

Sri Lanka: UNP mounts bogus campaign against slum evictions

Vilani Peiris

30 October 2010

As the Sri Lankan government prepares to evict 66,000 families from shanties in Colombo city, the opposition United National Party (UNP) is posturing as the champion of these impoverished people. The UNP's campaign, however, is not directed at defending the urban poor, but at improving the right-wing party's electoral fortunes.

The government announced the mass evictions as part of its plan to transform Colombo into a commercial hub for South Asia and boost the island's tourist industry. The job has been handed to the defence ministry, precisely because determined resistance is expected. Hundreds of armed police and soldiers were deployed in May to enforce the removal of 45 families from Slave Island and to suppress their protests as bulldozers demolished their homes.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has placed the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and the Land Reclamation and Development Board (LRDB) under the defence ministry, which is controlled by his brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse. The government has also indicated that it intends to replace the elected Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) with a body appointed by the defence ministry.

Amid rising anger among Colombo's shanty dwellers, the UNP claims to be "fighting" the government's plans. It has held meetings in housing estates in Colombo and launched a petition campaign against the abolition of the CMC. Speaking at meetings on October 14, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe demagogically declared: "If the government does not stop the evictions everyone should unite. We must take to the streets."

The petition is a transparent attempt by the UNP to regain control of the CMC. In calling on people to sign, Wickremesinghe promised: "We will bring this petition to the commissioner of elections. We will get the Colombo municipal election somehow and win it. We will then protect your houses and lands." Even if all of this were to come true, the Rajapakse government could still overrule the CMC and proceed with its eviction plans.

Wickremesinghe also painted a false picture of the UNP's own record in relation to Colombo city shanties. "When the UNP government came to power in 1977 there were slums and shanties. They did not have electricity, pipe-borne water or lavatory

facilities. We gave deeds to people, licences and inheritance to the land. We built flats for them," he said.

The record exposes these lies. Like Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the UNP has always acted in the interests of big business and the property developers in Colombo. After winning office in 1977, the UNP government became one of the first in the world to begin implementing the pro-market agenda of privatisation, slashing public spending and opening up the economy to foreign investors.

As part of this program, the UNP sought to convert Colombo into a commercial hub for the region. UNP leader J.R. Jayawardene announced plans to build a new administrative capital—Jayewardenepura—so that central Colombo could be devoted to finance and business. During its 17 years in power from 1977 to 1994, the UNP government engaged in one slum clearance operation after another, with callous indifference to the residents.

* In 1983, the UNP government cleared a large area in Colombo to build the Sugathadasa Stadium—the country's largest sports stadium. More than 243 families were evicted and their shanties demolished. The former residents were relocated to what is now known as Stadium Village. A quarter of a century later, this area still does not have proper lanes and roads and is lacking in essential services. None of the residents has legal title to the land.

* In 1985, about 100 families living at the Redbana estate in Mattakkuliya were told by authorities to shift to land on the other side of the canal through the area. One woman explained to the WSWs: "We had lived there for generations. After being evicted, we were given a small piece of land of about 22 feet by 22 feet (about 40 square metres). They laid the foundations and gave 15,000 rupees to each family. They told us to live here until flats were built on the land where we had been. But it was just a promise. So we don't believe the present promises about resolving our housing problem."

* Between 1992 and 1994, the UNP government evicted about 1,500 families living on the banks of a canal from Wellawatte to Kirulapona. They were sent to Attidiya, about 10 kilometres away, and each given 50 square metres of land. The first families to be moved had to live in wooden huts. Around 150 families shared

two toilets and a single water tap. Only later, the government laid the foundations for houses and gave each family a loan of 15,000 to 20,000 rupees to build a house. Many families did not accept the loan as they could not pay it back.

The UNP's claims to have provided proper legal titles are bogus. A woman from the Ibbagewatte settlement told the WSWS: "In 1982, former UNP president [Ranasinghe] Premadasa issued us with a card, saying that it was a legal document for our premises. But this card had no legal validity. Now the railway department claims our land belongs to it. They have pasted notices on our doors saying we should move by last August.

"We rejected the notices. Then the department registered a court case requesting that we be removed. We had to retain a lawyer and each family had to pay 1,500 rupees every time he appeared," she said. The case has been heard four times in court, but there is still no resolution and the future of the 14 families involved remains uncertain.

The UNP was thrown out of office at the 1994 election amid popular hostility to its attacks on living standards, its anti-democratic methods and the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that it launched in 1983. Despite claiming to oppose the UNP's policies, the incoming SLFP-led ruling coalition stepped up the war and continued the previous government's pro-market agenda. The current slum clearance program for Colombo was made public in 1999, but was shelved out of fear of a popular backlash.

After winning the general election in late 2001, the UNP held office until February 2004 when it was dismissed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, leader of the SLFP. The Wickremesinghe government had signed a ceasefire with the LTTE and opened up peace talks as part of its "Regaining Sri Lanka" program to turn the island into the Singapore of South Asia. Approved by the World Bank, "Regaining Sri Lanka" slashed public sector subsidies, welfare and jobs and offered generous incentives to foreign investors.

While Wickremesinghe now poses as an opponent of Rajapakse's eviction plan, all its key elements were to be found in his government's "Regaining Sri Lanka" program. The executive summary of that program included a proposal to develop a megapolis in the island's Western Region around Colombo. "The Colombo core [of this megapolis] will be a financial, business, transportation and administrative hub," it stated.

As for the shanty dwellers, the UNP document promised a "self-financing voluntary re-housing program in the city of Colombo". Residents would be asked to "voluntarily exchange their dwellings and land space for re-housing in high-rise apartment blocks". The program did not, of course, explain what would happen if residents refused to move. The promises of alternative accommodation were just as bogus as those of the present Rajapakse government.

Kumaratunga threw the UNP out of office in 2004, claiming its negotiations with the LTTE threatened "national security". Rajapakse narrowly won the November 2005 presidential election from Wickremesinghe and rapidly plunged the country back to war in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. Having defeated the LTTE in May 2009 through a criminal war of attrition that cost the lives of thousands of civilians, Rajapakse is now waging "an economic war" to "build the country" using similar methods.

The UNP has no fundamental disagreement with the government's program but is seeking to exploit the opposition to the evictions for its own political purposes. Shanty dwellers cannot defeat Rajapakse's plans by placing their hopes in another party of big business, but have to rely on their own independent strength and turn to the working class. The mass evictions are part of the government's broader agenda dictated by the International Monetary Fund to implement far-reaching austerity measures.

With the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), residents from Colombo's shanties have formed the Action Committee to Defend the Right to Housing (ACDRH). The SEP calls on other residents to follow their lead by forming action committees on their own estates and sending representatives to the ACDRH.

The fight for the right to affordable housing with all amenities involves a struggle against the profit system and necessitates a socialist program. Billions of rupees must be allocated to provide proper accommodation for all. Above all, this requires the independent mobilisation of the working class, together with the urban and rural poor, for a workers' and farmers' government to refashion society to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. That is the program for which the SEP fights.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact