

Socialist Equality Party condemns Sri Lankan president's constitutional coup

Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), strongly condemns the anti-democratic seizure of power by Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Her actions in taking control of three crucial ministries—Defence, Interior and Information—followed by the declaration of a state of emergency amount to a creeping constitutional coup. Relying directly on the army, Kumaratunga has taken the first steps to the imposition of a military dictatorship.

Kumaratunga now has full control over the security forces and has begun to deploy them around key installations, including the major Colombo power plant, several embassies as well as the state-owned media and presses. She has appointed her own administrators to run these institutions and departments and has prorogued parliament for two weeks, effectively cutting off any means for the United National Front (UNF) government to constitutionally challenge her actions.

Even more significant, the state of emergency abrogates the basic democratic rights of the Sri Lankan people, under conditions of rising militancy among workers, youth and the rural masses against mass unemployment, job cuts, privatisation and deteriorating social services. While its provisions have not yet been fully clarified, previous emergency declarations have banned political activities, enabled the president to impose strict media censorship and empowered the police and army to carry out arbitrary arrests and detentions.

In condemning Kumaratunga's coup, the SEP also denounces the criminal role played by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the Communist Party. All these so-called "workers organisations" have lined up with Kumaratunga and her army-backed manoeuvres, thus helping to grease the machinery of dictatorship.

Kumaratunga has seized control by making full use of

the extensive and autocratic presidential powers contained in Sri Lanka's 1978 constitution, which was pushed through by J.R. Jayawardene's United National Party government in response to the upsurge of the working class in the 1970s.

When in opposition, Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) railed against this "dictatorial constitution" and pledged to end the executive presidency. But in 1994, when her Peoples Alliance (PA) won the election, she reneged on her commitment. While the PA lost power in the 2001 elections, Kumaratunga retained the presidency. She is now exploiting that position to undermine the elected government.

At the centre of the struggle over control of the state is a conflict within the ruling elite over the UNF government's attempts to end the country's devastating 20-year civil war. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has been seeking to negotiate a power-sharing arrangement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as the means for opening up the island as a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. His initiatives have been backed by the United States, the European Union and India for their own economic and strategic reasons, as well as by big business. Representing the interests of more backward sectors of business, as well as layers of the military and state bureaucracy that have profited from the war, Kumaratunga and the PA have opposed the "peace process," increasingly orienting to Sinhala chauvinist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sihala Urumaya.

Kumaratunga's constitutional coup came only three days after the LTTE released its proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority in the north and east of the island in order to restart the stalled peace negotiations. For weeks the PA, along with the JVP and SU, have been denouncing plans for an interim administration as a "betrayal" that will split the country.

The alliance between Kumaratunga and the extreme right-wing and chauvinist groups must sound the clearest warning to the working class as to the content of her coup. The JVP's actions in fomenting racialism, and its accusations of a "betrayal of the nation" recall its role in the late 1980s during the Indo-Lankan accord, when it mobilised armed thugs to murder opponents of its "patriotic" campaigns, including members of the Revolutionary Communist League, forerunner of the SEP.

In denouncing Kumaratunga's actions and opposing her coup, the working class must give no political support to the UNF government. Its plans for "peace" have nothing to do with the aspirations of ordinary working people for democratic rights and improved living standards. Whatever their disagreements, the agendas being developed by both the UNF and the LTTE involve the imposition of an unelected, communally-based interim administration on the people of the north and east, and a program of drastic economic restructuring on the Sri Lankan working class as a whole. The willingness of the LTTE to tacitly line up with the UNF's use of the army against 80,000 striking hospital employees in September makes clear what workers can expect under any power-sharing deal.

Moreover, if Wickremesinghe were in opposition instead of Kumaratunga, he would undoubtedly be acting as she is. Both the UNP and the SLFP are deeply mired in Sinhala chauvinism, which they have utilised for decades to divide the working class along communal lines. Just three years ago, Kumaratunga, under pressure from business and the imperialist powers, sought to pass a package of constitutional reforms that would open the way for talks with the LTTE. Responding to a chauvinist campaign whipped up by the JVP and other Sinhala extremists, Wickremesinghe reneged on previous assurances to provide the necessary two-thirds majority, forcing Kumaratunga to withdraw the measures.

In order to cut a path out of this chauvinist quagmire, in which each bourgeois party follows the other in playing the racist card, developing increasingly reactionary and anti-democratic forms of rule, the working class must ground itself on the lessons of its own historical experience.

The origins of the present political crisis can be traced directly back to 1964, when the LSSP abandoned the principles of socialist internationalism and joined the government of Kumaratunga's mother, Sirima Bandaranaike.

By adapting itself to the SLFP's anti-Tamil Sinhala

chauvinism, the LSSP created the conditions for the rise of communalist politics, which was to lead, by 1983, to the outbreak of civil war. At the same time, by joining bourgeois governments in 1964 and in 1970, the LSSP abandoned both the Tamil working class and the most oppressed sections of the Sinhala population—above all the youth and rural masses. The political vacuum created by the LSSP's great betrayal paved the way for the growth of the LTTE and the JVP.

The working class is the only social force that can provide a progressive solution to Sri Lanka's deepening social and political crisis. Neither the PA nor the UNF has any policies to meet the needs and aspirations of workers, youth and the rural masses. That is why they strive to maintain power through internecine feuds, racialist communalism and by mobilising the military.

The working class can only defend its interests by establishing its complete political independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie and its political apologists in the LSSP, NSSP and CP. This requires rallying the urban and rural poor around a socialist program, aimed at refashioning society from top to bottom to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the few.

To carry this through, workers must decisively reject all forms of communalism and racism. Whether Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, all workers confront the same daily struggle to survive against a common class enemy. The working class must unify its struggles across ethnic lines for the United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the fight for socialism throughout the Indian subcontinent and internationally. The only party advancing this program is the Socialist Equality Party and its international organ, the World Socialist Web Site.



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