

Sri Lankan president issues bogus promise to fulfil election pledges

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11 January 2019

Politically discredited Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena claimed on Tuesday that he would fulfil all his remaining election promises this year, including to eliminate “fraud and corruption.”

Sirisena’s pledge, made at the opening of a new Laggala village and irrigation scheme in Central Province, marked his fourth year as president—he was elected on January 8, 2015. His term ends in November, with the next presidential election due in January 2020.

Sirisena’s comments are in line with his efforts to strengthen an alliance with former President Mahinda Rajapakse, as part of their continuing conflict with the United National Party (UNP)-led government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Sirisena ousted Wickremesinghe as prime minister in a political coup on October 26, replacing him with Rajapakse and then dissolving parliament. Last month, however, Sirisena was forced, following a Supreme Court ruling and under pressure from Washington, to reinstate Wickremesinghe.

Washington made clear that it would not allow any undermining of the military and political relations it had built up over the previous four years on the strategically-located Indian Ocean island. The US had previously opposed Rajapakse as president because of his economic and political orientation toward Beijing.

Sirisena declared on Tuesday: “We have made huge sacrifices to fulfil the aspirations of the people in the country.” He ludicrously claimed that his presidency had taken important measures “to build a society free from doubts and fears, ensuring people’s democracy and liberty, as well as building a free media, an independent judiciary and an unbiased government service to strengthen the national economy.”

He admitted that his campaign “to eliminate fraud,

corruption and malpractices” had failed but called on Sri Lankans “to join hands to reject corruption and fraud through a strong program.”

Sirisena’s proclamations are laughable. He and Wickremesinghe, who helped bring him to power, together established a “unity government” in 2015 and have fulfilled none of their election promises.

Sirisena was a senior minister in Rajapakse’s government until he defected in November 2014 to become the presidential candidate of a UNP-led electoral front. Sirisena and his supporters made all manner of promises. These included changing the constitution and abolishing the autocratic executive presidency, strengthening democracy, restoring human rights, ending ethnic discrimination and improving living and social conditions.

These promises exploited the anger of workers and the poor against Rajapakse’s autocratic 10-year rule, the military atrocities committed in the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and the escalating attacks on democratic and social rights.

Sirisena’s elevation into the presidency was orchestrated by Washington and its political allies, including Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga. While the US had backed Rajapakse’s communalist war, it was hostile to his government’s reliance on China for investment and military hardware. Washington, which was stepping up its economic, diplomatic and military offensive against China, was determined to bring Sri Lanka back into its orbit.

After taking office, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe reoriented Colombo’s foreign policy in favour of the US, India and the European powers, and integrated the island and its military forces with US preparations for war against China.

While the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration provided limited increases in agricultural subsidies and salary rises to some state employees, it soon began to implement the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The shaky unity government's promise to abolish the executive presidency never eventuated. The only changes were to prune some presidential powers, including the dissolution of parliament. Action on human right violations and war crimes was swept under the carpet to appease extreme-right Sinhala-Buddhist formations and the military. De facto military rule continued in the island's North and East.

Colombo's austerity policies provoked struggles by broad sections of the working class, as well as by farmers and students. The government responded with threats and repressive measures.

The anti-government opposition also manifested itself in landslide defeats for Wickremesinghe's UNP and Sirisena's SLFP in last February's local council elections. Most of the council seats were won by the newly-formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)—a breakaway Rajapakse faction from the SLFP.

Sirisena then calculated that the best way to deal with the growing opposition was by aligning himself with Rajapakse.

Sirisena said not a word in his Tuesday speech about the October 26 anti-democratic sacking of Wickremesinghe, or the prorogation, and later unconstitutional dissolution of parliament.

Since the failure of his political coup Sirisena has sought to undermine the UNP-led government and strengthen his own powers. When a new cabinet was announced late last year, Sirisena retained the law and order ministry and then established a special committee, answerable to himself, to assess the "suitability" of all individuals chosen as heads of state-owned enterprises and boards.

In the 225-seat parliament, Sirisena's faction of the SLFP and the United People's Freedom Alliance only has about 20 MPs, with about 75 MPs backing Rajapakse and his SLPP.

Sirisena is desperately trying to secure his political future by linking up with the SLPP and Rajapakse. Exploiting this crisis, Rajapakse hinted that he would support an alliance with Sirisena but indicated that it must have the blessing of SLPP. Rajapakse also issued

a statement on his ouster in 2015, declaring that his removal as president had created "triple dangers" for the country.

These dangers, Rajapakse claimed, are: the 19th amendment to the constitution, which prevents the president from dissolving the parliament in any circumstances; the collapse of the economy; and the government's alleged attempt to divide the country which, he falsely insisted, would hand over the North and the East to the Tamil elite.

Rajapakse is seeking to build an extreme-right movement, appealing to Sinhala chauvinist groups and military in the hope that these forces can suppress the opposition of the working class and rural poor.

Sirisena is appealing to the same right-wing elements. He has repeatedly opposed the arrest of any military officer over human rights violations and war crimes.

Rajapakse also declared that his party has started discussions with the US and other major powers in order to change their political attitudes toward a future Rajapakse government.

For his part, seeking to justify another round of IMF-dictated measures, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has declared that Sirisena's failed coup has had a "huge economic" impact. Wickremesinghe also has initiated discussions with the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party and so-called civil society groups to establish a National Democratic Front, another right-wing movement.

Under conditions of mounting economic problems, including \$US5.9 billion in foreign debt repayments due this year, and developing workers' struggles in Sri Lanka and internationally, every faction of the ruling elite is preparing for dictatorial forms of rule.

While the internecine political war continues within the ruling elite, the working class must take the political initiative to chart its own course—that is, to fight for a workers' and peasants' government on the basis of an international socialist program.



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