

Sri Lankan government to limit provincial powers

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has called for significant changes to the country's constitution that would reduce the powers of provincial councils. The proposal follows the government's announcement of an election for the Northern Province in September, which remains under effective military control following the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

The US, India, Japan and other powers have called for the election to take place as part of a "political solution" to Sri Lanka's protracted civil war that would involve a power-sharing arrangement with the island's Tamil elites. By making constitutional changes, Rajapakse intends to further centralise political power in Colombo and weaken provincial governments, especially those in the North and East.

The proposed changes are to the constitution's 13th Amendment, which was enacted as part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord. Under the Accord, limited powers were to be devolved to a unified North-East provincial council as a concession to the Tamil bourgeoisie, while Indian troops were sent to the warzones to disarm the LTTE. The Accord quickly broke down, the so-called Indian peacekeepers were withdrawn, fighting resumed and the North-East provincial council remained a dead letter.

The changes to the 13th Amendment would significantly weaken the ability of provincial councils to block legislation affecting their powers. At present, such laws must have the approval of all councils before being presented to parliament, unless overridden by a two thirds majority in the national parliament. Under the proposal, only a majority of provincial councils would be needed to approve the legislation.

The Rajapakse government is determined to avoid a repetition of the political crisis that erupted after it

sought to pass the Divineguma bill without the consent of all provincial councils that would strip them of some economic powers. When the Supreme Court ruled that the move was unconstitutional, the government impeached and replaced the chief justice, Shirani Bandaranayake, on trumped up corruption charges, provoking large protests.

The government is also seeking to change the constitution to prevent the merger of provinces. The northern and eastern provinces were demerged in 2006 after the Supreme Court ruled in favour of a case filed by the Sinhala-extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The constitutional alteration would ensure that a reversal of that decision was impossible.

The Sinhala supremacist parties in the ruling coalition—the National Freedom Front (NFF) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—are demanding the repeal of the police and land powers currently held by provincial councils, which exist only on paper. The president's brother, defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, has publicly backed this demand, declaring that a northern provincial council with these powers could pave the way for a separate nation state. The opposition JVP demands the repeal of the 13th Amendment in toto.

President Rajapakse has cynically used this chauvinist campaign, with which he obviously sympathises, to justify his constitutional changes. At the same time, however, his proposals have opened up rifts in his coalition, with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) opposed to any "diluting of powers" to provinces. The SLMC, representing the island's Muslim elites, has long advocated a special administrative district in the eastern province. It is also deeply concerned over the government's tacit support for the anti-Muslim campaigns of Buddhist extremist

groups such as Bodu Bala Sena.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and Democratic Left Front have also told the president that they will oppose the constitutional changes. Their claims to be defending the rights of Tamils are a sham, as they supported the Rajapakse government's renewal of the communal war against the LTTE in 2006 and have defended its war crimes and flagrant abuse of democratic rights.

Without the support of these coalition partners, Rajapakse is unlikely to achieve the two-thirds parliamentary majority required to pass constitutional amendments. He also risks further alienating the US and India, by turning the northern provincial council election into a farce. The opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main bourgeois Tamil Party, has declared that it will boycott the poll if the 13th Amendment is diluted.

Neither the US nor India is a champion of the democratic rights of Tamils. Both countries backed Rajapakse's war and covered up the military's atrocities until the defeat of the LTTE was imminent. Washington belatedly seized on the issue of "human rights" abuses as a means of pressuring the Sri Lankan government to break its ties with China. Like the US, India is seeking to counter Chinese influence in Asia. It is also seeking to pacify public hostility and anger in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu over anti-Tamil discrimination in Sri Lanka.

Rajapakse has decided to present a watered down 19th Amendment next week, which will only repeal the merger clause. Other proposed changes will be referred to a parliamentary select committee. Cabinet spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told the media this week that the merger clause posed "a threat to the authority of the government" and had to be repealed.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) has opposed the constitutional changes and declared that it would develop a devolution package based on the 13th Amendment—in line with the demands of the US and India. The Sri Lankan pseudo-left groups—the Nava Sama Samaja Party and United Socialist Party—function as mouthpieces for the UNP's bogus claim to be defending democratic rights. The UNP is a rightwing bourgeois party that was responsible for starting the island's communal war, carrying out gross abuses of democratic rights and initiating the pro-market

restructuring agenda that has devastated the living standards of working people.

The working class must reject the manoeuvring of all factions of the ruling class and their petty bourgeois, ex-left apologists. The fight for the democratic rights of working people as a whole—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—can only be addressed as part of a unified struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. That is the program for which the Socialist Equality Party fights—a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader fight for a United Socialist States of South Asia and internationally.



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