

Former Sri Lankan president threatens to topple government

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In comments to the media on December 28, former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse declared that he would “topple” the government in 2017, accusing it of failing in its “management and development of the country.”

Rajapakse added: “The biggest thing that they did was to stop all the development works that I started and they started taking revenge on me.” He said that although the present government had a parliamentary majority, this might not last long because “they are fighting each other.”

The former president is attempting to exploit the rising popular hostility toward the government, which came to power in January 2015 promising to end Rajapakse’s austerity policies and repressive measures. Over the past two years, the cost of living has continued to rise, social services and subsidies have been cut, youth unemployment has increased and the state repression of protests and strikes has intensified.

Any attempt to “topple” the government confronts constitutional obstacles. The 19th constitutional amendment passed by the present government bars the dissolution of the parliament, even by the Sri Lankan president, until it has completed four and a half years of its full five-year term.

Rajapakse, moreover, cannot constitutionally become president because he has already occupied that position for two terms. When one journalist pointed out these impediments, Rajapakse bluntly declared that he “could govern the country without being the leader.”

In his media interview, Rajapakse blamed the US and India exclusively for his electoral defeat in 2015. American and Indian support for his rival, Maithripala Sirisena, “was too much for us,” he said. “We didn’t know what was going on inside the party.”

The US and India certainly had a hand in helping to

engineer a regime-change through the January 2015 presidential election. Having failed to pressure Rajapakse to distance himself from China, Washington backed the intrigues in Colombo to remove him from office.

The selection of Sirisena as the “common opposition candidate” was organised secretly. Sirisena, who was a leading cabinet minister in the Rajapakse government until the election date was announced, was backed by senior figures in the ruling Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and the then opposition United National Party (UNP), the country’s two main bourgeois parties. Various pseudo-left organisations, trade unions and civil society groups exploited the widespread opposition to Rajapakse’s despotic methods to falsely promote Sirisena as a “defender of democracy.”

According to the *Hindu* newspaper, Rajapakse told journalists that the “US had spent nearly \$US650 million” on the regime-change operation and denounced the current government for “cosying up” to the US.

Rajapakse, however, is no opponent of imperialism, having previously enjoyed the backing of the Western powers in his regime’s civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In the press conference, Rajapakse also accused Sirisena of double standards in attacking him in 2015 for having close relations with China, while Sirisena himself was seeking Chinese investment.

Posturing as a defender of small landowners, Rajapakse criticised government plans to hand over 15,000 acres of land in Hambantota, adjoining a newly-built port, to Chinese investors. “15,000 acres is too much,” he said. “We wanted to give only 750 acres. These are people’s agricultural lands. We are not against Chinese or Indians or Americans coming here

for investment. But we are against the land being given to them and the privatisation that they are doing.”

At the same time, Rajapakse carefully avoided any reference to the record of his own government. On three occasions between 2011 and 2013, it mobilised the military to fatally shoot protestors opposing his policies. Under his regime, tens of thousands of poor families were evicted from their shanty homes in Colombo and other Sri Lankan cities and the land was sold to the local and foreign businesses.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe last week played down Rajapakse’s threat to topple the government, declaring that the former president could do whatever he wanted to do. Wickremesinghe confirmed a visit to Switzerland on January 17.

Nevertheless, under conditions of rising national debt, falling export earnings and declining foreign investment, Rajapakse’s threats to overthrow the government and rule by extra-parliamentary means cannot be ignored by Sri Lankan workers and youth.

One indication of the depth of the economic crisis is Sri Lanka’s rising national debt. The currency’s depreciation increased the public debt by 285 billion rupees (\$US1.9 billion) in 2015 and by another 141 billion rupees up to July 2016. The total public debt of 7,391 billion rupees in December 2014 climbed to 9,382 billion rupees in July 2016, a record increase in just 19 months.

All factions of the ruling elite—the government and its opponents like Rajapakse—are committed to imposing the debt burden on the masses. They recognise that austerity measures will be met by fierce resistance and are moving to strengthen the state apparatus to crush all opposition by workers and youth.

This is the political background to Rajapakse’s provocative threat against the government. Since losing office, he has mounted a right-wing populist campaign against the government, whipping up Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism against Muslims and Tamils and eulogising “war heroes”—that is, the military responsible for war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights in crushing the LTTE.

The “national unity” government of Wickremesinghe’s UNP and the Sirisena faction of the SLFP is increasingly fractured. It faces concerted opposition to its Development (Special Provisions) Bill, with protest resolutions from eight out of nine

provincial councils.

The day after Rajapakse’s interview was published, the state minister of Provincial Councils and Local Councils, Priyankara Jayaratne of the SLFP, resigned his post, complaining of harassment by UNP ministers. He said 10 others would follow him on the same grounds. Two days later, Sirisena had to personally meet a group of state and deputy ministers and assure them that he would look after their grievances.

The *Sunday Times* commented last week that Sirisena has “mulled over the idea of a reshuffle of his Cabinet of Ministers this month. The idea is to pick a robust team that could work to a more efficient agenda and thus obviate further public criticism over different issues.”

During his presidency, Rajapakse successfully bribed several UNP members to cross the floor and join his government so as to amass a two-thirds majority to steamroll through legislation to sanctify his arbitrary rule. While he might hope to do the same today, the task of convincing those who already enjoy ministerial privileges to abandon them is not same as enticing opposition members to join a government.

The unstable and unpopular government is increasingly reliant on the pseudo-left organisations and so-called civil society groups to keep promoting the lie that Sirisena and Wickremesinghe represent “democracy” and must be given “more time” to fulfil their “promises.” By blocking an independent movement of the working class to lead the oppressed masses on the basis of a socialist perspective, the pseudo-lefts are preparing the conditions for Rajapakse and an even more right-wing government to come to power.



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