

Sri Lanka: Opposition parties unanimously back new parliamentary speaker

Nanda Wickremasinghe
27 April 2010

When the new Sri Lankan parliament was sworn in last Thursday, one aspect of the proceedings underlined the degree to which the entire Colombo political establishment supports the anti-working class agenda of President Mahinda Rajapakse. Government and opposition parties came together to vote unanimously to install the president's elder brother Chamal in the key post of parliamentary speaker.

The vote was part of a prior arrangement reached in talks between the president and Ranil Wickremesinghe, who heads the opposition United National Party (UNP). Rajapakse's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won 144 seats in the 225-member parliament and the UNP gained 60 seats in the April 8 general election.

During the election campaign, the opposition parties—the UNP and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—accused the government of anti-democratic and corrupt methods. The criticisms were narrowly circumscribed and did not extend to the crimes for which the government and the military were responsible during the communal war that ended with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May.

Even this limited opposition was dropped in the first parliamentary session. Neither the UNP nor the JVP put up a rival candidate for speaker, as has happened many times before. Deputy UNP leader Karu Jayasuriya seconded the nomination of Chamal Rajapakse that was proposed by the newly appointed Prime Minister D. M. Jayaratne. Extending his congratulations, Wickremasinghe said he hoped that the new speaker

would act appropriately to establish the right to discuss, to express opinions, and to make objections “in the supreme legislature”.

Retired General Sarath Fonseka congratulated the new speaker and expressed his confidence that the president's brother would act justly and impartially in parliament. Fonseka spoke on behalf of the Democratic National Alliance (DNA)—an electoral bloc he formed with the JVP. Fonseka's comments were all the more remarkable given that he was detained by the government following the January presidential election on trumped-up charges that he was plotting a coup. He was brought to parliament and taken away under military guard.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which had previously functioned as the LTTE's mouthpiece, also voted for the speaker. TNA leader R. Sambandan declared that the new parliament's major task was to act fairly for all people. He made no mention of thousands of civilians killed by the military in the final months of the war nor the arbitrary detention of more than a quarter of a million men, women and children after the LTTE's defeat. Around 80,000 civilians are still living in detention camps.

The silence of the opposition over the government's past crimes and its support for the installation of the president's brother as parliamentary speaker are the preparation for backing the regime's future crimes. Having mortgaged the island to the hilt to pay for his war, President Rajapakse is preparing an “economic war” to impose the burden of the worsening economic crisis onto working people. Under the terms of its \$2.6 billion IMF loan, the government must slash the budget

deficit from 9.7 to 5 percent of GDP by 2011.

In the course of the past four years, Rajapakse has increasingly operated through a presidential cabal of relatives, senior advisers and generals that has acted independently of cabinet, reduced parliament to a rubber stamp and flouted the constitution and the legal system. Pro-government death squads killed hundreds of people, including politicians and journalists. The regime has responded to even limited criticisms with harassment, intimidation and physical violence.

By appointing his brother as speaker, the president is attempting to tighten his control over parliament and to further stifle any challenge to the government. The speaker decides the agenda of parliament, in consultation with party leaders, as well as who can speak. He interprets parliamentary Standing Orders. His rulings can only be challenged through a motion and he can “name” an MP, prohibiting him or her from participating in parliament for up to one month.

Under section 38 of the Sri Lankan Constitution, the speaker’s discretion is decisive in the event of an impeachment move against the president. Unless an impeachment motion is signed by two thirds of MPs, the speaker may refuse to entertain the resolution. The proviso makes the initiation of impeachment against the president virtually impossible.

The significance of the speaker’s role was sharply underscored in August 1991 when attempts were made in parliament to impeach President Ranasinghe Premadasa. The speaker M.H. Mohamed first entertained an impeachment motion, signed by just over half of the MPs. Premadasa prorogued the parliament and bullied dissidents from his own party to retract their support. Two weeks later, the speaker dutifully told parliament that as the impeachment motion did not have sufficient signatures it could not proceed.

The UPFA is seeking to win over a few opposition MPs to give it a two-thirds parliamentary majority and the power to change the constitution. The government has already hinted that it wants to change the constitution to allow the president another term of

office, to alter the current preferential voting system, and to modify the constitutional council that oversees senior appointments. Such moves could easily provoke situations in which the speaker’s rulings will be vital.

The opposition parties are of course well aware of the speaker’s powers. Their fawning support for Chamal Rajapakse’s installation is a clear sign that they have no fundamental differences with the government agenda. The UNP and the JVP backed Rajapakse’s criminal war and support the thrust of the government’s plans to slash public spending and increase taxes to reduce the war debts. While critical of the military’s operations prior to the LTTE’s defeat, the TNA is now seeking to accommodate to the Colombo political establishment.

Rajapakse is tightening his grip of over the institutions of the state in preparation for intensifying confrontations with the working class. Since end of the war, significant sections of workers have already engaged in struggles over pay and conditions. Last year, Rajapakse used his extensive powers under the continuing state of emergency to ban industrial action by port, power, water and petroleum workers. The vote last week signals that the opposition parties are behind the government as it tries to impose new burdens on working people.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact