

Sri Lankan president militarises administration to stop strikes and civil unrest

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Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse is rapidly militarising the state administration through the appointment of retired armed forces officers to key posts. Promoted into the higher ranks during the final stage of the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), these senior officers are close associates of the president.

Rajapakse's new appointments are in preparation for a confrontation with the working class. This was spelled out by Sri Lanka's new defence secretary, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, at recent meeting of the so-called Social Media Professional Forum.

The main challenges facing the new government, Gunaratne declared, were "radicalisation, the re-emergence of terrorism, separatism, religious extremism, organised crime, drug-trafficking, and internal disturbances, such as strikes."

The government, he continued, had merged "military and civil capabilities through 'Integrated Contingency Planning' to enable the military to work alongside civilian first-responders in order to mitigate the impact of disaster situations, workers' strikes and civil unrest, and take the lead if necessary." These actions, he claimed, are to "ensure the country's national security."

Rajapakse came to power amidst a rising wave of working-class strikes and anti-governments protests by the rural poor, young people and the victims of the decades-long communal war against the LTTE. The new government, which faces a deepening economic crisis, mounting international debt, and ongoing social opposition, is expanding Sri Lanka's repressive state machine to crush future strikes and other forms of social unrest.

After being appointed defence secretary, Gunaratne

was made chairman of the Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, a civil sector agency that regulates all internet, electronic communications and mobile services.

Last December, former Army Commander Major General Daya Ratnayake was made chairman of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority, which manages most of the country's major sea ports and is a key revenue earner. The authority employs thousands of people, including some of the militant sections of the working class.

Over the past three years the ports sector has been shaken by a powerful wave of workers' struggles in opposition to the former Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's privatisation policies. The new Rajapakse government has made clear that it is determined to resume Colombo's privatisation agenda and in particular expedite a Sirisena-Wickremesinghe agreement with India and Japan to privatise Colombo Port's Eastern Terminal.

On February 19, retired Major General Vijitha Ravipriya was appointed director general of the Sri Lanka Customs Department, another key government revenue collector. The appointment violated the previously existing seniority-based promotion procedures in the department.

In addition to the appointment of ex-military officers into civil sector positions, the government has begun using the military in administrative roles. From February 24, for example, Sri Lanka Corps Military Police personnel and their cars and motorbikes have been deployed to assist the Colombo City Traffic Division. The joint program will be supervised by the Army Commander Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva. He told media that the navy and air force will also be used for traffic control in heavily congested traffic areas.

Military personnel are also being used to check the family backgrounds of unemployed graduates and diploma holders applying for jobs. Military officers are now involved in district secretariat panels interviewing graduates and diploma holders applying for new a job-creation program initiated by the new government. According to reports, military officers are keeping separate files of all those applying for jobs.

In addition, the police—generally considered a civil service, and part of the Ministry of Law and Order—now operate under the defence ministry.

In late February, criminal investigations into terrorist activities, currently conducted by the Criminal Investigation Division of the police, now come under a special task force headed by Army Intelligence Service director, Major General Jagath Alwis, who will report directly to Gunaratne. This arrangement interferes with existing legal procedures in which the police are supposed to conduct all criminal investigations in Sri Lanka.

The government, with military assistance, has also launched a new program to buy this season's rice harvest. The purported intent of the program is to undercut the middlemen who control the price of rice. The secretary to the ministry of finance persuaded the state-owned banks to pump money into the program, claiming that its success would be assured by the army's involvement.

Ex-military officers appointed to civil sector posts have also begun openly expressing their hostility to fundamental democratic rights. Defence Secretary Gunaratne is on record saying said that the government "will not allow any compromising of national security in the name of protecting democracy and reconciliation."

There are signs that the Rajapakse government's militarisation is sparking resistance amongst workers. Strong opposition was expressed in the customs department over the appointment of Major General Ravipriya as director general. The discontent was temporarily quelled following an agreement between President Rajapakse and the Customs Superintendents Union that Ravipriya will only hold the position for two years, after which it will be held by a tenured officer of the customs department.

While the mainstream media and the opposition political parties are either silent or downplay the

government's militarisation of the state administration, there is simmering anger among workers and the public over the government's authoritarian measures, especially under conditions of skyrocketing living costs and the undermining of public services.

From the outset of Colombo's brutal war against the LTTE, which began in 1983, successive Sri Lankan governments have boosted the military, expanded its personnel to about 300,000 and systemically increased defence spending. Last year, its annual budget was lifted to 393 billion rupees (\$US2.2 billion) or around 2.6 percent of GDP. The military, which is increasingly engaged in economic activities such as farming and maintaining hotels, has become a major factor determining Sri Lankan political affairs.

The militarisation of Sri Lanka is part of the escalating moves towards the dismantling democracy and rapid development of dictatorial forms of rule. This is a sharp warning to the working class and not an isolated phenomenon. Ruling elites around the world, amidst a deepening crisis of capitalism and the rising resistance of the working class, are fast shifting towards authoritarian measures, dictatorship and fascism.



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