

Sri Lankan defence secretary proposes further security laws

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In an interview with the *Island* newspaper on April 17, Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse called for the next parliament to enact new security laws to crack down on “separatism” and “terrorism”. While nominally directed against the defeated Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the remarks foreshadow a broader attack on the democratic rights of working people.

Rajapakse, the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, emphasised that the judiciary was of “pivotal importance” for the government’s efforts in “suppressing the separatist movement and tackling its propaganda apparatus”. According to the defence secretary, supporters of Tamil separatism were organising internationally with the support of foreign governments to revive the LTTE, which the army defeated last May.

References to an “international conspiracy” were a constant theme in the government’s propaganda for the April 8 general election. By this, President Rajapakse and his brother meant the limited criticisms by the US and European powers of the war crimes carried out by the military in its offensives against the LTTE. Far from supporting the LTTE, the US and EU backed Rajapakse’s war. Since the LTTE’s defeat, however, the US has tried to exploit the issue of “human rights” to put pressure on the Sri Lankan government and to boost its influence in Colombo at the expense of its rivals, particularly China.

In his interview, Defence Secretary Rajapakse quickly made clear that he was not simply targetting remnants of the LTTE. He told the newspaper that “opposition political parties or constituent partners of

the ruling coalition should not be allowed to engage in divisive politics”. In a reference to the media, he said the “new government should go all out against any local element promoting separatist sentiments regardless of political consequences”. Turning to the state apparatus, Rajapakse expressed concern that “a section of officialdom could help the separatist cause by trying to appease foreign governments and some funding agencies”.

These remarks require some decoding. From the standpoint of government’s ideology of Sinhala supremacism, “separatism” not only refers to the LTTE’s armed struggle for a separate capitalist state, but any concessions to the island’s Tamil minority. In particular, Rajapakse is hostile to calls by Tamil parties for devolution of powers to the island’s North and East. The “separatist” threat is simply another way of whipping up the anti-Tamil communalism that has been used for decades by the Colombo establishment to divide working people.

Likewise, “terrorism” is a sweeping term that the government has applied not only to the LTTE, but to striking workers, protesting students and farmers who threatened to “undermine national security”. As for “divisive politics,” that refers to any political challenge, no matter how limited, to the government’s policies and anti-democratic methods.

The defence secretary did not spell out what new security laws he wanted enacted. The government already has a barrage of measures in place, including under an ongoing state of emergency, that allow for the banning of strikes, detention without trial and media censorship. At least 80,000 Tamil civilians continue to

be held in military-run “welfare villages” in breach of their basic democratic rights. Around 10,000 Tamil youth are being imprisoned without charge as “LTTE suspects,” to be released only after being “rehabilitated”.

It should be noted that Rajapakse is not elected, but was appointed to the top bureaucratic post in the Defence Department, where he wields considerable power through the island’s huge military apparatus. He is part of the presidential cabal of close relatives, senior bureaucrats and generals through which his brother has increasingly ruled since coming to power in late 2005. As part of that clique, the defence secretary has far more clout than most ministers.

In his interview, Rajapakse hinted at the agenda of the new government. He spoke on a range of topics, including “the need to maintain political stability, strengthening the economy and the responsibility of the new government to sustain a cohesive security policy”. After the LTTE’s defeat, President Rajapakse proclaimed a new “economic war” to “build the nation”.

Far from entering a new period of prosperity, however, the Sri Lankan economy is mired in debt and confronts a worsening crisis. The first task of the next government is to prepare a budget to meet the International Monetary Fund’s demands. These include halving the fiscal deficit by 2011, increasing taxes and restructuring state-owned corporations such as electricity and petroleum. Like governments around the world, the Rajapakse regime is preparing to offload the burdens of the continuing global economic crisis onto working people.

The central thrust of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) election campaign was for a two-thirds parliamentary majority to allow it to amend the constitution at will. Gotabhaya Rajapakse appeared on election platforms, repeatedly declaring: “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.”

While the UPFA fell just short of a two-thirds majority, the government is engaged in backroom wheeling and dealing to entice opposition MPs to cross the floor. If this succeeds, President Rajapakse will use the power to change the constitution to entrench the police-state methods that he has used over the past four years. Above all, these will be directed against any opposition by the working class to the “economic war” that he is about to launch.

The defence secretary’s interview in the *Island* is another warning that the government will stop at nothing to ram through the economic agenda being demanded by international finance capital. Last September, President Rajapakse used his emergency powers to ban industrial action by oil, power, ports, water and plantation workers who were demanding a wage rise. The government will not hesitate to go far further as strikes and protests erupt over its new austerity program.



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