

Sri Lanka: Phony moves toward democratic constitutional change

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Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe presented a “constitutional assembly” steering committee report last month. Although he declared the aim of a new constitution was “reconciliation and development,” the accompanying debate shows that every faction of the ruling elite is thoroughly steeped in divisive Sinhala communalism.

The report presented on September 21 will be debated for three days from October 30 to November 1, during which time the Sri Lankan parliament will meet as a constitutional assembly.

In March last year, the parliament decided to act as a constitutional assembly (CA) to prepare a new constitution. This is an anti-democratic body and not a genuine constitutional assembly directly elected by workers and poor.

The decision was backed by the ruling coalition led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP), as well as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and a faction of SLFP MPs supporting former president Mahinda Rajapakse.

Wickremesinghe boasted the CA would present a “consensus constitution” of all political parties for the first time since independence in 1948. However, the discussion has dragged on for more than a year and, after 60 sittings of the “steering committee,” only an interim report has been produced.

During the 2015 presidential election, President Maithripala Sirisena promised “democratic changes” to the constitution, including the abolition of the executive presidency and the strengthening of parliament to ensure “good governance.” This phony campaign, backed by the JVP, TNA and various pseudo-left organisations, was a means of exploiting popular anger toward Sirisena’s rival, the incumbent President

Rajapakse, and his attacks on democratic rights.

The ousting of Rajapakse was in reality a regime-change operation backed by the US and India. Washington was hostile to Rajapakse’s close relations with Beijing and wanted Sri Lanka to line up behind its military build-up in Asia against China.

Presenting the report to parliament, Wickremesinghe said the new constitution would ensure no divisions on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity or social background. It would provide “equal distribution of the benefits of economic development ... widen democracy and establish peace and stability.”

At the same time, the prime minister declared: “Sri Lanka should be a unitary state.” He stated: “We are a proud Buddhist nation. And the constitution is to be drafted on ‘Buddhist policies and principles.’”

Wickremesinghe noted the report replaced the words “unitary state” with more suitable words and formulas such as “Sri Lanka should be an undivided and indivisible country.” He said Buddhism would be given “the foremost place while assuring to all religions their rights.”

These comments demonstrated the utter hypocrisy of Wickremesinghe’s claims that the constitution will ensure no racial or religious divisions and will establish equality and democracy. His remarks are nothing but a vow to maintain the supremacy of the island’s ethnic majority Sinhalese Buddhists.

Under the banner of defending the unitary state and the “foremost place to Buddhism,” the Sinhalese ruling elite has systematically discriminated against the Tamil minority and exploited communalism to divide the working class. That resulted in the 30-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated in May 2009.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have promised some

minor concessions to the Tamil elite and its main party, the TNA, in order to strengthen bourgeois rule. The US and India, which are concerned about the risk of communal unrest, have advised the government to accommodate the TNA in a power-sharing arrangement.

The TNA earlier presented a proposal for a federal system, but later dropped it. TNA leader R. Sambandan praised the interim report, adding, “we must not be hanging on to words like federalism.” However, the TNA is hoping that the 13th Amendment to the existing constitution will be implemented, devolving greater powers to the majority Tamil provinces of the north and east.

The interim report demonstrates that the ruling coalition is not agreed on how far to go in making concessions to the Tamil elite. The UNP is proposing to merge the northern and eastern provinces—a longstanding TNA demand. But the SLFP is opposed. It demands the removal of a clause in the present constitution to hold a referendum to merge the provinces.

Just one week after the interim report was announced, Sirisena spoke at a Buddhist ceremony. He declared that the report “does not project a concept of federal state,” then added: “I will never allow a constitution that will break up this unitary status.” He affirmed there would be no “downgrading in the new constitution of any clause or paragraphs pertaining to Buddhism that are in the current constitution.”

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe campaigned to abolish the executive presidency but there is also no agreement between the ruling parties on this matter.

For all its claims to be establishing a new democratic constitution, the government is in fact preparing dictatorial rule and taking repressive measures against workers and the poor.

After nearly three years in office, the government has been discredited because of its implementation of savage, IMF-dictated austerity measures. Struggles have erupted in the plantations, power sector, petroleum industry, railways and universities, to mention a few. About 8,000 medical students have boycotted lectures for nine months, while other students are continuing to campaign against the privatisation of education.

The government depends on the betrayals of the trade

unions, on one hand, and, on the other, the unleashing of the police and military to crush strikes and student protests. Fearing defeat, the ruling coalition has postponed local government and provincial council elections.

Along with these repressive measures, the government has integrated the country more closely into US war plans against China. Last week, the Sri Lankan armed forces held joint exercises sponsored by the US military in Trincomalee. Next month, US Deputy Secretary for Political Affairs Thomas Shannon will visit Colombo for a “Partnership Dialogue” between the two countries.

The Rajapakse-led faction of the SLFP, with the backing of various chauvinist groups and Buddhist monks, has launched a virulent communal campaign. While participating in the CA, this faction is accusing the government of seeking to divide the country and create a federal system to satisfy the TNA.

In a statement on October 16, Rajapakse warned the government to stop its “destructive measures.” He is seeking to exploit the growing opposition to the government and divert it into reactionary communal channels. He is openly campaigning to topple the government.

The struggle for genuine democratic rights is bound up with the fight against war and attacks on living conditions. In the struggle for a secular democratic state, every form of discrimination, including on a racial or religious basis, must be opposed. These tasks can be achieved only by the working class, supported by the oppressed masses, in the fight for socialism.



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