

Sri Lankan president's Independence Day speech exposes deep crisis of rule

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena delivered a speech to mark the country's National Independence Day which summed up the hypocrisy, political decay and deep crisis of capitalist rule in the country. The independence ceremony was held at Galle Face Green in Central Colombo on February 4.

The celebration was dominated by military parades. Military officers provided commentary boasting of the role that each regiment played during the bloody 30-year communal war by successive Sri Lankan governments to suppress the Tamil minority and divide the working class along ethnic lines.

Invitees to the ceremony included political leaders, the military top brass, Colombo diplomats and religious leaders including Buddhist prelates. Their presence alone graphically demonstrated that the event had nothing to do with working people and the poor.

Significantly, the guest of honour was the newly-elected Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih who was installed in a regime-change operation by the US and India to scuttle China's strategic influence in that country. The Maldivian opposition which rallied behind Solih operated mostly from Sri Lanka. By honouring him, every faction of the Sri Lankan ruling elite is seeking the blessing of the US imperialism.

Sirisena began his speech by lamenting: "It is sad to note that the leaders of our history, including us, are responsible for the inability to find a clear political solution that all can agree on, although a decade has passed after the end of the 30-year war."

The war ended with the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in May 2009. During the final offensives, tens of thousands Tamil civilians were killed, nearly 300,000 were detained and more than 10,000 abducted.

Sirisena came to power in 2015, together with Prime

Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, promising to change the constitution to enable a "political reconciliation," thereby securing the backing of the Tamil National Alliance. This would have involved a limited devolution of powers to the Tamil bourgeoisie in the north and east of the island.

Neither Sirisena nor Wickremesinghe had an iota of concern for the democratic rights of Tamils who have been repressed by successive Colombo governments. In his speech, Sirisena repeatedly praised the "war heroes," that is those responsible for war crimes, for liberating the country and promised them greater benefits. The North and East are still under oppressive military occupation.

Sirisena's reference to the lack of a political solution reflects the fear in ruling circles that unrest in the North and East is taking place amid growing struggles by workers throughout the island. He also referred to the basis for this broader social turbulence, bewailing the failure of political leaders "to bring about the economic development our country and the people have expected for decades."

The president pointed to the official poverty rate of 6.7 percent and added that "more than 50 percent of the population is suffering from relative poverty." They have a daily wage of less than 1000 rupees (\$US5.60), unemployment and debt problem is rampant. "One child out of four is suffering from malnutrition," he said.

These figures are an indictment of the failure of successive governments to meet the pressing social needs of the masses in 71 years since formal independence from British colonial rule.

Hinting at the social consequences, Sirisena said: "The people of the country are no longer ready to continue in an economic recession... The political

leaders who lead the country should be aware of this.”

The Sri Lankan ruling class is nervous about the resurgence of the international working class. As the class struggles were developing in the US and Europe, hundreds of thousands of plantation workers in Sri Lanka were engaged in a wage struggle for the past four months along with protests by other private and public sector workers.

Sirisena, who was a senior minister for decades and a leader of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), falsely claimed that as president he sought to address the social crisis. “I attempted to enter into a new political journey with novel development experiences,” he said.

In reality, Sirisena came to power in the 2015 presidential election by exploiting the opposition to the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse over its war atrocities, and attacks on social and democratic rights. Despite Sirisena being one of Rajapakse’s ministers and close allies, the pseudo-left organisations and so-called civil society groups falsely promoted him as the democratic alternative.

It was through this right-wing movement that Washington orchestrated a regime change operation to oust Rajapakse and install Sirisena. The US was hostile to Rajapakse, not because of his anti-democratic rule, but because his relations with China cut across Washington’s aggressive confrontation with Beijing.

After four years, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has been thoroughly discredited because of its attacks on living conditions and democratic rights. Poverty has worsened as a result of its implementation of International Monetary Fund dictated austerity measures.

Amid rising popular discontent, the parties of both Sirisena and Wickremesinghe faced heavy losses in local government elections last February. Sirisena quickly distanced himself from the government and lined up with his arch rival Rajapakse in a bid to bring in a “strong” government to suppress the mounting opposition.

Sirisena sacked Wickremesinghe in late October as prime minister and replaced him with Rajapakse. However, this attempted political coup failed. Hostile to the return of Rajapakse, the US mounted intense pressure to reinstate Wickremesinghe. When Rajapakse was unable to muster a parliamentary majority, Sirisena dissolved parliament, only to be overruled by the

Supreme Court, which compelled him to reappoint Wickremesinghe.

The political infighting is continuing, however. Without a clear parliamentary majority Wickremesinghe is now seeking to form a “national government” by politically bribing MPs from other parties with minister posts. In his speech, Sirisena publicly criticised the prime minister’s moves to form a national government.

Despite criticising the “failures” of past governments, the president could not say a word about how he could solve the pressing economic and social problems facing the country. Sirisena’s open flouting of the constitution was another sharp warning that the ruling class will resort to police state measures to suppress the growing movement of the working class.

The decay of capitalist rule in Sri Lanka since formal independence in 1948 poses crucial political tasks for workers and youth. The only way to achieve essential democratic and social rights is on the basis of the fight for socialist internationalism and the struggle to establish a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as a part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia. The Socialist Equality Party fights for this perspective.



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