

Two Sri Lankan opposition MPs cross over to government

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse took a step toward his goal of achieving a two-thirds parliamentary majority, and the ability to amend the constitution, when two opposition parliamentarians joined his ruling coalition on August 5. The constitutional amendments being prepared are designed to further entrench Rajapakse in power and legitimise his anti-democratic methods of rule.

The two “cross-overs”—P. Thigambaram and Prabha Ganeshan—are members of organisations that function both as parties and trade unions among Tamil-speaking plantation workers. Thigambaram is the leader of the National Union of Workers (NUW). Ganeshan belongs to Democratic Peoples Front (DPF) headed by his elder brother Mano Ganeshan. Until last week he was also the financial secretary of the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC), a plantation-based trade union.

Both men, who are Colombo businessmen, contested the April general election under the banner of the United National Front (UNF), led by the opposition United National Party (UNP). Their political about-face is another example of the venal and duplicitous character of all the plantation-based parties and unions.

The NUW and DWC were able to gain support in April as a result of widespread hostility among plantation workers to the government and its ally, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which imposed a wages deal last September that maintains poverty-level wages for another two years. The NUW and DWC initially postured as opponents, before accepting the agreement.

During the election campaign, Thigambaram and Ganeshan both criticised the government for failing to improve the living conditions on the plantations and accused the CWC of betraying estate workers. Thigambaram won the second highest vote in the Nuwara Eliya district, where plantation workers are in a majority. Ganeshan was elected in Colombo.

Conscious that the cross-overs would provoke anger among plantation workers, the DPF and DWC suspended Prabha Ganeshan from membership, declaring that he had “betrayed the party”. Ganeshan responded by threatening to expose “secret deals” between the DPF and government, but did not elaborate. It would not be at all surprising that the DPF as a whole was already engaged in talks with the Rajapakse government, before Ganeshan “betrayed the party” by cutting his own individual deal.

Thigambaram attempted to defend himself by blaming the “international community” for failing to help the country’s Tamil minority after the end of the government’s brutal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. He used the callous indifference of the US and other major powers, which backed Rajapakse’s war, to justify joining the very government responsible for killing tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and detaining many more as virtual prisoners of war.

Both Thigambaram and Prabha Ganeshan absurdly claimed that they could help “our people” by joining the government. That is precisely the pretext that the CWC and the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) use to defend their own participation in the Rajapakse government. CWC national organiser N. Jegatheeswaran did not miss the opportunity to declare: “We always said that we can only serve our community by joining with the government.”

In fact, plantation workers are among the most oppressed layers of the Sri Lankan working class—a situation that has been worsened by the imposition of wage agreements that failed to compensate for inflation. The real wage index for estate workers declined by about 10 percent from 92 in 2004 to 83 in 2009. Workers still live in squalid accommodation known as line rooms without access to proper educational, health and sanitary facilities.

The role of the ex-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP)—in promoting the DPF in particular as a progressive alternative to other plantation parties should also be noted. The NSSP and USP have a long and sordid record of opportunist alliances with bourgeois parties—large and small—including Rajapakse’s own Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP). Since 2006, the NSSP and USP have been involved in various front organisations with the DPF, ostensibly in opposition to the Rajapakse government’s war and his anti-democratic methods. Now the DPF’s only parliamentarian has joined the same government.

During the April election campaign, NUW leader Thigambaram followed other opposition parties in urging people to prevent Rajapakse from securing enough seats to amend the constitution. “The minority people [Tamils] should decide for whom they vote in this election considering the political consequences if the ruling party wins a two-third majority in the election,” he warned.

The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won 143 seats in the 225-member parliament—chiefly because the opposition UNP and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) had fundamentally the same policies. This still left the UPFA seven short of a two-thirds majority. Now Thigambaram and Ganeshan have brought Rajapakse two seats closer to achieving his ambition.

Rajapakse is engaged in backroom wheeling and dealing to encourage UNP parliamentarians to cross over—one is already voting with the government and two others are considered likely to follow. There is little doubt, given the corrupt and mercenary nature of the entire Colombo political establishment, that two more can be induced through various bribes and perks of office to join them.

Under the present constitution, the executive president already has extensive powers, including to sack ministers and the government as a whole. Rajapakse has exploited his position to the full to rule via a cabal of ministers, generals and senior state bureaucrats, effectively sidelining parliament. Rajapakse himself currently holds the key ministries of defence, finance and the media. He has further draconian powers under the state of emergency that the government has continued despite the end of the civil war.

Rajapakse has foreshadowed significant changes to the constitution. He is planning to modify the 17th constitutional amendment that requires the establishment of a constitutional council, including opposition

nominees, to oversee the appointment of key state officials and the setting up of commissions for elections, the judiciary, police and government corruption.

Rajapakse has simply ignored the 17th amendment and refused to establish a constitutional council, which would have cut directly across the appointment of his own loyalists and cronies to positions of power. He has also ignored Supreme Court rulings that he abide by the constitution. Now he is planning to change the constitution.

The government is also planning to alter the constitution to remove the current two-term limit on the presidency. The presidential term of office is six years. Rajapakse, who won the presidency in November 2005, called a presidential election in January—two years early. However, he obtained a court ruling adding one year from his first term to his second. If he succeeds in amending the constitution, he will remain in office even longer—possibly indefinitely.

The government mooted the proposed amendments in July, provoking significant opposition, locally and internationally. Rajapakse deflected criticism by postponing constitutional changes and entering talks with the UNP over the planned amendments. The talks with the UNP, however, were a means of buying time as the president intensified efforts to woo cross-overs—from the UNP especially.

Rajapakse is seeking to consolidate his regime in preparation for major class struggles. The country is mired in debt as a result of Rajapakse’s huge military spending. During his four years in office, public debt grew by 160 percent and the budget deficit reached 10 percent of gross domestic product. The government is now under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to slash public spending, which it began to do in the June budget with a public sector wage freeze and higher taxes on basic commodities.

The government is preparing to use the police-state apparatus and methods built up during more than a quarter century of civil war to attack any resistance by working people to further inroads into living standards.



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