

New York Times columnist advises how to protect pro-US government in Sri Lanka

By K. Ratnayake
23 January 2015

The US and international media have focused a great deal of coverage on Sri Lanka's January 8 presidential election. Maithripala Sirisena, the newly-elected pro-US president, has been widely and falsely presented as a democrat. The real reason for this unusual amount of attention is not concern for democracy, but rather the strategic interests of US imperialism.

An op-ed column entitled "Helping Sri Lanka's New Democracy" in the *New York Times* on Monday went further, offering advice to the White House on how to entrench Sirisena and thereby protect American interests. It was written by Ryan Goodman, a law professor at New York University and adviser to the US State Department.

Goodman's promotion of the Sirisena government as "Sri Lanka's new democracy" is utterly false. Sirisena's election win was the outcome of a carefully engineered regime-change operation, backed by Washington and its allies, to exploit widespread hostility to the autocratic government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Former president Chandrika Kumaratunga, who has close ties in Washington via the Clinton Foundation, and Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of the pro-US United National Party (UNP), were instrumental in instigating Sirisena's defection from the government to stand against Rajapakse.

The promotion of Sirisena as the "democratic alternative" is absurd. As a senior cabinet minister under Rajapakse, he bears responsibility for all the Rajapakse government's crimes and abuses of democratic rights. Moreover, his backers—the UNP and other right-wing parties—have their own long records of human rights abuses.

The US-backed move against Rajapakse was not

motivated by support for democratic rights, but rather over his foreign policy tilt toward China. Washington is determined to bring Sri Lanka back into the US fold as part of its aggressive military preparations against China. American strategists regard the island as crucial to US control over vital sea lanes across the Indian Ocean that would enable a US economic blockade of China in the event of war.

Goodman has nothing to say about these considerations. Rather his column is addressed to a new task: having levered Rajapakse out of office, how will the US prevent the former president from destabilising the new government? Opposition to Sirisena will rapidly emerge as his government begins to implement the International Monetary Fund's agenda of austerity, just as ruthlessly as Rajapakse's did.

Goodman suggests what can only be described as a targeted human rights campaign. He refers to US Secretary of State John Kerry's remarks that Washington will closely work with the new Sri Lankan government and follow up human rights issues.

As part of its campaign to pressure Rajapakse to distance himself from Beijing, the Obama administration sponsored several resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council on the Rajapakse government's war crimes during the final months of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

The Rajapakse regime and the Sri Lankan army were certainly responsible for killing thousands of Tamil civilians, not only in early 2009 but also throughout the quarter century of civil war. The US, which backed Rajapakse's war against the LTTE and turned a blind eye to the military's atrocities, only took up the issue once it became apparent that China had developed close ties with the Rajapakse government.

Goodman advises that using the human rights issue in Sri Lanka now could be “too much and too little.” If the line were pressed too hard it could “destabilize the new government and jeopardize the warming of relations between the United States and Sri Lanka.” Nonetheless, the US must help “make sure that members of the ousted regime do not return to power.”

Goodman recommends that the Obama administration target former defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, one of the former president’s brothers, whom Goodman declares an “obstacle ... to smooth political transition in Sri Lanka.” According to Goodman, this can be done easily as Gotabhaya Rajapakse is a “naturalized citizen” of the US. The law professor proposes using the “War Crimes Act of 1996, which puts war crimes anywhere in the world under the jurisdiction of United States courts if the perpetrator, or the victim, is a United States citizen.”

Goodman suggests that the Obama administration publicly declare that “it will decide whether to proceed with its own criminal inquiry.” Charging the former defence secretary as a US citizen in an American court would ensure US control of the prosecution and circumvent drawn-out proceedings in the International Criminal Court.

Furthermore, Goodman even recommends that one of the charges be that Gotabhaya Rajapakse ordered the killing of unarmed LTTE leaders who were carrying a white flag and surrendering on the final day of fighting. The “white flag” incident is well known in Sri Lanka. The former defence secretary instigated legal action against ex-army chief General Sarath Fonseka, the opposition candidate in the 2010 president election, for making the accusation publicly.

Goodman’s suggestion is particularly cynical. As he states, his concern is not to prosecute all those responsible for war crimes in Sri Lanka, but rather to ensure that members of the Rajapakse regime do not return to power. Indeed, the list of war criminals is a very long one. It goes well beyond President Rajapakse and his associates. It includes General Fonseka, who was in charge of the final offensives against the LTTE and is now a key Sirisena backer, as well as the UNP leaders who were responsible for starting the island’s bloody communal war, and Sirisena himself, who was a key figure in Rajapakse’s cabinet and functioned as defence minister on several occasions.

Goodman’s column is another example of the way in which the US selectively exploits “human rights” to bully anyone obstructing US interests. It is not only meant as advice to the Obama administration but as a warning to Rajapakse, his brothers and their supporters to keep out of the way.

The posturing of the US as a defender of democracy and human rights is sheer hypocrisy. It has a long record of trampling on democracy, both at home and globally.

Just to take the past two decades, the US, assisted by other imperialist powers, invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq and intervened militarily in Libya, Syria and again in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of civilians died as a result. Top American officials from the president down are responsible for torture, arbitrary imprisonment and extra-judicial killings by drones.

Workers in Sri Lanka and around the world should reject US pronouncements on human rights with contempt. The only means for defending democratic rights is through a unified movement of the international working class, organised independently of every faction of the capitalist class and fighting on the basis of international socialism.

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