

Media pundits, pseudo-left back Sri Lankan president's call for authoritarian rule

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Last week, Sri Lankan cabinet minister Rajitha Senaratne informed a press conference that President Maithripala Sirisena was proposing that former army commander Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka should “take responsibility for disciplining the country” for a period of two years. Sirisena’s extraordinary proposition was made in the context of growing strikes and protests throughout the country against the government’s attacks on living conditions and on social and democratic rights.

This is no small matter. Fonseka is notorious for having presided over war crimes, particularly during the final years of the government’s military offensives against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). During that period, thousands of Tamil civilians were killed. Fonseka was also allegedly involved in attacking any journalists who made even the slightest criticism of the war, and branding as traitors workers and others engaged in protests to defend their democratic rights. Former President Mahinda Rajapakse and Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse considered Fonseka as sufficiently ruthless to implement their repressive measures, until he was deemed their political enemy.

Some ministers, nervous about the impact on ordinary working people of Sirisena’s proposal for a police state, tried to dismiss it as a passing remark. One minister claimed it was a “joke,” while another said that the proposal, “made lightly,” had been exaggerated out of all proportion.

Replying to a question raised in the parliament, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe denied that the government had decided to set up a special army unit. In the same breath, however, he admitted that “the government’s attention was only focused on how to maintain essential services without interruption or disruption” but refused to reveal what was discussed at the cabinet meeting.

Nevertheless, the campaign for anti-democratic measures, along with threats against working class strikes and protests, is proceeding. The Minister of Megapolis Champika Ranawaka insisted during his speech at a May Day meeting that a small group of people would not be allowed to rule the country. “Only the government has a people’s mandate for that,” he said.

More sinister is the role being played by the upper middle

class layers—the so-called “civil society,” the media and the fake left—who helped Sirisena and Wickremesinghe come to power. They are now providing cynical justifications for authoritarian rule and police-state measures against striking workers and students, by branding them as political operators who are seeking to overthrow the government.

One such person is media pundit Ranga Jayasuriya, who has shamelessly argued that Fonseka is an “ideal candidate” to “head an emergency mechanism” to confront strikes. Jayasuriya wrote a column in a Colombo-based newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, titled “Why is SF [Sarath Fonseka] good enough to confront strikes?”

Jayasuriya was an acting editor of the now defunct Colombo weekly, *Lakbimanews*. He is currently a regular columnist for the *Daily Mirror*, Sri Lanka’s main privately-owned English-language daily. He was among the milieu that rallied behind the US-orchestrated regime-change operation in the January 2015 presidential election to replace Rajapakse with Sirisena. The fraternity of pseudo-left, media and NGOs worked to cover up Washington’s role in exploiting the mass opposition to Rajapakse’s rule to bring Sirisena to power.

Ten days after the change of government, Jayasuriya showered praises on Sirisena, claiming that “under his presidency, Sri Lanka may be experiencing a democratic spring.” He highlighted various cosmetic changes and called on the population to rally to him on the basis that Sirisena’s presidency risked being overturned by Rajapakse.

In defence of Sirisena’s anti-democratic agenda, Jayasuriya makes a series of desperate arguments in his recent column. He notes that “apparently” Sirisena’s proposal “is tantamount to reversing the democratic reforms upon which he has embarked,” but, in fact, this is not the case. Sometimes, he writes, one has to stifle democracy by introducing authoritarian measures, in order to defend it.

He ridiculously tries to compare Muhammadu Buhari, a Nigerian military dictator who ousted another military ruler during the 1980s, and Sirisena coming to power in Sri Lanka. He says that Buhari took power to “discipline the country,” but that it paved the way for dictatorship and counter coups.

Jayasuriya makes this comparison, not because it has any historical validity, but to argue that Sirisena came to power in

order to dismantle Rajapakse's dictatorial rule. The "strongman's [Rajapakse's] rule was dismantled" and now it is "patently clear" that the government is "handicapped by the relative freedom it ushered in." He laments that "it has not led to social stability."

Jayasuriya's claim about Sirisena's "dismantling of the strongman's rule" and the establishment of "relative freedom" is bogus. Sirisena made a few minor changes, such as introducing the 19th Amendment to the constitution, which limited the powers of the Executive Presidency and set up "independent commissions" to appoint top bureaucrats and judicial officers. Jayasuriya failed to mention, however, that Sirisena has not kept his limited promise to abolish the widely hated executive presidency. His government has maintained the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act and is now preparing to replace it with harsher legislation.

Jayasuriya also fails to mention the unleashing of military, police and repressive laws against protesting workers, students and the poor. The government suppressed a strike, for example, by contract workers at the Hambantota Port, who were demanding job permanency. Naval soldiers were deployed against them last December, while protests by workers, farmers and students in Colombo are frequently met with riot police, tear gas and baton charges.

Jayasuriya tries to justify these attacks, by branding them as "acts of groups with vested interests, exploiting the limited state power and political will of the current administration" to advance the most minimum interests. According to him, "these are not protests, but blackmail."

Ironically, in the guise of criticising the Rajapakse government's police-state measures, Jayasuriya is, in fact, praising them. He claims that a telephone call from then Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse was enough to stop a protest of the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA). Villagers' protests were also stopped and Colombo slum dwellers moved to alternative houses after just a nominal protest, out of fear of Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Similarly, university student protests were not continued.

Jayasuriya has pointed out how former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the late Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayawardene crushed working class struggles and implemented ruthless and exploitative measures. His entire argument is aimed at legitimising the use of such methods against workers, youth and the poor in Sri Lanka, in order to maintain capitalist rule. He is frustrated about the government's "failure to confront the rising wave of protests."

He advises: "The bottom line of state power, in any state, be it democratic or authoritarian, lies in its ability and willingness to use coercive means to achieve legitimate ends, when a negotiated solution is not forthcoming."

"Sarath Fonseka's legitimacy derives from his role as the war-winning army chief," Jayasuriya argues, adding that he should act as Gotabhaya Rajapakse did to suppress the class struggle.

If such coercive rule were not established, "the alternative to this is the gradual breakdown of governance, which to put it bluntly, for a country at our economic and social level, is more dangerous than the breakdown of democracy."

The real fear expressed by Jayasuriya is that, if the growing struggles are not suppressed, they will transform into a social upheaval, creating a revolutionary crisis. "The government should do something to fix this mess. If it doesn't, it will not last much longer in office."

The popular protests are not just "outbursts of pent-up emotions," accumulated during the Rajapakse regime, he writes. It was precisely their deep concerns about the developing social opposition that drove the upper middle class groups, including elements such as Jayasuriya, to vigorously intervene to bring to power the pro-US Sirisena regime in Colombo, while hailing it as an attempt to establish "good governance."

Jayasuriya is not alone. Those who assisted Sirisena's ascension to the presidency, including the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the Citizens' Power group, and the *Ravaya* newspaper, are now leading the attacks on workers and students protests against the government, branding them as the means for Rajapakse to return to power.

Last Thursday, NSSP leader Karunaratne attacked a strike called by the GMOA and several trade unions as a "fascist attempt to overthrow the government." The strike was called by the unions in order to deflect mass opposition to the government's attacks on public education, health and privatisation.

Last month, when people in and around Colombo protested against an environmental disaster and the threat to their lives from a major garbage problem, Karunaratne demanded that they should be suppressed by the police, in the same way that students were.

These upper middle class layers are deeply hostile to the working class and the poor. They sense that the growing economic crisis and political instability throughout the country is driving the development of mass social upheavals, which threaten their own selfish class interests and those of the capitalist class as a whole. They are now assisting right-wing forces to bring to power a dictatorial regime to save capitalist rule.



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