

Sri Lankan opposition intensifies anti-government campaign

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A group of parliamentarians headed by former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse held a rally in Colombo on August 1 after a five-day march to challenge the ruling alliance of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The march was an attempt to re-install Rajapakse by mounting a right-wing and chauvinist campaign to try to exploit the widespread hostility toward the government's attacks on living conditions and the democratic rights of working people.

Rajapakse was ousted from office at the January 2015 presidential election by Sirisena in a regime-change operation orchestrated by the US. Sirisena, a former senior minister in Rajapakse's government and general secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), defected to contest the presidential election as the common opposition candidate.

Former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, who both have close connections with Washington, assisted in this operation. Washington had long turned a blind eye to Rajapakse's anti-democratic methods of rule, but wanted to end his close relations with Beijing and realign Sri Lanka, along with other countries across the region, behind its military build-up against China.

After taking office, Sirisena assumed the leadership of the SLFP and the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) which is led by the SLFP. He then led this coalition into a national unity government with Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP). However, around three dozen MPs defied Sirisena and regrouped around Rajapakse, forming a "joint opposition" to campaign against the government.

To give a populist coloration to the campaign, Rajapakse's front branded the 100-kilometre march from near Kandy to Colombo the "People's fight." It

boasted that one million people would rally in the capital but the demonstration failed to reach anywhere near that number. The police said the crowd numbered around 10,000, although that estimate could be deliberately low. Rajapakse's government was thoroughly discredited when in power for its relentless attacks on living conditions and its repressive measures.

Opposition groups raised slogans and carried placards against increased taxes, subsidy cutbacks and the postponement of local government elections, in order to feign concern about democratic rights and living conditions. At the same time, to stir up Sinhala communalism, they opposed any power-sharing with the Tamil elite, with slogans such as: "Do not to divide the country," "Don't betray Sri Lanka" and "Don't suppress war heroes."

Addressing a public meeting in Colombo, Rajapakse appealed to the military, claiming that the government was "putting war heroes (soldiers) in jail." His accusation is that the government wants to punish the military forces that crushed the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In fact, the government is whitewashing the war crimes, for which successive governments were responsible, starting from when the war began in 1983.

Rajapakse also accused the government of sending Buddhist monks to prison. He is keen to rally the monks behind his campaign. Ending his speech, Rajapakse declared, threateningly: "This march is only a dress rehearsal. Next time we will come to go the whole hog."

Rajapakse put on a show of sympathy for workers, farmers and youth hit by the government's cuts to fertiliser subsidies and increased value added tax (VAT). In fact, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe

government is simply deepening Rajapakse's attacks. His government imposed wage freezes, slashed social subsidies and mobilised the police and military to suppress the struggles of workers and the poor.

While seeking to make a political comeback, Rajapakse's campaign represents a definite response to the growing social unrest. It is seeking to fashion a right-wing, Sinhala chauvinist movement to divide and take on the working class.

Sirisena and the government are desperately trying to contain the intensifying political crisis. On the evening before the march, Sirisena called an emergency meeting of the Rajapakse faction of the SLFP and warned that no one would be permitted to "form new movements, forces or parties while remaining in the SLFP." But the march went ahead.

To keep Rajapakse's group at bay, the government has intensified police and judicial investigations into corruption during his government. This is rank hypocrisy because every section of the ruling elite has engaged in corrupt and shady deals. However, the investigations have widened the rift between the government and opposition factions.

Speaking at a public meeting a day before the Rajapakse rally, Sirisena declared: "No walk or talk can stop our mission. We will rule the country for five years. No one can topple the government." Sirisena and Wickremesinghe earlier decided to extend their national unity government alliance until 2020, in an attempt to strengthen its hand against the working class, not just the opposition.

Facing deepening global recessionary tendencies, falling exports and rising debt, the government has agreed to implement pro-investment policies and austerity measures as dictated by the International Monetary Fund, in return for bailout funds.

Those attacks have already triggered growing opposition among working people, the rural poor and students. In recent days, thousands of government workers, including university non-academic staff, health workers and teachers, as well as farmers, university students and unemployed youth have protested against the government's policies and attacks on democratic rights.

There is fear among sections of the ruling elite that the opposition campaign could destabilise the government and make it impossible to impose the

IMF's loan conditions. Expressing this nervousness, the *Sunday Times* political columnist wrote: "What cannot be stomached is that their actions threaten the stability of this nation upon which rests its economic prosperity. Let the JO (joint opposition) wander where they will on the road to nowhere, but let them not take the nation as their travelling companion."

The Rajapakse group's right-wing campaign and the government's deepening austerity assault pose great dangers to the working class. To answer the destruction of living conditions and democratic rights, workers need to rally youth and the poor and fight for a workers' and peasants' government as part of struggle for international socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of Fourth International, invites all class conscious workers and youth to attend SEP's public meeting on August 9 in Colombo to discuss this program.



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