

Sri Lankan opposition parties seek to bring back Rajapakse

W.A. Sunil**28 February 2015**

A number of opposition parties and organisations—supporters and allies of former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's ruling coalition—have launched the “National Front to Defend the Motherland (NFDM),” a communalist movement with the aim of bringing Rajapakse back to office, as prime minister.

In the January 8 presidential election, Rajapakse was defeated by former Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena, who was supported by the pro-US United National Party (UNP) and other parties. The whole regime-change operation was sponsored by the US to shift Colombo's foreign policy away from China, with whom Rajapakse had developed close ties.

Sirisena has formed a government with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and a UNP-dominated cabinet. Parliamentary elections are currently due to be held in June.

The NFDM started its pro-Rajapakse campaign with a rally in Nugegoda, a Colombo suburb, on February 18 under the banner, “The victory of freedom at risk, rally to take the challenges of the nation.” The reference to victory is to the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009 under Rajapakse, in which tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed.

The rally was mainly organised by the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) led by Dinesh Gunawardena, the National Freedom Front (NFF) led by Wimal Weerawansa and the Pivithuru Hela Urumaya (PHU), a breakaway faction of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). All are Sinhala chauvinist parties and partners in Rajapakse's former ruling coalition, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Also participating in the rally were the Deshapremi

Bikshu Peramuna (Patriotic Front of Buddhist Monks) and the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Brigade)—Sinhala Buddhist extremist groups that carried out violent attacks on Muslims and Christians under the Rajapakse government's patronage.

According to the police and media reports, around 20,000 people were transported from several parts of the country to attend the meeting. The organisers hope to hold further rallies around the country.

Hated for his police-state methods and relentless attacks on living conditions, Rajapakse was silent for a few weeks after his January 8 defeat. However, he has signaled his readiness to stage a comeback. He sent a message to the rally, read by former petty bourgeois radical-turned communalist Dayan Jayatillake, saying he could not “ignore the hands of affection.”

In his greetings, Rajapakse alleged that his defeat was the “result of an enemy conspiracy against the country” and again boasted about the victory over the LTTE. As in the past, Rajapakse did not name the “conspirators” because he is still trying to balance between Beijing and Washington, as he sought to do when in power.

The speakers at the rally delivered similar communal diatribes. They concentrated on appealing to Rajapakse to become a prime ministerial candidate and urging Sirisena, to appoint him as the SLFP candidate for the June elections. Even though Sirisena defected from the Rajapakse government and stood against Rajapakse in the election, not only is he still a member of the SLFP but heads it in his capacity as president.

“Today our national security has been threatened,” Gunawardena claimed. Weerawansa accused Sirisena's government of “betraying national security,” adding: “We will not stop our struggle to bring Mahinda [back] to politics.” PHU leader Udaya Gammanpila characterised Sirisena's election win as a victory for

the LTTE and declared: “We need Mahinda to save the motherland.”

The Democratic Left Front (DLF) of Vasudeva Nanayakkara, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party are backing this reactionary patriotic movement, underscoring the fact that these ex-left parties are nothing but appendages of a wing of the bourgeoisie directed against the working class.

According to media reports, sections of big business that profited from Rajapakse’s rule helped finance the Nugegoda rally. Rajapakse and his brother and former defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, have also cultivated close relations with the military hierarchy and senior state bureaucrats. Sirisena recently shuffled the top military posts, appointing new officers supposedly loyal to his government.

The NFDM coalition is trying to exploit the emerging disillusionment among working people, who, while hostile to the previous government, are distrustful of the new one.

Various middle class pseudo-left groups, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), and the trade unions claimed that a Sirisena government would boost their living standards. In his election program, for example, Sirisena promised to increase public sector wages by 10,000 rupees (\$US75) a month, but is already backtracking on the election pledge.

The moves to install Rajapakse as prime minister indicate growing political and social tensions and the instability of Sirisena’s government. The government only has minority support in parliament, even though Sirisena heads the SLFP-led UPFA, which still holds a parliamentary majority. A leading section of the SLFP wants to use Sirisena to reassert its authority, but he is hostile to bringing back Rajapakse.

The SLFP officially decided not to participate in the Nugegoda rally, but there is an incipient split in the party. Some parliamentarians and provincial council members joined it, defying the party decision. In a counter-move, Sirisena held a two-day workshop for party MPs and organisers last weekend, which proposed a “national unity government” with the UNP.

Sirisena and UNP leader Wickremesinghe have announced a rally against the forces “stoking communalism”—a reference to the NFDM campaign. In reality, neither Sirisena nor Wickremesinghe are anti-

communalist. Wickremesinghe’s UNP started the civil war in 1983 and Sirisena, as a senior minister in Rajapakse’s government, directly participated in it. Sirisena, like Rajapakse, hails the 2009 military victory and declares that he should be credited for his role.

Compounding these political tensions, the country’s economic crisis is intensifying under the impact of the worsening international situation. Sirisena’s government has initiated negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout loan of \$US4 billion. Finance Minister Karunanayake has also asked the IMF to defer loan repayments in order to avoid a default.

For several weeks, the Central Bank has been spending dollars in the money markets to stave off a sharp devaluation of the Sri Lankan rupee. Foreign investors are selling government and treasury bonds, withdrawing funds to invest elsewhere. The IMF will intervene with a more brutal austerity program that will impose new attacks on the conditions of workers and the poor, paralleling those in Greece.

Sirisena’s call for a “national unity government” amounts to a sinister plan against the working class and poor to impose such an assault. Similarly, the real target of those sections of the ruling class rallying behind Rajapakse is the working class.

At the same time, the sharp shift in foreign policy in favour of the US highlights the mounting frictions generated by Washington’s aggressive steps throughout the Indo-Pacific region to confront China, creating enormous dangers for the working people in Sri Lanka, across the region and globally.



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