

TNA offers a “democratic” veneer to Sri Lankan president’s coronavirus emergency powers

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Leading Tamil National Alliance (TNA) official M. A. Sumanthiran told the *Daily Mirror* last week that the coronavirus pandemic meant Sri Lankans “must abandon the idea of a general election anytime soon.”

In the course of his extended April 6 interview with the English-language daily, Sumanthiran, a former Jaffna District parliamentarian, urged President Gotabaya Rajapakse to reconvene parliament. Sumanthiran’s call was not aimed at challenging the government, but providing a rubber-stamp to the recent authoritarian measures imposed by the president.

Under the cover of suppressing COVID-19, Rajapakse has deployed the military and arrested tens of thousands as “curfew violators.”

On March 2, the president dissolved parliament, six months before its term officially ended, and announced, amid the surging pandemic, that the general election would be held on April 25. Rajapakse hoped to win a parliamentary majority for his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party so it could rewrite the constitution and scrap existing legal barriers to authoritarian methods of rule.

While the crisis forced the postponement of the election, Rajapakse continues to use executive powers, in violation of existing laws, to implement a range of authoritarian measures and further expand the militarisation of his administration.

Rajapakse has also made clear that while he is not ready to reconvene parliament, his administration still wants to hold the election next month. The government has signalled that prior to a ballot, it will seek to push people back to work without proper protection from COVID-19, in line with similar measures in Europe, the US and elsewhere.

Since March 18, Sri Lanka has been under a national curfew, with periods of brief respite in some districts. While the lockdown is to prevent the virus spreading, there is no serious government plan to distribute day-to-day essentials to workers and the poor who now face incredible hardship.

Every day the Sri Lankan police boast about the thousands of curfew violators its officers have arrested. On Wednesday, the number arrested rose to over 28,000.

Police spokesman Ajith Rohana has told the media that all those arrested would be sent to quarantine centres for 14 days—an arbitrary punishment—after which police will file cases against them.

According to Sumanthiran’s line of argument, these mass arrests and other anti-democratic policies would be allowed if the government gazetted laws related to curfews and calling out the military and presented them to a reconvened parliament.

In an April 8 interview with the Tamil-language *Veerakesari*, Sumanthiran referred to Rajapakse’s mobilisation of the military and cautioned that the “executive should not act arbitrarily.” Having the army controlling “the situation must be prevented,” he said, but added that this could not be completely avoided “in the context of today.”

In fact, Rajapakse, continuing actions taken by the previous president, is mobilising members of the armed forces every month “for the maintenance of public order” throughout the country and its territorial waters. The military personnel involved in these exercises have police powers to arrest people without a warrant.

Sumanthiran has insisted that the reconvening of parliament could involve about 20 MPs or, if necessary, consist of a teleconference of all 225 MPs who could pass laws and even make constitutional changes with a two-thirds majority.

Rajapakse has little concern for the TNA’s democratic gestures and continues elevating retired senior armed forces officers into key government posts. This includes the recent appointment of Army Commander Lt. General Shavendra Silva as head of the National Centre for Prevention of Coronavirus.

Military intelligence and police officers are conducting

threatening operations to “trace” those infected with the coronavirus. Distribution of limited government relief, particularly in the North and East of the country, is also being supervised by the security forces.

Police are also involved in a crackdown against anyone on social media criticising the government’s inadequate response to the pandemic. This operation, which is being stepped up, has seen 16 people arrested over their Facebook postings.

Neither the TNA, nor any other Sri Lankan opposition party has challenged these arbitrary measures, but are providing political cover for Rajapakse’s rapid moves towards a presidential dictatorship.

Sumanthiran noted in his *Daily Mirror* interview that the lockdown has drastically impacted on the masses “who are struggling to survive” and stated that “the situation in the North and the East is precarious... Some people are nearing starvation.”

In the same breath, however, he claimed that “subsequent actions by the government have been fairly satisfactory.” The only problem with the government’s so-called relief measures, he said, is that they are “not balanced.”

Workers and the poor in the North and East, whose lives have been devastated by Colombo’s three-decade civil war and the ongoing military occupation, face a social catastrophe. Recent media reports indicate that villages in both regions, like their counterparts in other parts of the country, have not received the government’s so-called “relief packages.” People are currently being arrested as they search for food or firewood for cooking.

Like every other capitalist party in Sri Lanka, the TNA is nervous about mounting political discontent. Tens of thousands of workers have lost their jobs; frontline health workers have denounced the lack of protective gear, and workers and the poor are increasingly shocked by the surging global death toll from the pandemic.

Over the past two years, Sri Lankan workers have united across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim divisions in a series of strikes and protests against government-imposed International Monetary Fund austerity measures.

The growing mass movement created divisions within the establishment and a political collapse of the Maithripala Sirisena-Ranil Wickremesinghe government. Rajapakse came to power late last year by exploiting the popular opposition and making various bogus social promises to working people while assuring the ruling elite that his regime would establish “strong government.”

As the pandemic crisis worsened, the TNA and every other parliamentary party met twice with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse—the president’s older brother—and pledged their support to the government.

Sumanthiran’s recent interviews are yet another exposure of the rightward shift of the TNA and other Tamil bourgeois parties, who support US imperialism’s war preparations against China.

In 2015, the TNA backed the US-orchestrated regime change to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse and install Maithripala Sirisena. It functioned as a de-facto partner of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration and endorsed its integration of the Sri Lankan military with US Pacific Command, along with the imposition of an IMF austerity program and the suppression of any inquiry into the military’s war crimes against the Tamil population.

Following last year’s Easter Sunday bomb attacks by an Islamic terrorist group, the TNA rushed to support former President Sirisena’s introduction of draconian emergency laws and its nationwide “anti-terror” deployment of the military.

After Rajapakse came to power, the TNA leadership similarly pledged to work with him in return for a power-sharing arrangement with the Tamil elite.

The response of the TNA and other Tamil nationalist parties to the coronavirus pandemic makes clear that these organisations do not represent the interests of the Tamil masses.

Tamil workers must reject these right-wing pro-imperialist parties and unite across ethnic lines with their class brothers in Sri Lanka and internationally to defend their democratic and social rights on the basis of socialist policies.

This is the program that the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International fight for. We urge all working people and youth to study the SEPs policies and read the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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