

Sri Lankan president presents rosy picture at UN General Assembly

By Saman Gunadasa
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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena recently addressed the United Nations General Assembly, appealing to the international powers to back his crisis-ridden government, while denouncing those demanding democratic and social rights at home as “extremists.”

Sirisena’s and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s government, now two-and-a-half years old, faces growing opposition from workers, youth and the rural poor, as well as from Tamil people whose living conditions have been devastated by the three-decade communal war in the country’s north and east. While Sirisena was addressing the UN, power workers were on strike and students and doctors were holding protests against the privatisation of education in Colombo.

Sirisena’s self-serving speech on September 19 boasted about democratic rights and reform measures to alleviate poverty. He pompously claimed to be an example in the international arena of “a leader who has shed power while holding office... [and] removing groups who use autocratic governance.”

Under his rule, Sirisena said, the country had “succeeded in our journey of re-establishing and restoring the freedom of the people, protecting human rights and nurturing fundamental rights.” He also claimed that, following the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Sri Lanka had “succeeded in initiating peace, establishing democracy and taking our country forward as a peaceful and free nation.”

These are blatant lies.

Sirisena came to office in the January 2015 presidential election, following a behind-the-scenes operation sponsored by the US. While the regime-change campaign exploited popular opposition to the autocratic rule of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, Sirisena’s claims to have “shed” presidential powers are bogus. In reality, he retains almost all the executive powers enjoyed by his

predecessor.

Sirisena has broken one of his main election promises—to abolish the executive presidential system—and instead introduced a constitutional amendment. The amendment limits the number of presidential terms to two and establishes a constitutional council and independent commissions to appoint top government official and judiciary, thus preserving the executive powers.

The president, in fact, is using these powers. In July, he imposed an essential services order and deployed the army to crush the oil workers’ strike and this month he prepared similar measures against striking power workers. Early this year, Sirisena issued an essential services order against people protesting environmental pollution.

The US and other major powers, via the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), used the human rights violations and war crimes committed during the war against the LTTE to pressure Rajapakse to distance his government from China. The US backed the war but opposed Rajapakse’s close economic relations with Beijing and wanted Sri Lanka brought into line with Washington’s war preparations against China.

After Sirisena suspended major Chinese-financed projects and showed his allegiance to Washington and its ally India, the political pressure was relaxed. Previous UNHRC demands for an international war crimes investigation were dropped and Colombo’s proposal for a local judicial investigation was endorsed in October 2015.

After two years of delay, Colombo only recently established an “Office of Missing Persons.” Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have publicly declared, however, that it will not investigate any previous disappearances. They have insisted that no war crimes were committed in Sri Lanka and said they would not allow any international charges to be laid against military or government

officials.

Sirisena cynically told the UN General Assembly that his administration was “firmly committed to strengthening national reconciliation” and to “build a society where everyone is able to live with freedom and dignity as equal citizens.”

Sirisena’s “national reconciliation” promise, which involved constitutional changes to devolve powers to the provinces, was made during the election campaign. Its purpose was to enlist the support of the Tamil capitalist parties. The recently released interim report on the new constitution, however, maintains the “supremacy” of Buddhism and Sinhala language, thus continuing the deeply anti-democratic character of the Sri Lankan state. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have pledged to maintain the “unitary” state in order to appease Sinhala-Buddhist communalists and the military, which are being whipped up by the Rajapakse opposition and fascistic forces.

Contrary to Sirisena’s “reconciliation” posturing, the military occupation of the north and the east continues. Military and police intelligence forces maintain constant surveillance of the population in these provinces, with the ongoing oppression justified by government and media claims of a “revival of LTTE terrorism.”

In his UN speech, Sirisena lashed out against the popular discontent over his numerous broken promises. “Some expect quick action and short-sighted, short-term solutions,” he declared. “Our path forward must be stable and progressive and not one of haste that may be destabilising.”

Speaking in Sinhala, he denounced those expecting quick action as “extremists.” This was not just aimed at Tamils demanding information about the disappeared, punishment for war criminals and the return of land seized by the military during the war. It was also directed against striking workers and protesting students in the rest of the country.

Sirisena told the UN the country faced a “severe debt burden” and his government had initiated various development projects to solve this problem. In reality, Colombo is brutally implementing social austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in an attempt to reduce the government’s fiscal deficit by half to 3.5 percent of gross domestic product by 2020.

These measures include increasing taxes, reducing subsidies and driving up the prices of essential items. Workers and youth opposing these measures are now deemed to be “extremists” seeking quick solutions.

While in New York, Sirisena met with US undersecretary of state for political affairs Thomas Shannon, who reportedly “commended the Sri Lankan government for political, economic and social progress achieved in the post war period.”

Shannon said the government was exemplary and “committed to build peace in the Indian Ocean region.”

These comments have nothing to do with “peace” but directly related to decisions taken by Colombo over the past two years to strengthen its ties with the US military.

In July, Sirisena secured cabinet approval to renew Colombo’s acquisition and cross-servicing agreement with the US department of defence. The 10-year agreement, first signed by the former Rajapakse government in 2007 during the war against LTTE, allows US military planes to access Sri Lankan airports and sea ports for refueling and service purposes.

While Sirisena is rapidly integrating Sri Lanka into US war plans against China, he has also condemned North Korea’s nuclear tests. Sirisena has no problem with US President Donald Trump’s threats at the UN to “totally destroy” North Korea.

After meeting Trump at a dinner hosted for state leaders, Sirisena tweeted: “Very glad that Jayanthi [Sirisena’s wife] and I could meet Donald Trump and Melani Trump in New York today.”

Behind his lies about democracy, reconciliation and poverty alleviation, Sirisena and his government are lurching toward dictatorial rule and deepening involvement in Washington’s catastrophic war plans in the region against China.

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