

Sri Lankan government discusses phony “100-day work program”

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The new Sri Lankan government of President Maithripala Sirisena held a meeting of its National Executive Council (NEC) last Thursday to discuss a “100 day-work program,” which is supposedly about establishing “democracy” and providing “relief for the masses.”

Sirisena and the opposition parties that backed him, including the right-wing United National Party (UNP), promised this program during the campaign for the January 8 presidential election. The measures are nothing but an attempt to exploit the deep discontent among working people against former President Mahinda Rajapakse and cover up the new government’s reactionary agenda, including its pro-US foreign policy.

Apart from the ruling National Democratic Front—comprised of the UNP, the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), former army chief Sarath Fonseka’s Democratic Party (DP) and the All Ceylon Muslim Congress—other parties participating in the NEC included the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who engineered Sirisena’s candidacy, and the National Movement for Social Justice, an NGO led by a Buddhist monk, also took part.

The NEC is a right-wing coalition that the JVP initially proposed as a mechanism for marshalling support for the new government. Both the JVP and TNA refused to join the government, but are backing it indirectly through the NEC. After the meeting, JVP leader Anura Kumar Dissanayake boasted to the media that the council “can act above the cabinet.”

During the election campaign, Sirisena invited all parties to form a “national unity government.” The NEC is a rehearsal for such a government and

demonstrates the depth of the political crisis facing the Sri Lankan ruling class amid a worsening global economic downturn and rising geopolitical tensions.

In the name of “re-establishing democracy,” Sirisena’s program proposes to reduce the powers of the president and create an executive cabinet responsible to parliament. “Independent commissions” would be established to appoint top state officials and the judiciary, and probe allegations of bribery and corruption.

It is a lie that these parties are seeking to establish democracy. When in power, the pro-US UNP and Kumaratunga both trampled on the democratic rights of working people and waged a brutal communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), aimed at dividing the working class. As a senior cabinet minister in Rajapakse’s government until November, Sirisena shared responsibility for its anti-democratic attacks on working people. The JHU and JVP are notorious for their communal provocations and support for the war.

Under the new “democracy,” draconian laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the military-police apparatus built up during the country’s 26-year civil war will be kept intact. The army will continue to occupy the north and east, where the majority of Tamils live. As was the case under Rajapakse, Sirisena will rapidly introduce further police-state measures when the working class and poor begin to resist the inevitable attacks on their living standards and basic rights.

Sirisena’s program includes 100 cosmetic proposals that are supposed to alleviate the “sufferings” of the people. These include increasing the monthly salaries of public servants by 10,000 rupees [\$US76] in two parts, one at the end of February and the second at an undetermined time in the future; giving pensioners a

5,000-rupee monthly allowance, and increasing Samurdhi welfare payments to 2,000 rupees a month. Others are: a decrease in taxes on 10 essential items, a 50 percent reduction in loans owed by farmers, a pension scheme for farmers, guaranteed prices for rice, tea and rubber, and a start in raising budget allocations for education and health to 6 percent and 3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), respectively.

Such election promises have been made in the past by the UNP and Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), only to be dumped on coming to power. The "100 day program" is simply the election platform for Sirisena and his allies for the parliamentary elections he has promised to call after 100 days.

After the election, Sirisena's real economic and social agenda will soon become apparent. Far from increasing public spending to alleviate the suffering of the masses, the next government will impose austerity—in line with the demands of international finance capital. Already, the International Monetary Fund is demanding the reduction of the budget deficit to 3.8 percent of GDP by 2016, down from 5.8 percent in 2013.

The new government is acutely aware that it will face opposition that Rajapakse could exploit. It is promoting claims that he and his aides plotted a "coup attempt" on election day. Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera publicly alleged that Rajapakse sought to annul the election outcome with the military's backing. An investigation has been launched that could result in charges.

Behind this campaign, the government is signalling to the US and India that there will be no return to Rajapakse's pro-China tilt in foreign policy. All the main figures involved in engineering Rajapakse's ouster—Sirisena, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is now prime minister, and Kumaratunga—support a sharp shift toward Washington and its "pivot to Asia," which is directed at undermining and preparing for war against China.

Sirisena has appointed Western-oriented officials to advise him on foreign policy. Two such advisers are Jayantha Dhanapala, former UN disarmament commission deputy chairman, and Austin Fernando, who worked with the US and European powers during peace talks between the former UNP government and the LTTE in 2002–03.

Foreign Minister Samaraweera chose to make his first overseas trip to India, for talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj and other top officials. Samaraweera and Swaraj pledged to "work [together] closely and extensively." Samaraweera agreed to discussions on a proposed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, which Rajapakse dumped.

US Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal issued a statement in India yesterday saying the Obama administration was "looking forward to working with the administration of newly-elected President Maithripala Sirisena." This is the latest in a series of messages from Washington welcoming Sirisena's election and Rajapakse's defeat.

The *Japan Times* noted the rapid shift in Sri Lankan foreign policy, saying Sirisena's statements had "raised expectations in New Delhi, Washington and Tokyo about wooing Colombo and finding out more about Sirisena's expressed desire to establish equal relations with regional powers. One expects that this will come up during US President Barack Obama's meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his visit to New Delhi later this month."



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