

Sri Lankan president seeks extended term without elections

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In an extraordinary, anti-democratic move, the ruling coalition in Sri Lanka—the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA)—has begun to sound out amending the constitution to allow President Mahinda Rajapakse to remain in office beyond his six-year term without facing a new election.

For weeks, the government has been whipping up a climate of communal triumphalism following the army's victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Now it is seeking to exploit the atmosphere to entrench Rajapakse in the powerful post of executive president.

Under the present constitution, presidents can serve two consecutive terms of up to six years. Rajapakse, who narrowly won the November 2005 election, could hold an early election this year to capitalise on the military victory. But, assuming he won, his next term would begin immediately, reducing his total period in office from 12 to 10 years.

Last weekend Janaka Bandara Tennakoon, minister of provincial councils and local government, told the *Sunday Times* that the government is hoping to pass a constitutional amendment in parliament to extend Rajapakse's term without an election. An island-wide campaign has been initiated to try to build public support.

Last Friday, several hundred local government members met in Colombo and passed a resolution tabled by Tennakoon in favour of the move. Some members of the opposition United National Party (UNP) also voted for the resolution. Tennakoon said similar resolutions would be passed in the provincial councils and other local government bodies before presenting an amendment to parliament.

Rajapakse has kept quiet on the issue, so as to maintain the pretence that he has not initiated the move. Media minister

Anura Priyadarshana Yapa issued a statement yesterday declaring that the president had no wish to continue his rule without a poll. Rajapakse believed in the rights of the voters and democracy, he added.

However, Yapa insisted that there was a “popular request” for the extension of the president's term. This “request” is, of course, Tennakoon's campaign. Far from believing in democracy, Rajapakse has ruled in an increasingly autocratic fashion, with scant regard for democratic rights, parliament, the courts or the constitution.

During the past three years, military-sanctioned death squads have killed hundreds of people, including politicians and journalists. The government has incarcerated, in violation of basic constitutional rights, nearly 300,000 Tamil civilians who fled the war zone in the final phases of fighting. Rajapakse previously ignored a constitutional requirement to appoint a constitutional council and independent commissions to oversee the government administration of the Tamil refugees.

A constitutional amendment requires a two-thirds parliamentary majority, and as the move involves changing the presidential term, to be passed by a referendum as well. The executive presidency established in 1978 concentrates enormous powers in the hands of one person. Rajapakse also holds the posts of defence minister and finance minister. Former president J.R. Jayawardene notoriously boasted that the “only thing the president cannot do is changing a man into a woman”.

Rajapakse has increasingly functioned through a cabal that includes his brothers, top generals, senior bureaucrats and select ministers. The cabinet and ministry have become unwieldy, as virtually every member of the fragile ruling coalition has been paid off with a post. The president's brother, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the unelected defence secretary, wields far more power and influence than most

cabinet ministers.

The chauvinist victory celebrations organised by the government are designed to justify the continuation and strengthening of such autocratic methods, particularly the role of the military. Parades and rallies have praised the role of the president, the defence secretary and the commanders of army, navy and the air force.

Rajapakse has been portrayed as the reincarnation of a Sinhala king sent to save the Sinhala nation. Ministers have put up billboards with the slogan, “Rajapakse the king in our time.” Other posters show the president, his brother and the military declaring that having won the 30-year war, Rajapakse should be king for 60 years.

All chapters of Buddhist establishments have rallied to honour Rajapakse. Just a week after the army destroyed the final pockets of LTTE resistance, the chief prelates of a leading Buddhist sect conferred the title of *Vishvakeerthi Sinhaladheeswara* (Universally Glorious Overlord of the Sinhalese) on Rajapakse. Last week chief priests at eight Buddhist sites of worship in Anuradhapura, bestowed the title of *Shree Wickrema Lankadheeswara* (Heroic Warrior Overlord of Lanka).

On Sunday, two more Buddhist chapters—Ramanna and Amarapura—held a grand ceremony in Independent Square in Colombo attended by hundreds of Buddhist monks. Rajapakse was crowned *Sri Lanka Raajavamsa Vibhooshana Dharamadveepa Chakravarti* (Monarchical Emperor of the Glorious Land of Buddhism). The defence secretary and military chiefs have all been given (lesser) titles.

The openly communal character of these events makes clear that the gratitude felt by the Sinhalese elites to Rajapakse for defeating the LTTE. Contrary to the government’s claims, the protracted conflict was not a “war on terrorism” but a war to entrench the dominance of the Sinhalese establishment over their Tamil counterparts.

The government is clearly seeking to create an atmosphere that will pressure the opposition parties to agree to extend the presidential term and other anti-democratic measures. Both the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have opposed any extension of the presidential term. However the two parties have backed Rajapakse’s communal war. Their concerns are not with the democratic rights of ordinary people, but with their own power and privileges. As a result, they may yet come to an

arrangement, if only to prevent some of their MPs from defecting to the government.

The obvious question is never asked in the Colombo media. If, as is being portrayed, Rajapakse is universally adored for winning the war, why is there a need to amend the constitution? Outside of the narrow confines of ruling circles in Colombo, the war and its devastating impact on people’s lives was far from popular. If the presidential elections were held off for two years, Rajapakse would be likely to confront a wave of popular opposition to the economic onslaught being prepared by the government.

The war-ravaged economy is being pounded by the global recession. Last Thursday official statistics showed the lowest growth rate for the first quarter since 2003. GDP growth was just 1.5 percent annualised for the quarter compared to 6 percent in the same period last year. “The global turmoil has directly or indirectly affected the local economy,” the head of the statistics department, Suranjana Vidyaratne, acknowledged.

Rajapakse has already called for an “economic war to build the nation”. Speaking to new recruits to the National Planning Service on June 22, Rajapakse declared: “It is the responsibility of state sector employees to come together to rebuild the nation and recover the momentum lost over the past three decades due to the menace of terrorism.”

The moves to entrench Rajapakse in power without a new election are another sharp warning to the working class. To carry out its “economic war” on working people, the government will not hesitate to use the police-state measures that have been built up in 26 years of war and are now being strengthened.



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