

Sri Lanka's pseudo-left FSP and its phony defence of democracy

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The political, economic and social crisis accelerated in Sri Lanka by global coronavirus pandemic has exposed the pro-capitalist nature of pseudo-left groups in the country, including the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

On April 18, FSP general secretary Kumar Gunaratnam wrote to Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the brother of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, urging him to “reconvene” the dissolved parliament to prevent militarisation and dictatorship. This appeal followed another letter to the prime minister on March 24 promising his party’s support for the government’s so-called efforts in “fighting the COVID-19,” despite “shortcomings.”

The FSP was formed in 2012 by a break-away faction of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a party mired in Sinhala communalism that has abandoned any socialist pretensions and is thoroughly integrated into the Colombo political establishment. Despite its criticisms of the JVP, the FSP has nothing do with genuine socialism and has not politically broken from the JVP.

Gunaratnam’s latest letter referred to the President Rajapakse’s decision to lift the lockdown and push for early elections and then noted that there is not the “democratic environment necessary for holding a free and fair election.” Instead, he called on the prime minister to take up his party’s proposal for the “postponement of the election and reconvening the parliament.”

The letter declared that “the anti-democratic practices of giving priority to the army chief, over-estimating the army and concentrating more powers in the hands of the President is thoroughly harmful.” It absurdly advises the prime minister to control the anti-democratic tendencies of his brother by reconvening the parliament.

It is a dangerous illusion that the drive to dictatorship can be prevented by “reconvening the parliament.”

Gotabhaya Rajapakse has repeatedly declared that he will call an early election to obtain a two-thirds parliamentary majority in order to rewrite the constitution, enabling him to use the full autocratic powers of the executive presidency.

Since coming to power last November, the president has inserted retired generals in key positions of the state, including the powerful post of defence secretary. He has used the pandemic to accelerate this process, appointing the Army Commander as the head of National Operation Center for Prevention of COVID-19 and retired Air Marshal Roshan Gunatilake as the governor of Western Province.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse has deployed the intelligence apparatus in Colombo. Two weeks ago, he also ordered the deployment of large number of forces in the capital in what could be the preparation for a coup to preempt the working-class opposition against major attacks on jobs, wages and other hard-won rights.

The threat of dictatorship in Sri Lanka is another expression of extreme right-wing developments globally. After allowing the pandemic to kill hundreds of thousands of people with millions more thrown into joblessness and poverty, governments around the world—including in the US, Europe and India—are pushing workers back to work and, at the same time, increasingly turning to dictatorial methods of rule.

The FSP proposes to counter the rapid shift towards dictatorship in Sri Lanka by reconvening parliament. Significantly the discredited, bourgeois opposition parties are making the same appeal to the president, along with a promise to provide him with unconditional support if parliament is reconvened.

Who would be in a reconvened parliament? As the government is in a minority, the opposition parties would dominate, including: the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of former President Maithripala Sirisena (which is now backing Rajapakse), the United National Party (UNP), the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), several Muslim parties and the JVP.

These parties have a long record of using anti-democratic methods. While in power UNP and SLFP-led governments waged a 30-year war against country’s Tamil minority and did not hesitate to use draconian emergency powers and the military to suppress working-class struggles.

FSP is cynically sowing illusions that these opposition parties would halt “anti-democratic tendencies” and the move towards dictatorship.

Despite their tactical differences, the Rajapakse government and the opposition parties fear the eruption of massive social struggles of the working class and rural unrest. The FSP is driven into this camp by the same fears.

Gunaratnam complains that the president is “concentrating powers in his hands.” However, the various fake left groups, including the FSP, are politically responsible for Rajapakse’s elevation into the presidency.

In 2015, these parties, along with various trade unions and the TNA, rallied behind a reactionary campaign led by the UNP to elect Sirisena as president and oust then President Mahinda Rajapakse. In order to exploit the mass anger against Rajapakse’s anti-democratic rule, they promoted Sirisena’s bogus campaign for “good governance” and better living conditions.

These illusions were shattered as the crisis-ridden Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government turned to the International Monetary Fund and unleashed its austerity program, fuelling a series of strikes and protests. The FSP and other pseudo-left groups lined up with the unions to scuttle these struggles by limiting them to futile protests. They vehemently opposed the efforts of the Socialist Equality Party

(SEP) to mobilise workers independently against the attacks of the government and the capitalist class on the basis of socialist policies.

In last year's presidential election, the "left" groups, including the FSP, along with many unions and the TNA, supported Sajith Premadasa, candidate of the ruling UNP which had unleashed attacks on workers and the poor. As a result, Gotabhaya Rajapakse was able to posture as the only opposition to the discredited government and win the election by making phony promises to help workers and the poor while pledging a "strong government" for big business.

The FSP has appealed to the Rajapakse regime to provide facilities for health workers and resources for health services, relief for those affected by lockdown and assistance for migrant workers. It has also urged that the government create a fund from "billionaire companies earning super-profits to provide relief" for the people.

These are not demands to mobilise workers against the government and the capitalist system that it defends but rather appeals to the very regime that is pouring billions of rupees in aid into big business while devoting a pittance to relief measures and starving the health services of funds.

Last month the FSP sent one of its leaders, Duminda Nagamuva, who heads the bogus "Centre for Workers Struggles," to meet Labour Minister Dinesh Gunawardena to discuss "workers problems."

The meeting had nothing to do with assisting workers but was to offer the FSP's services in containing the growing anger in the working class. Significantly the government gave Nagamuva an audience.

Emerging from the discussion, Nagamuva jubilantly declared told that he "discussed wages, state and private sector job problems and estate workers problems [with the minister]. The minister, Nagamuva claimed, "agreed to intervene against job cuts" and "to provide relief to estate workers and provide solutions to the problems of unemployed graduates."

To give credence to these empty promises is to throw dust in the eyes of workers. The government is in a desperate economic crisis and will seek to impose the burden on the working class using police-state measures if necessary.

Workers are increasingly aware that they cannot defend their social and democratic rights or their very lives within capitalist system. Anger is mounting among the rural and urban poor who are facing intolerable hardships.

However, the FSP is peddling the illusion that the capitalist economy can somehow be revived and reformed. In a May 1 comment on Facebook, FSP leader Pubudu Jayagoda declared that the government had agreed not to cut jobs or wages. "By next month the economy can be revived to some extent. This [workers' wage] problem prevails only for March and April."

Jayagoda's statements speak volumes. He accepts capitalism as the only viable system and expresses confidence in its survival even in the midst of its worst crisis since the 1930s. In every country, the ruling classes are gearing up for class war against the working class while the major powers, with the US in the forefront, prepare for wars against their rivals.

The FSP's occasional socialist phrase-mongering serves an underhand purpose. Gunaratnam recently pompously declared that the COVID-19 pandemic had created a "worldwide crisis and that there is no solution within the capitalist system ... The answer is socialism and communism." He then added, however, that "party's message is that we must build a movement uniting progressive and left forces in this country and internationally."

Who are these so-called progressive and left forces? Tellingly the FSP is an enthusiastic admirer of Syriza in Greece and PODEMOS in Spain. In January 2015, the FSP wrote in its newspaper *Janarala*: "If the Syriza wins the upcoming election, it would help to strengthen the PODEMOS party's position in Spain. This would create a left-wing wave in Europe and would make powerful those left-oriented organisations such as Sinn Fein in Ireland, Die Linke in Germany."

When Syriza won the Greece national election in 2015, it rapidly tore up all its promises to oppose the austerity demands of the European Union and implemented the most ruthless attacks on the living standards of workers and the poor. PODEMOS is currently in a coalition government with the right-wing Socialist Party and imposing the burden of the pandemic on the working class.

The FSP's support for these bourgeois formations is a warning of what it is being planned in Sri Lanka where it is seeking to create a similar "left" front with various trade unions, other pseudo-left parties, and non-government organisations. Such a front would function like Syriza and PODEMOS to above all prevent a struggle by the working class against the capitalist system while helping to impose the austerity measures demanded by finance capital.

The working class can defend its social and democratic rights from the onslaught by the government and big business only by organising independently of all factions of the capitalist class and their pseudo-left hangers-on.

The SEP calls on workers to build independent action committees in every workplace and neighbourhood, and to rally young people and rural poor to oppose these attacks on the basis of the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. This struggle can only be waged as part of the global fight of the working class for world socialist revolution.

The Rajapakse government is seeking to drive the working class back to work in unsafe conditions, and at the cost of many lives, in order to save the capitalist economy. A workers' and peasants' government would repudiate all foreign loans, seize the major industries, large estates and banks and place them under the democratic control of the working class and reorganise the economy rationally for the benefit of the majority of society, not the wealthy few.

Only the SEP fights for this socialist alternative. Fake lefts, such as the FSP, who masquerade as socialists but defend capitalism, should be rejected. Above all, we call for workers and youth to join the SEP and build it as the necessary revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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