

New UNHRC resolution aimed at pressuring Sri Lanka to end ties with China

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A new resolution on Sri Lanka has been presented to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) 51st session that began in mid-September. Voting on the resolution, titled “Promoting reconciliation, accountability, and human rights in Sri Lanka,” is scheduled for October 6.

The resolution, which was sponsored by the US, UK, Canada and Germany, as well as Malawi, Montenegro and North Macedonia, is based on a UNHRC resolution passed in March 2021, with some additional points. These include an investigation into the impact of “corruption” on Sri Lanka’s economic crisis and the “repression of the protest movement.”

The resolution has nothing to do with investigating war crimes or defending human rights in Sri Lanka. It cynically opposes the anti-democratic measures of Colombo governments, but only in order to increase pressure on the cash-strapped Colombo government and block its relations with Beijing. The US wants Sri Lanka to fully back its escalating geo-strategic confrontation with China.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe is a longtime stooge of US imperialism. However, Washington is concerned that he was elevated into this position by former president Gotabaya Rajapakse and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna MPs who have maintained ties with China.

New Delhi, a key strategic ally of Washington, provided considerable financial assistance to Sri Lanka when the economy plunged into crisis this year in a bid to strengthen relations with Colombo and marginalise Chinese influence. Several senior Biden administration officials, including USAID chief Samantha Power, have also visited Sri Lanka, following Wickremesinghe’s appointment as president for the same reason.

Last year’s 16-point UNHRC resolution called for the devolution of power, protection of human rights and human rights defenders, a “review” of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, accountability and respect for religious freedoms. It also expressed concerns about the militarisation of the civilian administration.

US interventions at the UNHRC on Sri Lanka go back to its support for a June 2009 resolution, following Colombo’s bloody defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The term “accountability” in the resolution

refers to crimes committed by the Sri Lankan military during the final months of the communalist war. These included the killing of at least 40,000 Tamil civilians and the cold-blooded murder of surrendering LTTE leaders.

The US and other major powers backed Colombo’s war and are responsible for supporting these crimes. The Obama administration, however, opposed then President Mahinda Rajapakse’s turn to China, which became a major arms provider and supplier of financial assistance. Washington’s concerns were bound up with its “pivot to Asia”—the diplomatic isolation and military encirclement of China in preparation for war.

After failing to pressure Colombo to distance itself from China, Washington orchestrated a regime-change operation in 2015 to oust Mahinda Rajapakse as president, replacing him with Maithripala Sirisena. Wickremesinghe, who was later installed as his prime minister, and former president Chandrika Kumaratunga supported the back-room operation.

The incoming Sirisena and Wickremesinghe administration shifted Sri Lankan foreign policy sharply in favour of the US, which then diluted its “human rights” campaign against Colombo. Washington, however, resumed its diplomatic pressure after President Gotabaya Rajapakse came to power in 2019 and his brother Mahinda won the general election in August 2020 to become prime minister.

In line with the latest UNHRC resolution, US Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair Bob Menendez and Senators Dick Durbin, Patrick Leahy, and Cory Booker have moved a resolution in the Senate. It calls for a “comprehensive international approach to address Sri Lanka’s current political and economic crisis, including challenges related to poor governance and economic policy under the Rajapakse family’s rule.” The Foreign Relations Committee resolution claims that the Sri Lankan economic crisis was “exacerbated by predatory loans” from China “as part of its debt trap diplomacy.”

The latest UNHRC resolution notes that “the severe economic crisis” in Sri Lanka has aggravated food insecurity, caused severe shortages of medicines and fuel, and reduced household income. “Corruption can have a serious negative impact on the enjoyment of human rights,” it states, and calls for the investigation and prosecution of corruption by “public

and former public officials.”

The corruption allegations, which are mainly directed at the Rajapakse family and its cronies, are aimed at preventing them from returning to power.

By contrast, the resolution “recognises” Wickremesinghe’s efforts “to address the ongoing economic crisis” and “welcomes” Colombo’s recently concluded bail-out loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Notwithstanding their cynical concerns about the suffering Sri Lankan masses, the major powers sponsoring the UNHRC resolution know that the IMF austerity measures will involve even more savage economic attacks on workers and the poor.

While corruption by successive governments, including those led by the Rajapakse family, is well-known, Sri Lanka’s economic collapse is part of the global crisis of capitalism, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia.

The UNHRC resolution also voices its concern over the “repression of the protest movement” and the mass arrest of demonstrators. Since April, the government has arrested around 4,000 people and detained over 1,500 in prisons, alleging they damaged state property and the homes of ruling party MPs.

“[P]articipation in peaceful protests can be an important form of exercising the rights to freedoms of peaceful assembly, of expression, and of association and to participation in the conduct of public affairs,” the resolution states.

The concerns of the US and other imperialist powers are not about democratic rights but Wickremesinghe’s ability to contain widespread opposition among working people to the country’s immense social crisis. Facing rising social tensions in their own countries, ruling elites everywhere are acutely nervous about the mass protests and strikes in Sri Lanka that forced President Rajapakse to flee the country and his government to collapse in July.

The resolution notes the “lack of progress in addressing the longstanding grievances and demands of Tamil and Muslim populations,” and voices concern about the ongoing “surveillance, intimidation and harassment of journalists, human rights defenders, families of the disappeared.” It proposes to “re-energise” the Office on Missing Persons and the Office for Reparations, toothless bodies established by the pro-US Sirisena regime, which did nothing and were used to hoodwink the families of war victims.

Addressing the UNHRC, Sri Lanka Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Sabry opposed the resolution, saying that the government policy was for a “domestic mechanism” to address any human rights violations. Successive Colombo governments have rejected all war crimes allegations and strenuously defended the military and political leaders responsible.

Seeking to advance its own influence in Colombo, Beijing opposed the UNHRC resolution on Sri Lanka. Chen Xu, its representative to the UN body said, “China opposes any country taking advantage of the current difficult situation in Sri

Lanka to seek self-interest” and urged the UN to “respect the human rights development path that Sri Lanka has independently chosen.”

The opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) party is backing the resolution, calling for an investigation into corruption in Sri Lanka and blaming Rajapakse governments. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has said nothing about the resolution but is developing close relations with US diplomats and other major powers as part of its back-room efforts to come to power.

The SJB and the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) sent representatives to the UNHRC, claiming it could be used to defend democratic rights in Sri Lanka. In fact, the SJB, JVP and FSP all maintain a guilty silence about the anti-China geo-strategic agenda behind the US and other imperialist “concerns” about human rights in Sri Lanka.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has always insisted, the struggle for a genuine investigation into war crimes and the defence of democratic rights in Sri Lanka can only be advanced as part of the independent mobilisation of the working class against capitalist rule. Sri Lankan workers must turn to international working class as its ally in this struggle.

The new US-sponsored resolution points to the advanced stage of global war tensions. The US and NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the escalating military provocations against China pose the danger of nuclear war. US imperialism and its international allies want nothing less than a totally obedient pro-Washington regime in Sri Lanka. World War III can only be prevented by building an anti-war movement of the international working class and in the struggle for international socialism.

This analysis, and the struggle for a global antiwar movement of the working class, will be discussed in detail at the forthcoming October 16 meeting called by the SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. We urge workers, students and youth to register here and attend this crucial event.



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