Sri Lankan government campaigns to entrench autocratic powers

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5 April 2010

The central thrust of the government's campaign in the April 8 general election in Sri Lanka is for a two-thirds parliamentary majority and the ability to change the constitution. The ruling coalition claims that it wants "a strong government" to create economic prosperity. The Socialist Equality Party warns that the government is seeking to entrench a police state to ram through a devastating assault on the living standards of working people.

Speaking at his official residence last week, President Mahinda Rajapakse declared: "I ended thirty years of war [against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)] and now I have started the war on the development front." He called on voters "to elect a strong parliament… to take the country toward greater prosperity and accelerate the development process".

His brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the country's defence secretary, told an election meeting in Galle on last Wednesday: "It is vital to have a strong government backed by a solid majority in parliament to carry forward Sri Lanka's development process without any hindrance from within or outside."

The government is mounting a massive campaign to achieve a two-thirds majority. As well as extensive meetings, billboards and posters, the state-owned media—TV, radio and newspapers—are devoted virtually entirely to government propaganda, without the slightest pretence of being unbiased. The majority of reported instances of election violence involve pro-government thugs intimidating and attacking opposition parties.

No one in the government has explained what constitutional changes are proposed—apart from ending the present preferential voting system. That change would make it easier for larger parties such as Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to dominate parliament. None of the major opposition parties—United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—has challenged the government. Their speakers have simply tried to ridicule the idea of a two thirds majority as unachievable.

The entire political and media establishment is throwing dust in the eyes of voters. When the president speaks of "a war on the development front" he means the burden of the huge debts resulting from his war on the LTTE must be imposed on working people. When his brother says the government must be able to act "without any hindrance," he means it will use the police-state methods developed in 26 years of civil war to suppress working class opposition.

When the LTTE was defeated last May, President Rajapakse promised a new era of "peace and prosperity" and now claims he is turning the country into the next Asian economic miracle. In reality, the economy is heavily indebted and the International Monetary Fund is demanding the government slash the budget deficit from 9.7 percent of GDP to 5 percent by 2011. After the election, the government will have to slash public spending, raise taxes and sell off state-owned enterprises and suppress the inevitable resistance of workers.

Already Rajapakse has in place all the elements of a police state. During the past four years of war, he has used his sweeping executive powers to create a ruling cabal of relatives, aides, generals and top bureaucrats. He has flouted the constitution and the Supreme Court on several occasions, including by failing to appoint a constitutional council to oversee government appointments.

Rajapakse boasts of ending the 30-year war, but working people should carefully consider what this has involved. In the final months of fighting, the military killed thousands of civilians through its indiscriminate bombing of LTTE-held areas. After the LTTE's defeat last May, nearly a quarter of a million men, women and children were incarcerated in military-run detention camps in flagrant breach of the constitution and legal system. Since 2006, hundreds of people, including politicians and journalists, have been killed or disappeared by pro-government death squads.

The whole security apparatus has been kept in place, despite the end of the fighting. No troops have been demobilised. In fact, a permanent military occupation is being established in the North and East of the island.

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Rajapakse has kept the state of emergency in place that gives him sweeping powers to censor the media, detain people without trial and outlaw strikes. He used these powers last October to ban industrial action by petroleum, electricity, water and port workers.

In the wake of January's presidential election, the government carried out an extraordinary campaign of intimidation. Opposition presidential candidate, retired general Sarath Fonseka, was arrested along with dozens of his supporters on trumped-up allegations that he was plotting a coup. Most have been released because the police found no evidence to support the claim. Fonseka, however, is being tried behind closed doors by the military—not for sedition, but on unrelated, relatively minor charges.

Given the extensive powers that Rajapakse already wields, what is the meaning of his call for "a strong government"? It is not primarily directed against the opposition UNP and JVP, which backed his war against the LTTE to the hilt and agree that Sri Lankan capitalism must be saved by imposing new burdens on workers.

The government's main target is the working class. With the power to change the constitution, Rajapakse can entrench his powers, block any challenge through the legal system and reduce parliament to a rubber stamp. During the war against the LTTE, the president repeatedly denounced striking workers as traitors for endangering national security. In his new "war for development," he will use a similar argument, accusing workers of undermining the country's economy to justify a crackdown on industrial action and protests.

Workers should recall what happened in the past when governments held sweeping majorities. Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) together with the ex-Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party and Stalinist Communist Party won a landslide victory in the 1970 election—taking 116 of the 151 seats. That government, led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, crushed a JVP uprising, killing an estimated 15,000 rural youth. It then enacted a constitution that enshrined Sinhala as the state language and Buddhism as the state religion, intensifying communal tensions that eventually erupted in war. As popular opposition grew, the government changed the constitution to extend its term of office by two years.

In the midst of an economic crisis, the UNP under J. R. Jayewardene won a devastating victory in the 1977 election taking 140 out of 168 seats. The UNP promptly revised the constitution, establishing the current executive presidency with its sweeping powers to sack the government and prorogue parliament. Jayewardene boasted that the only power that his government did not have under the new constitution was "to change a man into a woman and vice versa". He was one of the first leaders in the world to enact pro-market restructuring and in 1980 used his extensive powers to sack 100,000 striking government workers. As social tensions continued to build, the UNP turned to whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism and pogroms that led to the outbreak of war in 1983.

The crisis today is in many ways more advanced. The 26-year war has devastated the economy and crippled the economy amid the worst global economic breakdown since the 1930s. Around the world, finance capital is demanding that governments impose the resulting huge debt burdens onto working people. That cannot be done democratically, as Rajapakse is well aware. Having already suffered the horrors and deprivations of a quarter century of war, workers and young people will resist.

The danger facing the working class, however, is that it lacks a party with which to fight for its class interests. The opposition parties all support the government's economic agenda. The trade unions—pro-government, pro-opposition and "independent"—as well as the various ex-radical hangers-on, have been instrumental in blocking any political struggle against employers and the Rajapakse regime.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the election to unify and mobilise workers and youth—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—in a political movement independent of all the capitalist parties in the fight for a workers' and farmers' government and socialist policies. The struggle for basic democratic rights and decent living standards is intimately bound up with the restructuring of society to meet the social needs of working people, not the profits of the rich. The SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. We call on workers and youth who agree with this perspective to actively take part in our campaign and to join and build the SEP as the mass party of the working class.

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