

Former Sri Lanka president intensifies efforts to resume power

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Former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has urged his supporters to help him topple the government. Addressing a January 27 rally of tens of thousands in the Colombo suburb of Nugegoda, Rajapakse denounced the government as “corrupt” and declared he was “ready to lead the force” to bring it down.

Promoted as “The beginning of the struggle,” the event was part of intensifying efforts by Rajapakse, a group of sitting parliamentarians, known as the Joint Opposition (JO), and their supporters to return him to power.

The escalating conflict between the Rajapakse-led JO and the administration of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is an expression of deepening political instability within the ruling elite. Colombo faces escalating balance of trade and foreign debt problems and growing struggles of workers and the poor against its social austerity measures.

Currently 45 members of parliament, including Rajapakse, back the former president, and sit on the opposition benches. The group includes a faction of Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the SLFP-led United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Sirisena has the support of just 50 MPs. Wickremesinghe heads the United National Party (UNP).

Rajapakse told last week’s rally his faction would oppose the government’s “fraudulent new constitution,” which he claimed would “break up the country.” “The motive of the new constitution,” he declared, “is to appease the Tamil minority in their quest for political independence.”

Referring to the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) under his government in 2009, Rajapakse said, “we have to safeguard our victory” and prevent Sri Lanka’s breakup. Fighting against the division of the country is a slogan used by Sinhala chauvinist groups and the ruling class parties, including the SLFP and the UNP, to divide Sinhala and Tamil

workers and the poor along ethnic lines.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, in fact, has not presented any new constitution.

The government previously indicated it was considering a new constitution for “reconciliation” with the Tamil parties. It would provide the provincial councils with limited capacities, mainly involving land and police powers, but they would still be under the dominance of the central government. The proposal was shelved in response to increasing agitation from the Rajapakse group and various Sinhala- and Buddhist-chauvinist organisations supporting him.

Rajapakse attempted to posture as an anti-imperialist at the rally, declaring, without specifically mentioning the US, that some countries wanted him removed from power “because we were not kneeling before imperialism.” These claims are utterly hypocritical.

Just after last year’s US presidential election results were announced, Rajapakse sent a message to president-elect Donald Trump praising his victory. He said Washington, under Republican President George W. Bush, had good relations with Rajapakse’s government and supported its war.

Rajapakse also appealed to Trump to not support war crime charges against Sri Lanka for abuses committed during the military offensive against the LTTE. When Trump was sworn in on January 20, Rajapakse tweeted, congratulating him and welcoming his “non-interventionist foreign policy.”

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe also sent congratulations to Trump, further indicating the subservience of every faction of the ruling elite to US imperialism.

Rajapakse denounced the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government for the high cost of living, burdening the country with huge debts and selling state properties to foreigners. He accused it of rampant corruption, as well as destroying the “independence” of the judiciary and jailing

its political opponents.

Rajapakse appears to think the population is suffering from amnesia. The conditions he blames on the current government also existed under his rule. Rajapakse, for example, sacked the chief justice because she nullified a bill designed to take back some powers of the provincial councils.

Rajapakse's speech to the rally cautiously avoided any criticism of the government for implementing the International Monetary Fund's austerity measures. His regime slavishly imposed previous IMF demands.

Rajapakse's opposition group has no sympathy for the democratic rights or living standards of workers and the poor. His government used its war against the separatist LTTE to suppress the basic rights of workers and unleashed ruthless attacks on their living standards and social conditions.

The former president is now attempting to exploit the growing popular anger by whipping up communalism. His real target, however, is not the government but the working class and the poor.

Sections of the media—the *Daily Mirror*, *Lankadeepa* and Hiru TV—that supported Sirisena during the US-backed 2015–16 regime-change operation that installed him, are now providing propaganda support to Rajapakse's campaign.

While Rajapakse declares that he wants to change the government, no presidential election is due until 2019, followed by a general election in 2020. Rajapakse and his group are directing their attacks against the UNP and putting pressure on Sirisena's supporters in the SLFP to break from the government.

Last week, provincial council chief ministers loyal to Sirisena met with Rajapakse, urging him to unite the SLFP and contest the local government elections, which are supposed to be held in the coming months. These elections were due a year ago, but Sirisena and Wickremesinghe keep postponing them, fearing electoral defeat. Sensing the government's weakness, Rajapakse refused the request and demanded that the SLFP defect from the government.

Rajapakse was ousted in the presidential election in January 2015 amid mass opposition to his government. Sirisena, who was a senior minister in Rajapakse's regime, was installed via a US-backed operation orchestrated with the assistance of Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Those backing Sirisena insisted that his administration would improve the living conditions of the masses, defend

their democratic rights and end government corruption. A host of middle-class groupings, including the pseudo-left, promoted these bogus claims and worked to cover-up the fact that Rajapakse was removed because of his close political and economic relations with China, and in order to advance Washington's geo-strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

Over the past two years, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's promises have been exposed as lies. Colombo is implementing all the IMF's demands, ruthlessly increasing taxes, slashing expenditure on health, education and vital subsidies to farmers, and privatising state-owned enterprises.

Further, it is handing out huge concessions to big business and foreign capital to attract investment. Government ministers have also been discredited by corruption allegations.

The explosive social conditions that existed before Rajapakse's ouster have reemerged. Not a single day passes without reports of protests by workers, students or the rural poor. Telecom and electricity board temporary workers recently demonstrated and took strike action for several days until a court order banned their protests. Hundreds of students marched in Colombo early this week—the third time in the past two weeks—against the privatisation of education.

While the government is increasingly using the courts, police and military to suppress these actions, the capitalist elite is becoming nervous about the explosive situation. The crucial question is the development of an independent movement of the working class, hostile to all factions of the ruling elite and fighting on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program to end the capitalist profit system.



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