

Is Sri Lankan President Rajapakse plotting a coup under cover of anti-pandemic measures?

K. Ratnayake
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Amid a profound economic and political crisis, Sri Lanka's minority government has taken a series of sinister, authoritarian steps in conjunction with the military that indicate a coup d'état could be in preparation.

At the very least, the government is using the COVID-19 pandemic as the pretext to mount a power grab, insert the military even more fully into the running of the state, and run roughshod over working people's democratic rights—all in flagrant violation of democratic-constitutional norms.

In so doing, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his prime minister and brother, the former President Mahinda Rajapakse, are not simply accruing more power at the expense of their bourgeois opponents. Their real and principal target is the working class.

Even prior to the pandemic and consequent global economic collapse, Sri Lanka's economy was in profound crisis. During the last two years of the previous United National Party (UNP)-led government, which President Gotabhaya Rajapakse promptly sacked after winning last November's election, there was a powerful wave of protests and strikes against its brutal International Monetary Fund-imposed austerity measures.

Early Monday morning, the Rajapakse government had been slated to lift a weeks-long anti-coronavirus shutdown in most of the country. Instead, with virtually no warning, it ordered an even more draconian 24-hour all-island curfew till 5 a.m. Tuesday. The reason given was that it would facilitate the return to their respective camps of military personnel who had been on leave.

Prior to the curfew announcement, the defence secretary, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, had issued a notice cancelling leave for members of all three armed forces and ordered all troops to report to their respective officers in charge.

Imposing a 24-hour all-island curfew to facilitate military deployments is without precedent in Sri Lanka. Not even during the Sri Lankan state's almost three-decade civil war against the Tamil minority was such a step taken.

Also in apparent contradiction with Gunaratne's original order, it soon emerged that rather than returning to their normal camps, many of the soldiers are to be deployed to the national capital, Colombo. There they are to be housed in schools, including five of the city's larger ones.

No official explanation has yet been given for the deployment. However, in an interview early last week, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse spoke about deploying the military in Colombo as part of what he called the "wartime" measures needed to fight the

coronavirus pandemic, which thus far has officially claimed seven lives in Sri Lanka amid almost 600 confirmed COVID-19 cases.

In another unusual move, the military has taken over the external security of the parliament, according to defence spokesman Brigadier Chandana Wickremesinghe. Parliament administration has said that 120 policemen were removed from the security detail and replaced with troops, purportedly because the police were needed to help with enforcing the anti-coronavirus lockdown, which is to remain in force in Colombo until May 4.

Rajapakse won the election last November by making a calibrated and demagogic appeal to mass opposition to the UNP-led government's austerity, on the one hand, and, on the other, by rallying support from big business by casting himself as a Sinhalese-Buddhist "strongman" who could force through unpopular measures.

A former colonel, Rajapakse has cultivated close ties to the military and a reputation for ruthlessness. He served as his brother's defence secretary in the final stages of the civil war, which ended in 2009 in the state-ordered military slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians. Moreover, during this period, under draconian Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism law, the country's security forces unleashed state repression across the island against workers, political opponent and journalists.

Within days of winning the presidency, Gotabhaya Rajapakse shunted aside the UNP government and installed his brother as prime minister. He then kept parliament largely in abeyance, because the new government lacked a parliamentary majority, until March 2, when he gained the constitutional right to call an early election.

His stated aim is to secure a two-thirds majority in parliament in a snap poll, held before the government is compelled to impose a new and even more draconian round of austerity measures. He wants to push through constitutional changes giving himself, as executive president, sweeping, arbitrary powers.

Rajapakse's anti-democratic machinations have become even more pronounced with the outbreak of the pandemic.

With the support of the military and the caretaker government headed by his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, he has used presidential decrees to arrogate exceptional power, even as the elections have been postponed, initially indefinitely and now tentatively to June 20.

Since March 20, the Western Province, Puttalam in the north-

west and the Jaffna district in the war-ravaged north have been under lockdown, or, in Sri Lankan parlance, “curfew.” In other areas, the lockdown/curfew has been relaxed intermittently.

The lockdown is patently illegal. To conform with Sri Lankan law, it would have to be publicised by a gazette notification or declared under emergency laws. If it was implemented through gazette notification, this would have to be presented to parliament. Similarly, a declaration of emergency must be approved by parliament.

But Rajapakse, exploiting the pandemic to seize new powers, has simply ignored the law, and curtly dismissed opposition appeals for the dissolved parliament to be recalled.

Police have arrested some 40,000 persons for failing to respect the illegally-imposed lockdown and confiscated more than 10,000 vehicles belonging to them. None of the opposition parties or media has challenged these actions.

After his election, Rajapakse filled many key posts with senior military officers. Following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, he has further militarised the administration. Army Commander Lt. General Shavendra Silva has been appointed to head the National Centre for Prevention of COVID-19. Retired Air Marshal Roshan Gunatilake has been appointed governor of the Western Province.

While imposing repressive new powers over the population in the name of fighting the highly contagious and potentially lethal coronavirus, the Rajapakse government has shown callous disregard for the health and well-being of Sri Lanka’s workers and toilers.

During the past two months, no mass testing has been conducted, as repeatedly urged for all countries by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Health workers lack proper protective equipment, and while the government found billions of rupees to help bail out big business, no significant funds have been allocated to modernise and strengthen the dilapidated health service.

The lockdown was imposed hastily and without plans to ensure that workers and the rural poor would be provided food and other essentials, including medicine. Hundreds of thousands of daily wage workers have lost their jobs and now find themselves without any means of support.

Behind Rajapakse’s turn to authoritarian methods of rule lies fear of, and preparation for, a headlong conflict with the working class.

The global economic crisis triggered by the pandemic has cut off the Sri Lankan ruling elite’s main foreign exchange earners—the tourism and garment industries—while leading to a plummet in remittances from overseas migrant workers.

Desperate to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the working class, the Rajapakse government, like its counterparts in India, the US and Europe, has moved aggressively to reopen the economy. Fourteen Free Trade Zones (FTZs) have already been reopened. At the same time, Rajapakse has sanctioned big business calls for job, wage and pension cuts, saying, “the head of each [private] organisation has the freedom to decide who should report to work and the number of employees.”

Workers must beware. Rajapakse has talked of deploying troops to Colombo to impose “wartime”-like measures. “I have instructed

the defence secretary,” he boasted last week, “to ensure that the situation remains under control, as it was during the war, and ensure that people... act in a disciplined manner.” While today that may take the form of their imposing a lockdown that inordinately punishes the poor, on the morrow their deployment may serve to enforce a back-to-work under dramatically inferior conditions for working people.

Yesterday, many of the opposition parties appealed to President Rajapakse to reconvene parliament to defuse the political-constitutional crisis provoked by his illegal actions. They pledged to forego any attempt to unseat the minority government and offered to provide it “responsible cooperation.”

Those making this appeal included the UNP, its breakaway group Samagi Jana Balavegaya, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Tamil National Alliance, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the parties of the plantation trade unions.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) did not join in this appeal, but it has twice participated, along with the above parties, in all-party meetings and has praised the government’s actions to “prevent [the] coronavirus pandemic,” thereby strengthening Rajapakse and his anti-democratic actions.

These parties have only minor tactical differences with the Rajapakses’ rule. While they may on occasion prattle about democratic rights, they are all steeped in chauvinism, are complicit in the imposition of IMF austerity, and most are outspoken advocates of bringing Sri Lanka four-square behind US imperialism’s anti-China war drive.

The developments in Sri Lanka must serve as a sharp warning to workers, not only on the island, but all over the world. Under the cover of necessary measures to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, the capitalist ruling elites are attacking democratic rights, seizing draconian powers and militarising society.

Workers in Sri Lanka must intervene independently in this crisis, in opposition to all the rival bourgeois factions, so as to defend their lives and livelihoods and secure their basic social and democratic rights. Action committees must be built in every workplace to mobilise the political and industrial strength of the working class and rally the rural poor against capitalist reaction, and to prosecute the struggle for a workers and peasants’ government committed to socialist policies and the fight for international socialism.



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