

Sri Lankan president calls for “sacrifice” at Independence Day celebration

Saman Gunadasa
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Addressing the annual Independence Day celebrations on February 4, President Maithripala Sirisena complained of the lack of “economic freedom” and appealed for “all of us” to “commit ourselves to ensure the economic freedom of our country.”

He continued: “We expect the commitment and the sacrifice of all the people, including the intellectuals, academics, politicians, public officials, in implementing national sustainable development policies and strategies and freeing the country from poverty.”

Sirisena’s call for “commitment and the sacrifices” from “all” is not to ease the economic burden on the masses. On the contrary, it is to fulfil the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to ensure the survival of Sri Lankan capitalism, which is being battered by the worsening global economic breakdown.

The government is seeking to make working people pay for the huge debts racked up by successive governments to ensure the “economic freedom” of businesses to boost their profits. Annual debt servicing this year is \$US2.6 billion and the government is borrowing more just to cover this rising cost. It plans to raise another \$1 billion loan and a further \$1.5 billion by issuing sovereign bonds in the next few months.

To meet the IMF’s conditions, the government is to privatise more state-owned enterprises, including land and buildings. It is already finalising the sale of Hambantota Port and Sri Lanka Air Lines. Government-owned luxury hotels, such as the Hilton, Hyatt, Waters Edge and Grand Oriental, as well as Lanka Hospital and Mattala Air Port, are also being lined up.

The government is under strict IMF orders to drastically reduce the budget deficit to 3.5 percent of gross domestic product by 2020, almost half what it was in 2015. This means not only enforcing

privatisations but slashing funds for public education and health, and abolishing the current pensions system and welfare subsidies.

The government has stepped up the privatisation of education and health services and reduced fertiliser subsidies for farmers, and subsidies for school children and the poor. Sirisena’s deceitful slogan of “economic freedom” only means the further deterioration of the unbearable social conditions.

Working people should consider the balance sheet of the last 69 years of so-called national independence. The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has proved incapable of addressing the democratic and social rights of the masses. It plunged the country into three decades of devastating communal war and is now presiding over a widening gulf between rich and poor.

In his address, Sirisena went through the ritual of hailing national independence. “[D]uring the decades of 1930 and 1940, as a result of the demands made by the leaders of this country, we got rid of some major grievances through the Donoughmore and Soulbury Commissions. We succeeded in winning the freedom on the 4th of February 1948,” he declared.

In reality, the capitalist class mounted no struggle for independence from the British. It concocted a deal with London to head off a movement of the masses. What has taken place since confirms the warnings made at the time by the Trotskyist movement—the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI)—which characterised the independence granted by Britain to India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as “fake.”

The BLPI explained in 1948: “[T]he native exploiting classes of Ceylon have been handed over, well nigh completely, the task of administering British imperialism’s interests in Ceylon.” The continued subordination of Sri Lanka to imperialism would mean

the ongoing suppression of the democratic rights and living standards of the masses.

To denounce the fake independence, the BLPI held a protest rally in 1948 at the Galle Face esplanade in Colombo, the very place where this year's "independence celebrations" were held. The rally drew some 50,000 people from the working class and rural masses of all communities—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. The BLPI wrote: "Will there be anything for the masses of this country to hail in it [independence] at all?" Its answer was a clear and unequivocal "No!"

Significantly, after two years of relatively low-key celebrations, Sirisena delivered his speech this year, calling for "sacrifice," amid a huge military-police pageant at Galle Face. The massive show of force is a warning of the methods that will be used to suppress growing popular opposition to the government's austerity agenda.

The parade included 7,553 armed personnel from the military, air force, navy, civil defence force, special task force and police. Air force planes and Israeli-built combat aircraft performed an air show, while 34 parachutists jumped to the venue. The military displayed all the hardware used in its brutal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—tanks, artillery, amphibious vehicles, anti-aircraft guns, armed speed boats and multi-barrel rocket launchers.

Sirisena glorified the "valiant war heroes who fought to save our country from LTTE terrorism throughout 30 years." The war, fought to ensure the dominance of the country's Sinhala Buddhist elites, resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths and the devastation of much of the island. The military top brass—the "war heroes"—destroyed the LTTE through a series of brutal offensives in 2009. They are responsible for war crimes that involved the killing of tens of thousands of civilians.

Sirisena's hailing of the "war heroes" underscores the hypocrisy of his appeal for "national peace and reconciliation" and the cosmetic concession of ending the celebration by singing the national anthem in both Sinhala and Tamil. The government continues the repression of the country's Tamil minority, including through the continued occupation of their homes and land by the military.

Sirisena boasted of winning accolades, locally and

internationally, for his "reconciliation" efforts. What is meant by "international accolades" is the partial withdrawal of war crimes allegations raised at the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The US only raised the issue of Sri Lankan human rights abuses as a means of pressuring the previous President Mahinda Rajapakse, whom it regarded as too close to China. After Rajapakse was ousted at the 2015 election and Sirisena re-oriented to Washington, the US shelved its concerns about human rights.

Sirisena has adopted the slogan of "economic freedom" to obscure the failure of his government to fulfil its promises to lift the living standards of working people and to cover up preparations to implement the new round of IMF austerity demands. He is facing a challenge from Rajapakse who is whipping up reactionary Sinhala chauvinism and posturing as a defender of workers, peasants and youth in a bid to return to power.

Sirisena ended his speech with a demagogic pledge to "develop the motherland of you and me." The working class and oppressed masses should realise their interests cannot be advanced through Sirisena's "motherland," where property and the state that defends it are in the hands of the capitalist class. There will be no "economic freedom" for the working people until a workers' and peasants' government is established as part of the struggle by the international working class for world socialism.



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