

Sri Lankan president foreshadows further economic hardship

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President Mahinda Rajapakse delivered the annual Independence Day speech on February 4, marking the formal end of the British colonial rule in 1948. Invoking the reactionary mythology of Sinhala supremacism, the president presented himself as the saviour of the national economy, who must now single-handedly carry out “hard decisions” to cut wages and jobs, even in defiance of the public will.

The official independence celebration was staged at Kataragama in the country’s south, where a holy shrine is located. Rajapakse selected the site to venerate the gods and claim the feudal heritage of the Sinhala kings, in order to give his increasingly dictatorial rule a kind of divine character. Rajapakse compared himself to King Dutugemunu who allegedly ruled from 161 BC to 137 BC and “united this motherland with blessings from this sacred land of the deity of Kataragama”.

The reference to King Dutugemunu was designed to invoke anti-Tamil communalism. The ancient monarch has long been glorified by Sinhala supremacists who attribute to him the defeat of the Tamil King Elara. Historical evidence is sketchy. But myths have been cultivated by Buddhist monks over centuries to depict Dutugemunu as a saviour of Sinhalese society and the Buddhist religion in Sri Lanka.

Rajapakse promoted himself as the contemporary “Dutugemunu” in ending the island’s 30-year civil war by crushing the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. Rajapakse restarted the war in July 2006, and according to the UN, the military killed 7,000 Tamil civilians during the final phase of the conflict. Human Rights Watch puts the figure even higher at 30,000 to 75,000 deaths.

The so-called “unity” established by Rajapakse had been achieved through the military occupation of the north and east of the island state, where the majority of Tamils live. The anti-democratic methods used to subjugate the Tamil masses, including detaining thousands of alleged LTTE suspects without trial, have not “united” the country but only deepened the communal tensions.

Rajapakse is now preparing the same militaristic methods against all working people, whether they are Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim. Rajapakse declared that his government would overcome “whatever the obstacles” to make up the “lost opportunities for economic development” from the three-decade war.

Amid a continuing global economic crisis and rising competition from cheap labour platforms such as India, Bangladesh, Vietnam or Cambodia, the only way for the Sri Lankan business elite to make up for “lost opportunities” is to depress the local price of labour power, by cutting real wages and working conditions and lowering living standards in general.

Rajapakse insisted that “the country cannot be developed solely on popular decisions”. He warned: “Inconvenient and difficult decisions are also necessary for the nation’s progress.” It was the entire nation’s responsibility “to take hard and difficult decisions” in order to “bring light to the future of our children”.

Rajapakse made no mention of his broken promises, made during the presidential and general elections last year, to improve the wages and conditions of working people. Instead, he has implemented the International

Monetary Fund's demands for budget cuts and austerity measures. Over the past year, his government has frozen wages for public sector workers, increased the prices of utilities and slashed subsidies to farmers.

Rajapakse's government has already taken numerous "unpopular" decisions, including the planned eviction of 66,000 shanty dwellers from Colombo to clear prime land for foreign and local developers, and the use of troops and police to intimidate resisting residents. Moreover, the government has announced a program to privatise university education and impose higher school costs onto parents. The destruction of the state sector will continue. Rajapakse declared: "The economic environment necessary to expand private sector activity has been established."

Rajapakse attempted to paint his government's six-year rule in rosy colours, insisting that public services like health and education had been "strengthened" and unemployment had been reduced to a "record low".

The reality is very different. Even according to dubious official figures, 28 percent of the Sri Lankan population earns less than \$US2 a day. An article in *Daily Mirror* on February 4 noted that 85 percent of the wealth and resources of the country are controlled by the top 15 percent of society. About 14 percent of young people aged between 20 and 29 are unemployed, according to official figures.

Rajapakse's government and the ruling elite as whole are well aware of the danger that explosive social and class struggles could erupt. These circles have nervously followed the recent uprising of the Tunisian masses and the revolutionary movement in Egypt. In Sri Lanka, where the ruling elite has depended on instigating ethnic and religious discrimination for decades as a means to divide the working people, the fear is that the class issues will similarly unite working people across religious and ethnic lines.

Rajapakse declared in his speech that he was committed to "building a law-abiding society". Without such conditions, he insisted, economic development alone "will not make our freedom meaningful". He insisted on the necessity for

"attitudinal change" by the people to the government.

Rajapakse was making a thinly-veiled warning to the working people that they must submit to the authorities and not seek to challenge the government. The government itself acts completely lawlessly, constantly trampling over the legal and democratic rights of Tamils, political opponents and the masses. Rajapakse has renewed the state of emergency every month, even though the civil war ended nearly two years ago.

Last year, Rajapakse used the police-state powers of the emergency to not only deploy police and troops to evict Colombo shanty residents, but also to crack down on students protesting university privatisation and to threaten health workers protesting against low wages in government hospitals.

The Colombo press responded to the president's speech with approval. The *Island* declared: "Rajapakse did right by continuing to speak positively about the government courageously and resourcefully taking on the task of developing the country." At the same time, the editorial sought to assure its readers that mass uprisings like those in Tunisia and Egypt were unlikely to erupt in Sri Lanka, arguing that "sizable development activities ... should translate into more wages and income in the hands of working people".

In reality, just as the rapid growth of foreign investment in Egypt over the past decade only benefitted a tiny elite, condemned the majority of people to poverty and triggered the immense class struggle now underway, the pro-market agenda of the current and previous governments have created similarly explosive tensions in Sri Lanka.



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