

Sri Lankan president dissolves parliament, calls national election

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Using his executive powers, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse dissolved parliament on Monday night, six months before its term ended, and announced the next general election for April 25.

The declared aim of Rajapakse and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) is to win a two-thirds parliamentary majority, in order to change the constitution and strengthen presidential executive powers.

Addressing selected media heads yesterday, Rajapakse claimed that the current presidential powers were “adverse to the country’s stability” and criticised the 19th Amendment to the constitution, which limits the president’s executive authority. He claimed that he could not “fulfil the people’s expectations” without expanded powers.

The previous “unity” government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe introduced the 19th Amendment in order to curtail certain presidential powers.

These included a two-term limit; bans on the president dissolving parliament until it has served at least four-and-half years of its five-year term; the appointment of cabinet members only in consultation with the prime minister; appointment of top judges and high officials through independent commissions; and banning the president from holding a cabinet portfolio. Sirisena, however, dropped his election promise to abolish the executive presidency.

Rajapakse wants removal of these restrictions and the full restoration of the president’s executive powers, and more.

Addressing an Independence Day ceremony on February 4, he said: “I do not envisage public officials, lawmakers or the judiciary, impeding my implementation of this commitment [to the people]”—i.e., parliament and the judiciary must act as pliant instruments of a presidential dictatorship.

Rajapakse won last November’s presidential election not because of popular support but by exploiting mass opposition to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s ruthless implementation of the International Monetary Fund’s austerity program.

During the elections, pseudo-left groups and the Tamil parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), promoted Sajith Premadasa, presidential candidate of the ruling right-wing United National Party (UNP), as a “lesser evil.” This ensured that Rajapakse gained mass protest votes against the previous government.

Rajapakse and his SLPP election campaign centred on anti-Muslim rhetoric, anti-Tamil propaganda and appeals to the military and extremist Sinhala and Buddhist groups. Rajapakse accused the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government of “weakening” the military and intelligence apparatus and called for the strengthening of “national security.”

Straight after the election, Rajapakse demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, who readily acquiesced, and then appointed his older brother and SLPP leader Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister of a minority regime.

The new Rajapakse regime has quickly moved to militarise the administration. It has appointed military officers to key government positions, including retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as defence secretary. The establishment parliamentary parties have not opposed these appointments.

In the run-up to the April 25 general election, Rajapakse and the SLPP will step up their communalist propaganda and shore up its support from the military.

In line with these efforts, the Rajapakse government has announced that it has withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council resolution that was passed in October 2015. It claims that the resolution undermines national security as it threatens the Sri Lankan military with investigations into the war crimes that were committed during the final stages of the war to suppress the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In the months since President Rajapakse came to power, his administration has been confronted with a wave of strikes and protests by the tea plantations workers, Kahatagaha mine workers and a one-day national strike by over 200,000 teachers. About 15,000 workers sacked by the

new government from various departments and state-owned corporations are also maintaining protests in Colombo to demand reinstatement.

These actions are a continuation of the mass opposition that developed under the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration.

Sirisena became president after a US-orchestrated regime-change operation to oust Mahinda Rajapakse when he was president. Washington wanted Mahinda Rajapakse removed because of his government's close relations with Beijing and to bring Sri Lanka back into line with America's geo-strategic military buildup against China.

While the incoming Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration reoriented Sri Lanka's foreign policy towards the US and its ally, India, the new government's IMF-dictated austerity measures produced widespread social opposition.

The mass anger was expressed in a distorted form in the electoral victory of the SLPP in the February 2018 local elections and was followed the largest wave of strikes and protests by Sri Lankan workers since a public sector general strike in 1980. This eruption produced sharp divisions within the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration.

Sirisena responded with a political coup, removing Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replacing him with Mahinda Rajapakse. The coup failed, however, because Washington was hostile to any return of Rajapakse and the Supreme Court ruled Sirisena's dissolution of parliament unconstitutional.

The reactionary anti-working class character of all factions of Sri Lanka's ruling elite was revealed by the response to the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist bombings. While evidence points to the fact that the intelligence apparatus and political leaders, including President Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Mahinda Rajapakse, were warned in advance of the attacks, they allowed them to occur, exploiting them to strengthen the repressive state apparatus and whip up anti-Muslim chauvinism.

Yesterday, at the same meeting, Rajapakse declared that Sri Lanka's "main problem is economic development" and his administration would focus on this issue. This is code for unleashing sharp social attacks to impose the burden of Sri Lanka's economic decline and mounting debt crisis on workers and the poor.

Sirisena's remaining fraction of the SLFP and its allies have established a political alliance with the SLPP to contest the election. A majority of SLFP parliamentarians and local organisers have joined the SLPP.

The opposition UNP has been split down the middle. Its leader Wickremesinghe and the party "old guard" oppose handing over the leadership to deputy leader Sajith

Premadasa. A majority of former UNP MPs and local leaders, however, have sided with Premadasa. With the UNP widely discredited, these MPs calculate that Premadasa, who is close to a section of the Buddhist establishment, can effectively mount a Sinhala communalist election campaign.

Premadasa recently declared that if his party won a parliamentary majority he would work with Rajapakse, an indication that he agrees with the president's shift toward dictatorial forms of rule.

The TNA, the main alliance of several Tamil party groups, is also discredited amongst the Tamil masses over its reactionary and unprincipled manoeuvres.

In 2015, the TNA supported the US regime-change to remove Rajapakse and functioned as a de facto partner of Colombo and the ongoing military occupation, suppression of any war crime investigations and austerity. The TELO and EPRLF, former constituent members of the TNA, have aligned themselves with former Northern Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran's Tamil People's Alliance, which is yet another nationalist trap to derail Tamil workers and poor.

Every faction of the ruling class and its fake-left allies are terrified by the developing social opposition in Sri Lanka as part of struggles of the international working class.

The pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party has sided with the Wickremesinghe faction of the UNP whilst the political activities of the United Socialist Party and the Frontline Socialist Party are focused on demanding Rajapakse to fulfil his election promises. These formations are hostile to any independent movement of the working class on a socialist program.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, will run candidates in three districts—Colombo, Nuwara Eliya and Jaffna—in the April 25 election. The party's intervention will be based on an international socialist program against imperialist war, social inequality and dictatorship. The SEP will issue a detailed announcement and election manifesto in the coming days.



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