

Sri Lankan president appoints minority government and puts security forces on alert

Saman Gunadasa
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Within days of his appointment as Sri Lanka's defence secretary last week, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne issued a statement declaring that the country's security enforcement agencies will "strictly enforce the law, regardless of the status, against any persons or groups who may cause disturbance to peace."

Gunaratne, who was appointed defence secretary by newly elected President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, led a military unit that has been accused of carrying out summary executions of detained Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) members during Colombo's bloody war against the separatist movement.

The defence secretary also said police officers will be "more vigilant regarding the security of the country and that they are responsible for the security of their respective areas." He insisted that "[T]here should not be any undue fear among the people of the country of any political revenge, abduction or disturbances can be caused by the political changes that have taken place in the country following the recent presidential election."

If there are fears among Sri Lankans about "political revenge, abduction and disturbances" following the election this is no surprise. Such acts were commonplace during President Mahinda Rajapakse's administration from 2005 to 2015 and with Gotabhaya Rajapakse as its defence secretary. Gotabhaya, who oversaw a brutal and unrelenting attack on democratic rights, is the subject of war crime allegations committed during the war against the LTTE.

Gunaratne's statement is an attempt to intimidate all those fighting to defend their democratic and social rights. Sri Lankan workers and the poor have been involved since 2018 in mass strikes and protests against the previous government's imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures.

National strikes by railway workers, teachers and university non-academic workers in the lead-up to this month's presidential election were shut down by the trade unions following directives by the election commissioner.

These struggles, along with Sri Lanka's growing debt and economic problems, have thrown Colombo's ruling elite into a deep crisis. Sections of big business are demanding a "strong ruler" to suppress popular opposition. Any resumption of national strikes and protests over wages and social conditions could be deemed by the government as a "disturbance to peace" and outlawed.

On April 21, former President Maithripala Sirisena and the entire ruling elite seized on terrorist attacks by an Islamic fundamentalist group to immediately declare a state of emergency and deploy the military throughout the country.

Mahinda Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) endorsed those repressive measures and instigated a communalist anti-Muslim campaign. It accused the government of undermining and weakening military intelligence and put forward Gotabhaya Rajapakse as its presidential candidate, promoting him as a "strong man" and highlighting his brutal record during the war.

Last Saturday the defence secretary, in response to a journalist's question, declared that there is "not an iota of truth in remarks made by some people that the government is heading for military rule constricting democratic space for people." Gunaratne warned, however, that the police were responsible for maintaining law and order and that a special task force and security forces would be deployed if any situation became uncontrollable.

On November 22, President Rajapakse issued a

gazette notification under the Public Security Ordinance for the army, navy and air force to maintain law and order across Sri Lanka. The decision continues the deployment of the armed forces in 25 districts, and the country's territorial waters, introduced by the former President Sirisena in August (see: "Sri Lankan president 'lifts' emergency but armed forces mobilised to 'maintain security'").

While Defence Secretary Gunaratne made clear that these draconian measures will continue, the new regime is politically unstable and confronts deep-seated working-class opposition to the attacks on democratic and social rights.

Since the election, President Rajapakse has moved to appoint political cronies to bolster and consolidate his administration. Last week, he called on Ranil Wickremesinghe to step down as prime minister and appointed his brother, former President Mahinda Rajapakse, in his place, along with 16 other political loyalists in ministerial positions.

Prime Minister Rajapakse will lead the new cabinet, holding the finance, urban development, housing, water supply and Buddha Sasana (Buddhist religious) portfolios, and effectively controlling state power. The SLPP, however, does not have a parliamentary majority.

President Rajapakse has declared that he wants a snap general election "at the earliest opportunity." Although the five-year term of the current parliament ends next August, he wants to use his presidential powers to dissolve the parliament and hold new elections next March.

The SLPP is also demanding that the 19th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution be scrapped because it prevents the president from holding ministerial positions. This cannot be carried out by a minority government.

This week, SLPP chairman G. L. Peiris, a leading figure in the Colombo political establishment who has held ministerial positions in consecutive Sri Lankan Freedom Party and United National Party (UNP) governments between 1994 and 2015, demanded that the UNP immediately dissolve the parliament and hold a general election.

Peiris indicated that the new president and prime minister are ready to act arbitrarily. "The Gotabhaya-Mahinda combination," he declared, "will not stay idle

solely because we don't have a majority in parliament. They will ensure that main pledges, including the ones made to revive the defence sector and national economy, are materialised."

Rajapakse has also appointed top state bureaucrats, including P.B. Jayasundara as presidential secretary and S. R. Attygalle as treasury secretary and secretary to the finance ministry. These appointments are significant.

Jaysundara, a former Central Bank economist and finance ministry secretary under various governments during the 1990s and 2014, is notorious for his ruthless implementation of the IMF's demands. Attygalle, is a former Central Bank deputy governor and served during the last 10 years as deputy secretary of treasury and finance ministry deputy secretary.

Notwithstanding these appointments, the newly-elected president and his SLPP minority government is weak. Facing an acute financial crisis, it will be compelled to implement the austerity measures demanded by international finance capital. However the ruthless attacks on the living and social conditions of millions of Sri Lankan workers will, sooner rather than later, ignite major class battles.



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