

Sri Lanka's constitutional crisis: The way forward for workers

**The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that President Mahinda Rajapakse's impeachment and sacking of the country's chief justice, Shirani Bandaranayake, is aimed above all against the working class. As the government moves to make further deep inroads into living standards, it is tightening its control over the state apparatus in preparation for cracking down on any resistance by workers and the rural poor.

Rajapakse engineered Bandaranayake's removal this month following a Supreme Court ruling that his government's Divineguma Development Bill was unconstitutional. While the government claimed that the legislation was designed to counter communal discrimination, its real purpose was to remove economic powers from provincial councils and concentrate them in the hands of the national government.

The president rammed through Bandaranayake's impeachment in defiance of court orders, parliamentary procedure and basic legal processes. The government's own MPs backed the impeachment motion without even knowing the charges—they signed blank sheets of paper. The parliamentary speaker, Chamal Rajapakse, the president's brother, accepted the motion and appointed a parliamentary select committee to examine the concocted charges.

The Supreme Court ruled that the parliamentary select committee did not have the power to investigate the charges against Bandaranayake, and ordered that no such inquiry proceed. Chamal Rajapakse simply overrode the Supreme Court decision and the constitution, declaring that the sovereignty of the people resided in the parliament—which the government controls.

The bitter standoff between the government and the Supreme Court reflects sharp differences within the ruling class over the rampant cronyism of the government, as well as its orientation toward China, rather than the US. Sections of the Colombo political establishment have

become increasingly concerned that the presidential cabal, which has reduced parliament to a rubberstamp and flouted the constitution, is setting the stage for a dangerous confrontation with the working class.

The courts, which ruthlessly defend the interests of the capitalist class, are no friend of workers and the poor. However, Rajapakse cannot tolerate any opposition and has removed Bandaranayake as a means of disciplining the judiciary as a whole. The new chief justice, Mohan Peiris, is a former attorney-general, a government legal adviser and a trusted presidential confidant. Bandaranayake's impeachment is another step toward open police-state rule.

The origins of the present police-state apparatus lie in the protracted communal war waged by successive Colombo governments, which has institutionalised arbitrary arrest, detention without trial and torture, as well as extra-judicial killings.

Since the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, Rajapakse has increasingly resorted to autocratic methods of rule as his government implements the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Rajapakse government has repeatedly used the police and military against strikes and demonstrations by workers, fishermen, farmers and students, protesting against attacks on jobs, services and living standards.

All the parties of the political establishment supported the war and bear responsibility for the military's war crimes and abuse of democratic rights. The United National Party (UNP) started the war in 1983 and is notorious for the death squad killings of rural youth in 1989-91 that resulted in 60,000 deaths. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has been the chief cheerleader for the military. It backed Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election and urged him to restart the war in 2006.

The working class can place no faith in any of these parties, which are now posturing as opponents of Rajapakse's anti-democratic methods. The legal and judicial associations and trade unions, which organised protests against the impeachment, sought from the outset to block any broader political struggle against the Rajapakse government in defence of democratic rights and living standards.

The limited character of the protests reflects the organic inability of the bourgeoisie and upper middle class to wage any consistent fight for democratic rights. They were and are concerned only about defending their vital interests and own privileged positions within the capitalist establishment. Above all, they fear the entry of working people into the struggle—far more than they have concerns about the Rajapakse government's ruthless methods.

The most insidious role is being played by the ex-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP). These groups are shamelessly promoting the right-wing UNP as a defender of democracy. They are a crucial linchpin in subordinating workers to openly capitalist parties and preventing any independent mobilisation of the working class.

During the parliamentary debate on impeachment, USP leader Siritunga Jayasuriya told a group of protesters: "We must sacrifice our lives to win democracy. Everyone, in the left and the right, must be united against this dictatorial rule." The USP and NSSP are in an alliance not only with the UNP but with openly Sinhala chauvinist parties—the Motherland People's Front and New Sihala Urumaya.

Writing in the *Daily Mirror*, NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne promoted illusions in the protest leaders, declaring: "Because of resistance by the CJ [chief justice] and the judiciary combined with the mass agitation of trade unions and the protest of the Opposition, the plan of Mahinda may be short-lived." Even when these protests fizzled out, he wrote: "Thinking about these steps taken by the UNP, I am happy that a Liberal Democratic party could go that far with us in the opposition."

The working class must reject the fatal illusions peddled by the pseudo lefts of the NSSP and USP in the UNP, the judiciary and trade unions.

The arbitrary removal of the chief justice is a warning sign that the Rajapakse government will not hesitate to use dictatorial measures against working people. Around the world, the ruling classes are increasingly resorting to

repressive measures to impose the austerity agenda of finance capital. In Greece, the government has placed striking subway workers in Athens under martial law to force them back to work and sent police to violently break up resistance. In Egypt, as he prepares to impose the IMF's pro-market policies, President Mohamed Mursi has imposed a state of emergency on three cities, directed against anti-government protesters.

The working class is the only social force capable of waging a consistent struggle for basic democratic rights, as part of an international revolutionary strategy for the overthrow of capitalism. Workers can only do so, however, by mobilising independently of all factions of the ruling class and their petty bourgeois hangers-on, and, in doing so, rousing the oppressed masses in the struggle for political power.

The SEP calls for the establishment of independent action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods to defend democratic rights and living standards, which are under relentless attack. In opposition to the current communal and anti-democratic constitution, the SEP demands the convening of a genuine constituent assembly, elected by popular vote, to establish the democratic rights of all—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim.

The SEP proposes the broadest campaign by workers, the rural poor and youth to build a movement on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program. The SEP fights for a workers' and peasants' government to replace bourgeois rule, and the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally.

We call on all those who support this program to join the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and to build it as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.



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