dictatorial aims, including to strengthen the executive presidency and maintain the draconian PTA, while boosting the military.

"Establishment of hybrid courts" means a domestic inquiry with international observers. This is a watered-down version of what was proposed in the UNHRC resolution.

The Sirisena government did not even establish such courts, despite bogus UNHRC criticisms. Nevertheless,

during last year's presidential election campaign, Rajapakse and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which supported him, accused Sirisena's government of "betraying" the military and the country by agreeing to the resolution, and vowed to withdraw from it.

Significantly, Rajapakse announced this move in preparation for the next general election. This week, using his executive powers, he issued a gazette notification to dissolve the parliament six months before its term ends. Rajapakse and the SLPP are bidding for a two-thirds majority in parliament to strengthen autocratic rule. One main plank of their propaganda will be the withdrawal from the UNHRC resolutions, supposedly to protect the country's sovereignty and safeguard the military.

The decision to withdraw from the UNHRC resolution was taken just two days after Washington imposed a travel ban on Army Commander Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the decision was taken due to Silva's "involvement in extrajudicial killings during Sri Lanka's civil war."

As the major human rights violator in the world, the US has no interest in safeguarding democratic rights in Sri Lanka or anywhere else. The travel ban was a threatening message that Washington will not tolerate any attempt by the Colombo government to balance between the US and China.

Washington is concerned that Rajapakse's government may not proceed with the renewal of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to allow free access to US military forces, and may not sign the Millennium Corporation Challenge Agreement that allows Washington to enhance its influence.

The US has not issued any statement on the withdrawal from the UNHRC resolutions. However, the UN human rights commissioner Michelle Bachelet and other major powers expressed "concerns."

Bachelet said "some progress" had been made by Sri Lanka in "promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights," but the government's inability to "deal comprehensively with impunity and to reform institutions, may trigger the recurrence of human rights violations."

Bachelet's claim of "progress" is false. The island's war-ravaged north and east, where the majority of Tamils live, continues to be under military occupation.

The government is withdrawing rare cases against war criminals and freeing them. It is pressuring the judiciary and police to drop charges against former Navy chief Wasantha Karannagoda and 13 other naval officers accused of abducting and killing 11 youth for ransom in

2008 and 2009.

Rajapakse is also militarising the administration, appointing retired senior military officers to key government posts.

The UNHRC's so-called Core Group on Sri Lanka issued a statement, saying it is "deeply disappointed and concerned that the government has changed its approach to the resolution," but the countries in the group "remain profoundly committed to the resolution."

This Core Group includes Canada, Germany, North Macedonia, Montenegro and the UK. France issued a separate statement expressing its concerns.

These countries supported the US regime-change operation in 2015. Their statements are a warning that they and the US could use war crime charges once again to prevent Colombo drifting toward China.

Conscious of these threats, Foreign Minister Gunawardena told Bachelet that his government would continue to engage with the UNHRC, despite withdrawing from its resolutions.

The Rajapakse regime faces mounting economic problems and the deepening of the continued social opposition that has developed against successive governments. It wants to politically exploit its withdrawal from the UNHRC resolutions, combined with a communalist campaign against Tamil Muslims, to divert and divide the social anger of working people.

Since Rajapakse was elected as president, several struggles of workers and students have erupted. They include strikes in plantations and the Kahatagaha mine, and 200,000 teachers joined a one-day sick leave protest last week. About 15,000 workers sacked by the Rajapakse government are continuing a campaign to demand their jobs back.

These struggles are indicative of a socially explosive situation developing. Like his counterparts internationally, Rajapakse is moving toward a dictatorship in response to the rising social tensions.



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