

# Ex-Sri Lankan defence secretary calls for brutal big business regime

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29 May 2018

Former defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse's recent "Economic Vision for 2020–2030" document is a policy blueprint for an authoritarian regime in Sri Lanka.

Addressing the annual conference of the extreme-right Viyath Maga (Professionals for Better Nation) this month, Rajapakse called for a complete overhaul of the economy in order to exploit "windows of opportunity" for international investment. The essence of his speech was that "economic development" requires vicious law and order measures.

The Viyath Maga conference was attended by 2,000 invitees at the ultra-expensive Shangri-La Hotel in Colombo on May 13. Participants included former president Mahinda Rajapakse, retired military leaders, business chiefs, highly-paid professionals, some Buddhist clergy and Sinhala extremists.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse is the president of Viyath Maga, established in 2016. The ex-army officer, notorious for his hatred for Tamils and working people, has declared he is prepared to run for president in the next election. He has expressed his admiration for figures such as Donald Trump, the fascistic billionaire US president, and other "non-traditional" political leaders.

Gotabhaya was appointed defence secretary in 2005 by his older brother, then President Mahinda Rajapakse, in preparation for a resumption of the Colombo regime's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He was a leading figure in the president's cabal that ran the country autocratically, using police-state methods, until his ouster in the January 2015 presidential election.

Significantly, Gotabhaya Rajapakse's "Economic Vision" and Viyath Maga's right-wing campaign have intensified in line with the deepening political crisis of

the current government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Last week, *LMD*, a business magazine, gave voice to the mounting concerns of the corporate elite. According to its survey, the business confidence index dropped to a 70-month low in April. "Political uncertainty and disappointing GDP growth numbers seem to be taking a toll on sentiment," it wrote. The economic growth rate last year was 3.1 percent, the lowest in 16 years.

Seeking to exploit this frustration, Rajapakse told Viyath Maga's big business audience that China's economy would double and surpass the US by 2030 and India would become the world's third largest economy, with Japan and Indonesia in fourth and fifth places respectively.

"Sri Lanka's economic policies must be changed without delay" in order to focus on Asia and take advantage of Asian growth, Rajapakse said. Any delay would "increase country's economic problems."

Sri Lankan state-owned enterprises, he continued, must generate profits and not create "financial problems for the government." The country's economy had to be transformed into a skilled-labour intensive one in order to reduce the government's wage bill. Free trade zones had to be established across the country, near ports and with proper management, and the "rule of law" strictly applied, with "national defence" a priority.

Rajapakse said nothing about the escalating social problems of workers and the poor. Instead, he ended his speech by calling for a "Sri Lanka first campaign." In other words, he issued a patriotic appeal for more sacrifice by the working class and harsher austerity measures to boost profits.

Development Strategies and International Trade Minister Malik Samarawickrama responded by

declaring that Rajapakse's "vision" was the same as the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's policies.

While Colombo is slashing expenditure on education, health and subsidies and privatising state-owned ventures, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the business elite are becoming increasingly impatient with the current government. Concerns are being raised about whether it is capable of dealing with the mounting opposition to the austerity agenda by workers, the rural poor and students.

Rajapakse's "vision" and his speech constitute an appeal to finance capital and the corporate elite that he will do everything to intensify the cost-cutting measures and crush all resistance.

The prospective presidential candidate told the *Daily Mirror* last April: "First of all, political stability and investor confidence should be established under a powerful leadership." He added: "When an investor comes here, he should see a stable government." In a crude self-promotion, he told *Ceylon Today* in March, that the president should be "an individual who loves this country and who could protect the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unitary status of it."

Sections of the ruling elite are seriously considering whether his ruthless reputation and involvement, along with senior military chiefs, in war crimes and other human rights violations, are necessary "qualities" for stable government—i.e., to crush working class opposition to Colombo's social attacks.

Together with the commanders of security forces he directed the massive military onslaught in the north and east against the LTTE, expelling thousands of Tamils from their homes and into refugee camps when the civil war resumed in July 2006.

The bloody conflict ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the LTTE and the annihilation of its principal leaders, including those who had surrendered, and the killing of tens of thousands of innocent civilians. Simultaneously in the south of the country, Rajapakse led military-police crackdowns against political opponents, workers and the poor.

Rajapakse was also permanent secretary of the urban development and land reclamation ministry. His main job was to eliminate 60,000 slum dwellings in Colombo and brutally evict thousands of poor families to transform the city into a financial and commercial hub and tourist hotspot.

In June 2011, protesting Katunayake Free Trade Zone workers were attacked by police, who killed one person and injured dozens of others. The following year, special task force police officers killed a fisherman and injured others demonstrating in Chilaw against fuel price hikes.

During a military operation in August 2013 to crush a massive protest of people against environmental pollution at Weliweriya, in the suburbs of Colombo, three young men were shot dead.

Rajapakse, who is promoted in the media as the "war-winning defence secretary," also intervened to stop the exposure of military war crimes, illegal police activities and those responsible for communalist violence.

Among Rajapakse's enthusiastic supporters are leading Buddhist monks, serving and retired military officers and Sinhala extremists. For years, Gotabhaya and Mahinda Rajapakse have encouraged and nurtured the fascistic Bodu Bala Sena and similar outfits.

Discussions are underway in the parliamentary opposition about its next presidential candidate.

Under Sri Lanka's constitution, Mahinda Rajapakse cannot contest the presidency for a third time. A faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the newly-formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which he leads, have yet to decide their next candidate.

Although Gotabhaya Rajapakse is not a member of the SLPP, he is trumpeting his ambition to become president and has declared he would renounce his US citizenship to do so. In the meantime, he is attempting to build up his extreme-right base in preparation for the establishment of an even more brutal regime.



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