

Sri Lankan president expands Rajapakse family political power

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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse last week issued a gazette notification on the subjects and functions of the newly-appointed cabinet of ministers. The December 10 announcement, which gives him and his brothers—Mahinda and Chamal—control of key political institutions, is another step towards authoritarian methods of rule.

Following his election as president in November, Gotabhaya Rajapakse quickly established a minority Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)-led government, after forcing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to resign and replacing him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse. He also appointed Chamal Rajapakse as a cabinet minister and the state minister of defence.

Dinesh Gunawardena, the leader of the racist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna and long-time Rajapakse ally, was given the key post of foreign minister as well as minister of skills development, employment and labour relations.

President Rajapakse then prorogued the parliament until January 3, calculating that by offering various political positions and bribes in the intervening period, he could increase the number of parliamentarians backing the SLPP.

According to the December 10 gazette notification, an unprecedented 37 subjects and functions, and 31 government bodies, have been allocated to the ministry of defence.

The president, according to the 19th amendment of the Sri Lankan constitution, cannot hold any ministerial positions. While he is the commander in chief of the three armed forces and controls them, he has amassed considerable power indirectly via other bodies and institutions.

Apart from the armed forces and related agencies, President Rajapakse will also control Immigration and Emigration and Registration of Persons, the Secretariat for Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and the

Computer Emergency Readiness Team (CERT).

These institutions were previously assigned to ministries. The Immigration and Emigration and Registration of Persons department, for example, was previously under the Home Affairs ministry and the Secretariat for NGOs under the National Co-existent, Dialogue and Official Languages ministry.

In Sri Lanka, there are currently around 1,500 NGOs, many of them monitoring and criticizing government policies. They have been the target of hostile attacks by successive Colombo administrations which have sought to control their activities, particularly during the country's protracted civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Placing the Secretariat for Non-Government Organisations under the defence ministry will see further restrictions on NGO activities.

President Rajapakse will also run the Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (TRC), Information and Communication Regulatory Commission and the police department, which was allocated to the defence ministry last year by former President Sirisena.

Placing telecommunication agencies under the defence ministry is another significant move. Former Sri Lankan presidents Mahinda Rajapakse and Sirisena used the telecommunication commission to block social media, including Facebook, and limit access to web sites critical of their governments' anti-democratic measures.

In September, Army Commander Shavendra Silva made clear the military's determination to police the internet. Increasing computer literacy rates and internet penetration in Sri Lanka, he told a Cyber Security Conference in Colombo, meant that the population was "vulnerable" and "many elements would try to propagate misinformation and destabilise social cohesion."

Referring to the Easter Sunday bomb attacks by local-ISIS inspired terrorists, Silva declared that the "misguided youths" using social media could be "more dangerous

than a suicide bomber” and that social media “has become serious concerns for national security.”

Senior Sri Lankan military intelligence officials, who had been forewarned about the planned Easter Sunday bombings, are not concerned about terrorism but workers and youth using social media and the internet to organise resistance to government austerity and attacks on basic democratic rights.

Addressing selected editors and journalists on December 16, Rajapakse spelled out his hostility to the constitutional limitations on presidential powers and said he was determined to scrap them. There is “nothing good in the 19th amendment to the constitution,” he said, and it “will be completely repealed.”

While the previous Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government promised to abolish Sri Lanka’s autocratic executive presidency it backed away from this making only limited changes through its 19th amendment.

Rajapakse referred to the Supreme Court ruling opposing former President Sirisena’s dissolution of parliament and appointment of Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister late last year. He made clear that he was determined to secure a two-thirds majority in the parliament and write a new constitution to consolidate his powers.

Rajapakse told the media conference that he will “definitely dissolve the parliament in March... I want a strong government to function. This cannot be done in the current parliament.”

Justifying the appointment of retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as defence secretary, Rajapakse claimed this was necessary because the government’s priority was to strengthen “national security.”

The unelected Gunaratne effectively holds ministerial powers and can issue orders to all related institutions. He has also been appointed Telecommunication Regulatory Commission chairman and has wide-ranging control over the media.

Not a single journalist or editor challenged the president’s expansion of the Rajapakse family’s political power and the moves towards authoritarian forms of rule.

In line with his previous appointment of senior military officials, the president last week also appointed former Army Commander General Daya Ratnayaka as chairperson of Sri Lanka Port Authority (SLPA), which owns ports in Colombo, Galle, Trincomalee and Kankesanthurai. It is the first time in over 20 years that a military official has been an SLPA chairman.

Yesterday Rajapakse appointed Admiral Professor

Jayanath Colombage the Additional Secretary to the President for Foreign Relations and retired General G. A. Chandrasiri as chairman of Airport & Aviation Services (Sri Lanka) Limited. Chandrasiri previously acted as governor of the Northern Province, which is still effectively under military occupation.

The December 10 gazette notification also boosted the political power of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, who is the minister of finance, economic and policy development. This position has 27 key subject areas and will control 48 government bodies, including the Treasury, the central bank, all state banks, securities and the exchange commission and the employees’ trust fund.

Prime Minister Rajapakse is also the minister of buddhasasana, cultural and religious affairs, which covers 21 subject areas and another 23 institutions, as well as minister of urban development, water supply and housing facilities, with 22 functions and controlling another 17 government bodies.

Along with his role as the state minister of defence, Chamal Rajapakse is the minister of mahaweli, agriculture, irrigation and rural development, with 26 government bodies and 39 duties and functions under his purview.

Rajapakse’s election to the presidency came amid Sri Lanka’s deepening economic crisis and rising strikes and anti-government sentiment by workers, students and the rural poor. The president’s call for “strong government” is in line with growing demands by Colombo’s ruling elite for dictatorial measures to confront an increasingly combative working class.



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