

Sri Lankan president outlines big business, communalist policy to parliament

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President Gotabhaya Rajapakse outlined his government's policy agenda in a statement to Sri Lanka's reconvened parliament on January 3. It was his first address to parliament, which he suddenly prorogued late last year.

Rajapakse's first action after winning the November 16 presidential election was to force out the United National Party (UNP)-led government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and replace it with a minority regime, with his elder brother and former President Mahinda Rajapakse installed as prime minister. Wickremesinghe passively accepted his removal.

The new minority government consists of parliamentarians from the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and former President Maithripala Sirisena's faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

After appointing the cabinet and state ministers, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, in violation of the country's constitution, took over the defence ministry and several other key institutions. He also elevated former generals and senior armed forces officers into several prominent state positions, including appointing retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as Sri Lanka's defence secretary.

Rajapakse last week claimed in parliament that the election gave him a "clear mandate" to carry out his government's policies. Rajapakse won the presidential elections, however, not because he has any popular support, but because thousands of Sri Lankan workers were hostile to the former Sirisena and Wickremesinghe government's attacks on social and living conditions.

Political support for the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration by the pseudo-left groups, trade unions, Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) allowed Rajapakse and the SLPP to pose as the only opposition.

Rajapakse and his government are acutely aware that they are sitting on a social powder-keg. Last November's election was held amidst rising political and industrial unrest by Sri Lankan workers, in line with unfolding workers' struggles internationally.

Just as he did during the election campaign, Rajapakse told parliament that Sri Lanka required "strong government" to

"strengthen national security" and bring economic and political stability to the country. Using his executive powers, he will dissolve parliament in March and hold elections with the aim of obtaining a two-thirds majority of MPs.

"National security occupies the foremost place," he told parliament. He added that he had already taken steps to strengthen the military and police apparatus. The government would make the "motherland safe, a country free of terrorism, extremism, underworld activities, theft, robbery, extortionists, the drug menace, disruptions of public order, and the abuse of women and children."

Rajapakse's demagoguery about fighting terrorism, extremism and disruptions to public order are aimed at justifying state suppression of inevitable struggles against his government by workers and the poor.

The president told parliament that he wants to rewrite the constitution, declaring that the 1978 constitution, which has been amended 19 times, "has given rise to many problems at the present time because of its inherent ambiguities and confusions." An "unstable parliament," he continued, "that cannot take clear decisions and remains constantly under the influence of extremism, is not one that suits the country."

The constitution legislated by Prime Minister J. R. Jayawardene's UNP government in 1978 created an executive presidency and transformed the legislature and the judiciary into rubber-stamp bodies. Its purpose was to crush all social resistance to the government's reactionary "open market economic policies." It was accompanied by intensified anti-Tamil communal provocations that resulted in Colombo's almost 30-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Since his election Rajapakse has insisted that he will scrap the 19th amendment to the constitution, which limits some of the president's executive powers.

Rajapakse did not elaborate on his assertions about the "influence of extremism" on the constitution. This appears to be a reference to Sri Lanka's proportional representative system, which means that any party seeking to secure a parliamentary majority must win the support of parliamentarians from the Tamil and Muslim minority parties. Rajapakse wants to introduce laws that go beyond the

autocratic 1978 constitution and provide even greater state powers to deal with an insurgent working class.

In a signal that he will use communalism to split the working class, Rajapakse declared that the constitution would “always defend the unitary status of the country, and protect and nurture the Buddha Sasana whilst safeguarding the right of all citizens to practice a religion of their choice.” In plain English this means the promotion of Sinhalese-Buddhist chauvinism.

Since formal independence in 1948, the ruling elite in Sri Lanka has systematically discriminated against Tamils in order to divide the working class along ethnic lines. This reactionary agenda is enshrined in the designation of Sinhalese as the country’s main official language, and Buddhism as state religion. During the presidential elections the SLPP whipped up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim propaganda to secure electoral support from Sinhalese and Buddhist fascistic groups.

Rajapakse admitted to parliament that Sri Lanka is in “a social, economic and political crisis today,” and declared that “we must be prepared to make the sacrifices” for the development of the country. In other words, the burden of Sri Lanka’s economic crisis, a part of the systemic crisis of world capitalism, will be imposed on Sri Lankan workers and the rural poor.

The Sri Lankan ministry of finance has already stated that the government will implement the “economic reform policies” dictated by the International Monetary Fund. This austerity program includes the privatisation, or “commercialisation,” of state-owned corporations and departments, the slashing of limited welfare subsidies, and further cuts in public education and health.

Rajapakse referred to the finance ministry’s recent tax concessions to the corporate sector and praised his former president brother’s so-called development program to make the country a hub for international trade, investment and tourism.

Turning to international relations, he told parliament that Sri Lanka had recently become the focus of “considerable attention” in global geopolitics. His government, he insisted, would “follow a neutral foreign policy, never giving up our independence.”

SLPP leaders employed similar rhetoric during the presidential election. Their supporters criticised the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s preparation to sign the Millennium Challenge Corporation Agreement (MCC) with the United States, and the existing Access and Cross Service Agreement and Status of Forces with Washington.

While this posturing was used to exploit deep-seated anti-imperialist sentiments among the masses, the rhetoric ended after the election. The new government has appointed a committee to examine the “merits” of the MCC. Amidst deepening tensions between the US, Russia and China, Colombo’s ruling elite is cautious not to do anything to annoy Washington.

Rajapakse, who hopes to rapidly push forward with his

reactionary agenda, has encountered little resistance from the so-called opposition.

After an extended crisis, the UNP has appointed its defeated presidential candidate, Sajith Premadasa, as parliamentary opposition leader. Speaking during the debate on the president’s speech, Premadasa said that “all 225 members of parliament will vote in your favour if you are keen to implement your progressive pledges. We will act as a modern opposition and support the government’s good deeds.”

Bimal Ratnayake, a JVP member of parliament, likewise told the media that his party would support all “good actions” of the government.

M.A. Sumanthiran, a leading TNA parliamentarian, appealed to President Rajapakse to consider Sri Lanka a “pluralistic” society, and voiced his support for a new constitution.

Though the Sri Lankan opposition parliamentary parties have tactical differences with the new Rajapakse regime, they are unified in their determination to build up the state apparatus against the working class.

Like his counterparts around the world, Rajapakse, who faces a growing upsurge of the working class, is rapidly moving towards autocratic forms of rule. He is preparing for the upcoming general election, hoping this will strengthen his SLPP government and open the way for the imposition of his anti-democratic agenda.

Workers cannot fight the escalating government assaults on their social rights and living standards by appealing to the “opposition” capitalist parties promoted by the pseudo-lefts and the trade unions. They must secure their class independence from every faction of the capitalist elite and rally the rural poor and youth to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government, based on socialist policies. This struggle can only be waged by uniting with the international working class, as part of the fight for world socialism.

We urge workers and youth to join this fight and attend Socialist Equality Party’s public meeting, on Sunday, January 12, in the Colombo Public Library Auditorium at 3 p.m., to discuss this perspective.



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