

The international significance of Sri Lanka's emerging police state

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The rapid moves by the Sri Lankan government towards a police state not only spell danger for the working class on this island, but are a warning to workers around the world. As debt crises erupt in country after country and governments encounter resistance to the savage austerity measures being demanded by international finance capital, the anti-democratic methods of President Mahinda Rajapakse are an advance notice of the measures that will be used elsewhere.

Political tensions in Colombo illustrate broader international processes in an acute form. The island was embroiled in a savage communal war for 26 years which came to an end with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May. President Rajapakse, who had restarted the war in 2006 and conducted it with particular ruthlessness, declared that he would now bring “peace and prosperity” to the island.

The opposite has been the case. The end of the fighting solved none of the underlying problems. Having mortgaged the country to pay for his criminal war, Rajapakse was compelled to take out a \$2.6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to prevent a major balance of payments crisis. Now with the IMF calling the tune, the government is preparing to make major inroads into the living standards of working people.

Rajapakse has been seeking to consolidate his grip over the state apparatus in preparation for social convulsions. In the course of the war, he increasingly operated through a presidential cabal of relatives, close advisers and generals acting independently of

parliament and with growing contempt for constitutional and legal norms. The president wielded his extensive powers under the state of emergency, which is still in place, to ban strikes, threaten the media and conduct widespread detentions without trial. Pro-government death squads acting with the complicity of the security forces killed hundreds of people, including politicians and journalists.

Calculating that he could politically exploit the military “victory” over the LTTE, Rajapakse called the presidential election two years early in a bid to entrench himself in power. The opposition parties backed the country’s former top general, Sarath Fonseka, as their “common candidate” in the bitterly fought election on January 26. Fonseka had been part of Rajapakse’s inner circle but fell out with the president and resigned last November to contest the poll.

Rajapakse’s election win, far from settling the issues, produced what can only be described as factional warfare in the country’s ruling elites. Fonseka refused to concede defeat and threatened to mount a legal challenge. The government responded last week by placing the former general under military arrest, on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations that he was plotting to overthrow Rajapakse.

A day later, the president prorogued parliament and announced a general election for April 8 which will now take place in a political climate of fear and intimidation. The government has already announced that its aim is to obtain a two-thirds majority, giving it the power to change the constitution and thus provide the legal fig leaf for Rajapakse’s autocratic rule.

For all the venom of the infighting in the Colombo establishment, the factional disputes are of a tactical character—how to impose new economic burdens on working people and where to line up in the sharpening rivalry between the major powers, especially between the US and China. Rajapakse's extreme measures are a sure sign that class tensions on the island are reaching a breaking point.

While Greek debts are in the international headlines, Sri Lanka's economic crisis is of a similar magnitude. The country's overall debts rose to four trillion rupees (\$US35 billion) in the first 10 months of 2009. According to the IMF, the ratio of total public debt to gross domestic product (GDP) reached 87 percent in 2008. The budget deficit has risen to 11.3 percent of GDP and the IMF is demanding that the ratio must be slashed to 5 percent by the end of 2011.

Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Corporation Senior Economist Robert Prior-Wandesforde told a seminar in Colombo last week that the government had to go far further in slashing public spending. Dismissing Rajapakse's economic figures, Prior-Wandesforde said: "He has to deliver like he did with terrorism [the LTTE]. The one thing that would prevent Sri Lanka from reaching its true potential is the kind of recklessness, wastefulness and corruption in public expenditure."

Greek economic measures now have to be applied in Sri Lanka and more broadly. But the corollary is that Sri Lankan political methods will increasingly be employed in Greece and elsewhere as popular opposition grows to huge new economic burdens. The crisis is not isolated to economically backward countries like Sri Lanka and problem European states such as Greece, Portugal, Spain and Ireland. A default by Greece would impact heavily on Germany and France and reverberate throughout the EU. Britain is heavily indebted, as is the US, which is only able to sustain a budget deficit at 10.6 percent of GDP because its dollar remains the international reserve currency.

The present global economic crisis is not a temporary phenomenon, but results from the breakdown of the mechanisms put in place after World War II to restore

the equilibrium of world capitalism. The United States, which was central to the post-war restabilisation, is now in economic decline and is at the centre of the present financial turmoil. Whatever the short-term ups and downs of particular economies or the global economy as a whole, the world has entered a new period of economic convulsions that has profound political ramifications for the working class.

Anyone who dismisses the warning signs in Sri Lanka would be badly mistaken. Because of its particular history and relationship to the global economy, this small island often sharply reflects economic and political processes taking place internationally. In the final analysis, amid heightened economic and social tensions, the ruling elites around the world are being driven to defend their privileged position by adopting Sri Lankan methods.

The working class needs to draw the necessary conclusion: the only means of defending their basic democratic rights and living standards is to abolish the present social order and to restructure society to meet the pressing needs of the majority, rather than the profits of the wealthy few.

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