Sri Lankan president calls on former army commander to “discipline the country”

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has called upon Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka to resign from the government’s ministry and return to the position of army commander. In a bid to “discipline the country,” Fonseka would be head of the country’s three armed forces for two years.

Cabinet spokesman Rajitha Senaratne announced the president’s request at a media conference on Wednesday. His statements revealed extensive discussions in the previous day’s cabinet meeting over how to suppress mounting strikes, protests and unrest among workers and youth, and prevent any disruption to state-run entities or the operations of the corporate elite.

The immediate incident that rattled the government was a strike on Monday at the state-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, which halted fuel supplies in the entire country.

The proposal made to Fonseka is a warning that the government of Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is planning an escalating assault against workers, the poor and young people.

Fonseka’s reinstatement would be tied to an expansion of the army commander’s powers, raising the spectre of a military dictatorship. Among the measures floated by the cabinet is the creation of a new special force under Fonseka. It also discussed training military groups for deployment in the event of “emergencies” affecting key sectors of the economy, such as the Petroleum Corporation, the Electricity Board, the Water Board and the ports.

There are no constitutional provisions for these anti-democratic moves. They would require the introduction of special regulations.

The cabinet has not taken a final decision on Fonseka’s role. However, the proposal points to the advanced crisis of the government and the ruling elite as a whole, which is propelling it toward extra-parliamentary forms of rule.

According to Senaratne, Fonseka said he would consider the request and work accordingly if he were provided with proper powers and responsibilities.

Fonseka was engaged from its inception in the ruthless 26-year civil war waged by successive governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As army commander, he was notorious for having overseen war crimes committed by government forces at the conclusion of the war in 2009.

Foreshadowing renewed repression, Senaratne said military deployments in key economic sectors were proposed because protests and social unrest were increasingly “hindering the development plans of the country.” He referred to the governments’ backroom discussions with trade union leaders, but complained that strikes were often called with little notice.

“People complain that the president and prime minister have been quiet for too long,” Senaratne said. “For those who say the government is spineless, we are about to have a spine.”

Since last October, tens of thousands of workers have engaged in strikes and other struggles demanding higher wages. The industrial action has involved workers at the Hambantota and Colombo ports, the Electricity Board and the Water Board.

Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital, has experienced a wave of protests, with virtually continuous actions involving doctors, students and others. Yesterday, working people in the country’s war-ravaged north held a hartal, a total shut-down of businesses, shops and most transport, demanding to know what happened to those who disappeared during the civil war.

There is also widespread anger regarding the deaths

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of dozens of people due to the collapse of a huge garbage dump at Meethotamulla on April 14. Hundreds participated in protests against dumping garbage in their areas, fearing similar tragedies. Sirisena declared garbage disposal an essential service to justify deploying the police to suppress protests.

The military forces are demanding greater powers in a bid to crush these struggles. Senaratne told the press conference: "Security forces asked us what was this joke happening in the country. They questioned if investors and tourists would come here if this situation went on. They said, 'give us more powers. We will take care of Colombo.'"

Answering questions from reporters, Senaratne justified Sirisena's proposal by saying that the former Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike and former President J. R. Jayawardene used the military to break strikes.

Bandaranaike, using emergency laws, forced strikers back to work at bayonet point in order to break the 1976 general strike. Jayawardene used the communal war, and emergency laws, to unleash military terror against workers and rural youth from 1987 to 1990.

Senaratne did not refer to former President Mahinda Rajapakse, because Rajapakse is an opponent of the Sirisena government. However, during the war and at its end in May 2009, Rajapakse used the military and police to violently suppress the struggles of workers and the poor.

The Sirisena government has attacked strikes and protests on the pretext that they were called to support Rajapakse's new political outfit. "We cannot allow trade unions to bring back Rajapakse who was thrown out by the people," Senaratne declared. He was referring to some union bureaucracies, which are backing Rajapakse.

Rajapakse has organised a group of MPs, including from Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, as a "united opposition" and warned he will topple the government and form a new one.

Though he ruled the country autocratically, attacking living standards and social conditions, Rajapakse is absurdly posturing as a democrat who established social justice. He is seeking to exploit growing opposition toward the Sirisena government. Rajapakse is preparing to take on the working class, building a right-wing movement and instigating a communal anti-Tamil and anti-Indian campaign.

The Sirisena government is facing an economic crisis, with foreign debt rapidly increasing and exports declining. The International Monetary Fund has imposed further austerity measures, including the slashing of subsidies, tax increases and privatisation. The government is well aware that these measures will be resisted by the working class. Between January and February, inflation rose by 8.2 percent.

A host of pseudo-left parties and trade unions campaigned to bring Sirisena to power in 2015, claiming he would establish "good governance," in an attempt to derail unrest among workers and the poor. However, because of the attacks on living conditions and democratic rights over the past two years, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has been thoroughly discredited. At the same time, it is increasingly tying Sri Lanka to the US-led plans for war against China.

Around the world, the ruling classes in every country are going on the offensive against workers' rights and seeking to establish dictatorial rule. The Colombo government's right-wing turn is one expression of this international tendency.

The working class must prepare to fight the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's autocratic moves and its attacks on living standards and social conditions. It can only do so by breaking from every faction of the bourgeoisie, mobilising its independent strength and rallying the rural poor and youth to fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program.

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