

Sri Lankan president calls for autocratic executive presidency

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena at a meeting with media heads last week called for the abolition of the 19th amendment to the constitution which clipped some of his powers as president. He blamed the amendment for “creating the current political instability in the country” and proposed to revert to the previous executive presidential system.

Sirisena’s attack on the 19th amendment, which he once hailed as a victory for democratic rights, is another expression of the drive by every faction of the ruling elite for autocratic forms of rule amid the deep political crisis in the country.

The 19th amendment was passed by the parliament in April 2015 just four months after Sirisena came to power. It limited the president’s term of office to two and his/her power to dissolve parliament was also reduced. Under the amendment, a constitutional council was set up to propose top judges and independent commissions such as for elections and the police.

Hailing these changes as a victory for democracy was a fraud. As the WSWs explained at the time, “it was designed to refashion the constitution to hoodwink the working class and poor by providing a democratic façade for repressive measures being prepared to ram through the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).” This is exactly what workers, the poor and youth have experienced over the past four years.

However, on June 25, President Sirisena told the media heads that “the amendment has created two power houses, the president and the parliament,” two leaders—president and prime minister—and “severely reduced the capacity to create cohesive and long-term policies.”

While saying he and the parliament were responsible for the amendment, Sirisena claimed it was “drafted on

NGO [non-government organisation] requests” and the “clauses brought from the back door.”

The thrust of all these utterances is there must be only one “power house” and one leader—that is a strong autocratic ruler must be established.

Noting that the next presidential election takes place in four months, Sirisena declared it would be better to abolish the amendment before or after the election, regardless of who wins. Significantly, he added, “we need no new constitution. The constitution is in good shape when we get rid of both 18th and 19th amendments.”

The claim that the political instability is a result of the constitutional amendment is false. Rather, it is the result of bitter political infighting between the factions of the ruling elite—led by President Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and opposition leader, Mahinda Rajapakse—against the backdrop of enormous social opposition to their common agenda of austerity.

Sirisena came to power in 2015 January by exploiting the huge popular opposition against the government of then President Rajapakse. He was a senior minister in that government but suddenly declared his opposition to Rajapakse’s “dictatorship” and gross human rights violations and promised to abolish the executive presidency and transfer powers back to the parliament.

His defection was engineered by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe, leader of the United National Party (UNP) who both backed Sirisena’s campaign. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) rallied behind Sirisena along with the pseudo-left groups including Nava Sama Samaja Party, United Socialist Party and Frontline Socialist Party. A host of academics directly or indirectly supported this fraudulent campaign for “good governance.”

Behind this façade, Sirisena's campaign to oust Rajapakse was backed by the US and its regional strategic partner India. The US was hostile not to Rajapakse's autocratic rule but his close relations with Beijing as the Obama administration was ramping up its confrontational "pivot to Asia" against Beijing.

Sirisena and his then ally Wickremesinghe, who was appointed as prime minister, abruptly shifted Sri Lanka's foreign policy in favour of the US. They abandoned the promise to abolish the executive presidency and brought the limited 19th amendment to the constitution instead.

However, their collaboration was short lived. The so-called unity government was fractured as it became increasingly discredited among workers and the poor because of its implementation of IMF-dictated policies that slashed welfare measures and price subsidies, privatised and axed jobs. Opposition grew despite the unleashing of police and military repression against the struggles of workers, farmers and students.

This huge social opposition was reflected in the humiliating defeat in local government elections in February last year in which Sirisena's party came a poor third, while the UNP ran second. Many voted for Rajapakse's new party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), simply as a means of showing their opposition to the government.

Sirisena blamed Wickremesinghe and withdrew his party from the ruling coalition. Seeking a political realignment with the SLPP, he staged a political coup in October last year, arbitrarily removing Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replacing him with Rajapakse. The scheme failed, however, when Rajapakse failed to gain a parliamentary majority. Sirisena dissolved parliament, but the Supreme Court ruled that this decision was illegal. In the background, the US opposed Rajapakse's return, compelling Sirisena to reappoint Wickremesinghe.

The rapid rightward shift by the entire ruling class was sharply expressed after the terrorist bombings of churches and hotels on April 21. Evidence is emerging that, not only the defence establishment, but political leaders, including Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse, knew well in advance of the impending terrorist attack but deliberately did and said nothing.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe seized on the attack to impose draconian emergency laws and activate the

Prevention of Terrorism Act. The military and police were deployed across the island in the largest operation since the end of the bloody anti-Tamil communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. All of the opposition parties, including Rajapakse's SLPP, the TNA and JVP fully supported these measures. The real target of these anti-democratic measures is not the terrorist threat but the emerging struggles of the working class.

The constitution that Sirisena now hails as "fine" was introduced by President J. R. Jayewardene in 1978. It concentrated sweeping powers in the hands of the executive president, effectively reducing the parliament to a rubberstamp. Jayewardene's calculation was that an autocratic president was necessary to suppress the emerging opposition of the working class to his open market economic policies that were transforming Sri Lanka into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors.

Significantly when Sirisena called last week for the repeal of the 19th amendment, Rajapakse immediately welcomed the proposal. At the same time, he defended his own 18th amendment to the constitution that allowed unlimited terms for the president and boosted presidential powers to appoint judges and top state officials. Under the 19th amendment, it was repealed. Rajapakse is seeking to return to power under the slogan of a "strong and stable government."

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe made a similar response. At a public meeting last week, he declared: "It is difficult to handle the government vehicle as it is manned by two drivers. When one driver tried to speed up the other tried to stop him."

Sirisena's call for the repeal of the 19th amendment is a sharp warning to the working class. Mired in deep economic crisis produced by the global slowdown and facing developing unrest among workers and the poor, the ruling class as a whole is preparing police state measures in its desperate bid to defend the capitalist rule.



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