

Sri Lankan political establishment appeals to incoming Trump administration

By Vilani Peiris
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Every faction of the Sri Lankan ruling elite, including the leaders of the pro-US government and the parliamentary opposition parties, have issued statements voicing their readiness to collaborate with the incoming administration of US President-elect Donald Trump.

President Maithripala Sirisena sent a congratulatory message to Trump, declaring that Sri Lanka and the United States were “bound by deeply rooted and longstanding democratic traditions and common values.”

Sirisena said political ties between the two countries had “strengthened” since his elevation into the Sri Lankan presidency in January 2015 and hoped that he and Trump could “elevate the relationship between our two countries even further.” Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe issued a similar message.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is heavily dependent on Washington’s support. Sirisena was installed as Sri Lankan president last year in a regime-change operation orchestrated by the Obama administration, with the help of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and then United National Party opposition leader Wickremesinghe.

The operation was part of the US’s geo-strategic “pivot to Asia,” which is aimed at diplomatically isolating and militarily encircling China.

Washington was hostile to former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s developing economic and political relations with Beijing. The US initiated resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) calling for an international investigation into the war crimes and human rights violations committed during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The US diplomatic campaign was aimed at forcing

Rajapakse to distance himself from China. It culminated in the regime-change operation to oust him. India, which also opposed China’s influence in Sri Lanka, backed the behind-the-scenes operation.

Soon after Sirisena became president, the Obama administration helped change the UNHRC resolution from an international investigation into a “domestic inquiry.” This will be a whitewash, aimed at protecting the new regime in Colombo.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government quickly aligned Sri Lanka with Washington’s military strategic network in the Asia-Pacific region. In September President Barack Obama hailed the new regime at a UN luncheon event, declaring that Sri Lanka was “an example to the world” and said Colombo had the “fullest support” from the US.

Senior Obama administration officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry and UN Ambassador Samantha Power, have visited Sri Lanka and praised the new government. The US Pacific-Asia Command has been systematically building its presence and military relations in the country.

Notwithstanding the congratulatory messages to Trump from Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite are nervously discussing whether the current close relations with Washington will be maintained by the incoming Trump administration.

An indication of this was a *Sunday Times* editorial on November 14. The newspaper warned that Trump’s opposition to free trade agreements “does not bode well for Sri Lanka looking for foreign investors and trade pacts with the US.” It also voiced concerns about whether “deep friendships” made by the Sri Lankan foreign minister with “the Democratic Party-fuelled [sic] State Department and through them the Tamil

Diaspora” would “have to start all over again” with the new US administration.

Former President Rajapakse immediately congratulated Trump and used the message to indirectly complain about the treatment meted against him by the Obama administration. Rajapakse said his government had received logistical support from former US President George W. Bush and expressed his gratitude. “The Republican administration extended great assistance to Sri Lanka, especially in the spheres of diplomacy and intelligence, which helped my government to conclusively defeat the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” he said.

Rajapakse, who hopes that Trump will not support any UNHRC investigation into the Sri Lankan war crime allegations, also declared: “We look forward to a new world order based on the principles of the sovereign equality of all nations and non-interference in the internal affairs of nation states.”

Rajapakse’s overtures toward Trump are part of his ongoing efforts to return to power with the backing of various Sinhala chauvinist formations, and by exploiting the rising discontent with the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government and its social austerity program.

Sinhala extremist groups, including those supporting Rajapakse, were jubilant over Trump’s election. One such formation is the Federation of National Organisations (FNO), which represents several Sinhala chauvinist groups.

FNO convener Gunadasa Amarasekara told the Colombo media last week that the group “unreservedly” welcomed Trump’s victory and hailed his anti-immigrant campaign. The result, he declared, showed that “major elections could be won primarily on the strength of the majority community.” Translated into Sri Lankan politics, this means the ruthless domination of the Sinhala majority over all aspects of political life.

The FNO is currently supporting ex-President Rajapakse’s brother and former defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who ruthlessly pursued Colombo’s war against the LTTE. Gotabhaya Rajapakse has praised Trump’s “anti-establishment” posturing.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the umbrella organisation of Sri Lankan Tamil capitalist parties,

fully endorsed last year’s operation to bring Sirisena to power. TNA leaders, working on the advice of Washington, have provided consistent parliamentary support for the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration and backed its attacks on democratic rights and the austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Senior Washington officials visiting Sri Lanka since Sirisena became president have held talks with TNA leaders, who have endorsed US geo-strategic aims in the region.

The TNA and other Tamil party leaders had hoped Hillary Clinton would win the US presidency.

Five days before the US election, two Northern Provincial Council members, M.K. Shivajilingam and Ananthi Sasitharan, held prayers at a Hindu temple and a Christian church, hoping for a Clinton victory.

Shivajilingam claimed that a Clinton win would help them resolve the political and social issues confronting Sri Lanka’s Tamils. The Tamil bourgeois parties are not interested in the democratic rights of the Tamil workers and poor. Instead, they are seeking US assistance in their quest for a limited devolution of political power to secure their privileges.

Nervous TNA leaders are now looking for help from the incoming Trump administration. In a brief comment to the *Global Tamil Times*, TNA parliamentary opposition leader R. Sambandan said: “We will get the support of the new president of America, Donald Trump, to solve the problems [of the Tamil people]. We will explain [to him] the resolutions passed at the UNHRC.” Sambandan blindly insisted that US policies would not change under the new Trump administration.

Whatever their tactical differences, every faction of the Sri Lankan ruling elite is preparing to serve the new US president. As already indicated by the Colombo regime-change operation under Obama, the Trump administration will insist that Sri Lanka’s ruling elite continues to serve Washington’s geo-political interests in the region.

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