

Sri Lanka: New cabinet installed to implement austerity program

K. Ratnayake
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Following the April 8 parliamentary election, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse appointed the new cabinet yesterday in preparation for what will be a far reaching offensive against the living standards of workers. He has put in place a ministry that will not only implement the austerity agenda being demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but seek to suppress the inevitable resistance of working people.

Rajapakse, who holds extensive executive powers under the constitution, has retained an unprecedented number of ministries in his own hands. As well as the key posts of defence and finance, he will be responsible for mass media and ports, aviation and highways. As defence minister, Rajapakse also has control over the country's large police force.

His younger brother Basil has been appointed to the powerful post of Economic Development Minister. Basil Rajapakse has functioned as a key member of the cabal of relatives, senior bureaucrats and generals through which the president ruled over the past four years. He functioned as a presidential adviser, parliamentary liaison and political fixer. The president's older brother, Chamal, was installed in the key parliamentary post of speaker on Thursday.

A fourth brother, Gotabhaya, is the country's defence secretary. While an unelected post, it has over the past four years become a far more powerful position than most ministries. Together the president and his brother direct the large military apparatus that waged a communal war on the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) until its defeat last May.

While smaller than the previous huge ministry which contained 109 cabinet ministers, non-cabinet minister and

deputy ministers, Rajapakse nevertheless had to pay off the various parties that form part of the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). As a result, the new cabinet contains 37 ministers and 39 deputy ministers. Further appointments are expected once the results for Kandy district are finalised.

The appointment of G.L. Peiris as foreign minister may signal an attempt by the Rajapakse government to appease the US and European powers, which made limited criticisms of the military's crimes in the war against the LTTE. Both the US and European Union backed Rajapakse's criminal war, but have exploited the human rights issue to attempt to gain greater influence in Colombo at the expense of rivals such as China. Rajapakse leaned heavily on Beijing for military, financial and political support during the war. Peiris, who studied at Oxford University, is regarded as leaning towards Sri Lanka's traditional allies in the West.

The installation of Mervin Silva, as deputy media minister, operating directly under President Rajapakse, is an ominous warning of further repressive measures against the media. Over the past four years, the government sought to suppress any, even limited, criticism of the war and its policies. Pro-government death squads abducted or murdered journalists. Silva is notorious for his thuggery. In 2007, he entered the government-owned Rupavahini television premises and his thugs physically attacked a news editor for failing to broadcast one of his speeches.

Rajapakse took over the media ministry in February, after parliament was dissolved prior to the general election. The president used the opportunity to make preparations for Internet censorship using technical assistance from China. As part of the crackdown on

opposition parties after the January presidential election, several Internet sites critical of the government were blocked. During both election campaigns, the UFPA openly used the state-owned media as its propaganda tool.

Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) dominates the cabinet. The ministries handed out to key allies include:

* Wimal Weerawansa, who heads the National Freedom Front (NFF), has been appointed Minister for Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities. The NFF is a breakaway from the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Just 2 of its 15 candidates won seats in their own right. Weerawansa, a chauvinist demagogue, was publicly critical of Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) for not allocating an extra national list seat to the NFF.

* Champika Ranawaka from the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) was installed as Minister for Power and Energy. The JHU, which won just two seats, is a right-wing Sinhala extremist party based on sections of the Buddhist hierarchy. The government is under pressure to restructure and eventually privatise Ceylon Electricity Board and has already used its emergency powers to ban industrial action by power workers demanding pay rises.

* Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader Arumugam Thondaman rejected the initial post offered but is likely to be given a ministry. The CWC is a trade union that also functions as a political party among Tamil-speaking plantation workers. Only 3 of 9 CWC candidates were elected in their own right, reflecting deep hostility among estate workers towards its sell-out pay deal last year. Another trade union—the Upcountry People's Front—won no seats.

* D.E.W. Gunasekera, head of the Stalinist Communist Party (CPSL), was appointed as Minister of Rehabilitation and Prison Reforms. He is directly responsible for thousands of young Tamils who are being held without trial as "LTTE suspects". Tissa Vitharana of the ex-Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party, who was previously Minister of Science and Technology, was dropped from the cabinet. The LSSP, which betrayed the principles of Trotskyism by entering an SLFP-led government in 1964, has been reduced to a rump—Vitharana gained his seat from the national list and the LSSP won one other seat.

Both the LSSP and CPSL fully backed Rajapakse's communal war and his assault on the living conditions of the working class.

At the press conference yesterday, the new Youth Affairs Minister Dulles Alahapperuma boasted about the government's "unprecedented mandate" at the general election. While the UPFA has won 144 of the 225 parliamentary seats, it was a hollow victory. Just 61 percent of registered voters cast a ballot—the lowest turnout on record—which translates into just 34 percent support for the UPFA.

The new health minister, Maithripala Sirisena, told the press conference that the government would bring down a budget in July, not May as earlier indicated. Rajapakse delayed the budget last November by having an interim Vote on Account to cover government expenditure until after the presidential and parliamentary elections. Now it is planning to have another Vote on Account to cover May and June before a mini-budget in July. A full budget will be delayed until November.

The IMF, however, is demanding that the government press ahead with efforts to halve the budget deficit, from 9.7 percent of gross domestic product last year to 5 percent in 2011. It delayed the third instalment of a \$2.6 billion loan in February because the government failed to meet its budget target of 7 percent for 2009. Now the IMF is insisting on a concrete plan in the next budget before releasing any more money.

The IMF's demands set the stage for major class battles as the Rajapakse government begins to impose new taxes and make further inroads into essential services such as education, health and welfare. Its efforts to privatise major state-owned corporations have already provoked opposition by workers. Rajapakse's tight grip over the country's huge security apparatus and his retention of police-state emergency laws are a warning of the repressive measures that will be used against any opposition by the working class.



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