

Sri Lankan government to abolish Colombo Municipal Council

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In another anti-democratic move, the Sri Lankan government is planning to abolish the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC)—a longstanding, elected body—and replace it with an appointed authority set up by the defence ministry. The new authority, which will not be even remotely accountable to residents, will open the door for the national government and the military to dictate policy, including for planning and building, in Colombo city.

Housing and Construction Minister Wimal Weerawansa revealed the proposed changes at a meeting on September 12 for potential investors and property developers. He boasted that the new authority would provide a boost for business and construction. Although the plan is yet to be formally announced, the Colombo media has indicated that new legislation is being drawn up.

The government had already made several attempts to take control of the CMC, which is currently dominated by an independent group backed by the opposition United National Party (UNP). After failing to buy off the ruling group, Western Provincial Council Chief Minister Prasanna Ranatunge dissolved the council in June, eight months before the end of its term.

Ranatunge, who is a member of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party, exploited the results of an inquiry, which found the council was guilty of “corruption, mismanagement and inefficiency”. Corruption, which is rampant at all levels of government in Sri Lanka, was simply a pretext. President Mahinda Rajapakse then used his broad executive powers to appoint Omar Kamil, a former mayor, as CMC Special Commissioner to run the council’s affairs.

Local government bodies have a long history. The CMC was established under British colonial rule in 1865, and became a fully elected body responsible for providing basic amenities in 1936. In 1954, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), when it still upheld Trotskyist principles, won control of the council along with other local bodies. In August 1954, LSSP leader N.M. Perera became the mayor of Colombo.

In recent years, successive national governments have slashed public spending as part of the pro-market agenda demanded by international finance capital. Subsidies to local councils have been cut, forcing them to reduce or abandon many social services.

The CMC is responsible for public health services, solid waste management, road maintenance, street lighting, water and drainage systems and veterinary services. According to the 2001 census, Colombo city, which excludes surrounding suburbs, has a multi-ethnic population of more than 600,000, including Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers. Within its 37 square kilometres, there are 120,000 houses, including more than 66,000 shanties.

The government’s decision to abolish the council is connected to its sweeping plans to evict all shanty dwellers from Colombo city and to turn over an estimated 390 hectares of land to real estate developers. The government has branded the shanties as “unauthorised structures” even though many families have lived in them for decades. As a result, nearly half a million people—the majority of the city’s population—will lose their homes and livelihoods.

President Rajapakse has declared that he will transform Colombo into a “commercial hub for South Asia” as part of his “economic war,” declared after the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May last year. Amid a deep economic crisis, the government is desperate to provide facilities to attract foreign and local investors at the expense of the city’s poor.

Real estate development, particularly in Colombo city, has become a lucrative business. The price of a perch (25 square metres) of land in Colombo varies from one million rupees (\$US8,800) to eight million. Rajapakse and his cronies are closely involved. Chamber of Construction Industry president Surath Wickramasinghe recently complained that decisions on the allocation of state-owned land to the private sector were in the hands of “powerful ministers”.

In May, President Rajapakse put the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the Land Reclamation and Development Board (LRDB)—two civilian bodies—under the command of the defence ministry, controlled by his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse. On August 12, the cabinet approved a defence ministry plan to evict all shanty dwellers. Announcing the decision, acting media minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa declared that the families were occupying “very valuable land in the City of Colombo in a haphazard manner”.

The government claims that those evicted will be provided with new homes. On September 23, the UDA launched the sale of 5 billion rupees (\$US45 million) worth of debentures, saying part of the fund would be used to build houses for the shanty dwellers. However, the government has not announced any concrete plans. In the past, only a few families have been rehoused following evictions.

The government’s plan to place Colombo city under a new authority run by the defence ministry is aimed at crushing any resistance to the eviction of the shanty dwellers. In early May, the defence ministry deployed police and army to suppress protests against the demolition of the homes of 45 families at Slave Island in central Colombo. In early July, hundreds of police and soldiers rounded up around 8,000 slum dwellers at Mattakkuliya in Colombo’s suburbs after an angry protest at the local police station over the arrest and beating of a local youth.

The government is also preparing to block any legal avenues to oppose the evictions. The UDA, on the direction of Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, has established a committee to draft changes to the UDA legislation. According to the state-owned *Daily News* on September 15, the changes would “enable the UDA to directly intervene in the removal of unauthorised structures [and] cut down excessive expenditure that UDA spends to get court approval to remove them.”

The abolition of the Colombo City Council is part of a broader assault on basic democratic rights. Earlier this month, the government rammed through parliament the 18th Amendment to the constitution allowing the president to make key appointments and ending the two-term limit on an individual running for the presidency. Rajapakse is concentrating power in the hands of his ruling cabal in order to impose the draconian austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund.

The major opposition parties—the UNP and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have conducted no serious campaign to defend democratic rights. Speaking at a press conference on September 18, UNP secretary general Tissa Attanayake rhetorically branded the plan to abolish the Colombo City Council as “an entirely anti-democratic move”

and declared that the UNP “will work to organise a countrywide protest movement against government’s move”.

Likewise, in an interview with *Iruessa*, JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake accused the government of taking over local government bodies that it could not win in elections. He declared that the JVP and its Democratic National Alliance hoped to launch a “common action with opposition parties against those anti-democratic moves of the government”.

No faith should be put in these utterances. The UNP and JVP have no fundamental disagreements with the government’s pro-market agenda and both parties have a long record of anti-democratic practices. Their “opposition” to the 18th amendment was nothing more than a token protest. The UNP boycotted the parliamentary vote and its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe advised the party’s youth front to pray to Buddha one month after the vote as a means of expressing “people power”.

Shanty dwellers cannot rely on these bourgeois opposition parties to defend their basic rights but must begin to mobilise independently. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) also calls on the working class to come to the assistance of the urban poor by opposing the evictions and by blackbanning such operations and any development projects on the cleared sites. This campaign must be part of a broader struggle for a workers’ and farmers’ government and socialist policies to reconstruct society to meet the needs of working people, not profits of the wealthy elite. That is the program for which the SEP fights.

The author also recommends:

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[27 August 2010]

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[19 July 2010]



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