After the Sri Lankan election, president moves towards dictatorial rule

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has intensified steps towards dictatorial rule after the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) won nearly a two-thirds majority in the August 5 general election. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on the working class to prepare to defend their democratic and social rights by fighting for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

The president formed a government on August 12 in which he and his brother, former president Mahinda Rajapakse, hold many of the key levers of power. Gotabhaya Rajapakse has appointed himself as defence minister, in direct violation of the constitution that bars the president from holding a ministerial post. He is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces. His brother has been installed as prime minister as well as finance minister and two other ministerial posts.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse has retained retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as the secretary to the defence ministry, which now has been put in charge of the internal security ministry controlling the police and associated institutions previously considered civilian affairs. Jayanath Colambage, a retired admiral, and a director from a pro-US think tank, the Pathfinder Foundation, has been appointed as the secretary to the ministry of foreign affairs.

Rajapakse, himself a military man, has key ministries and institutions under in-service and retired senior military officers associated with him during the bloody civil war that ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). These moves are to consolidate the military as the principal base of support for his presidential dictatorship.

Rajapakse is rapidly seeking to make constitutional changes. During the election, his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) called for the abolition of the 19th Constitutional Amendment that limited some of the president's powers. Last week the cabinet approved a proposal to replace it with a new 20th Amendment.

Rajapakse, however, is planning to go far further. In his policy statement to the new parliament last Thursday, he declared: "After that [abolishing the 19th amendment], all of us will get together to formulate a new constitution suitable for the country. In this, the priority will be given to the concept of one country, one law for all the people."

While he did not explain the content of his proposed "new constitution," it will vastly increase the executive powers of the president. His reference to "one country, one law" is the communal slogan of the SLPP and its Sinhala supremacist allies to oppose any concessions to the democratic rights of the island's Tamil and Muslim communities. It is a reactionary campaign aimed at dividing and weakening the working class.

Taking all these steps together, the Rajapakse government is preparing for a ruthless class war under conditions of a worsening crisis of the entire Colombo establishment.

Despite the president's bogus claims of "victory" over COVID-19, the pandemic, as in every other country, has impacted heavily on the economy, hit working people hard, and has exacerbated political and social tensions.

Sri Lanka's gross domestic product (GDP) is to contract by 1.3 percent this year, its worst performance in 18 years. On average, the government has to find $US4 billion a year until 2024 to pay back huge foreign debts. The treasury has estimated the fiscal deficit will hit 7.5 percent of GDP this year and 8.3 percent in 2021, but is drawing up austerity plans to slash the figure to 5 to 4.5 percent of GDP next year.

Big business, with the backing of the government, has already imposed massive job and wage cuts while increasing workloads over the past three months. More than 400,000 workers have lost jobs in the manufacturing sector alone. Workers are being forced back to work under unsafe conditions. Schools are being reopened exposing teachers and students to the danger of the coronavirus. The rural poor face enormous hardships.

Rajapakse won the presidency last November on a wave of strikes and protests by workers and peasants that began in 2018 against the harsh austerity policies of the previous government of "national unity" led by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The SLPP won the general election this month on the same basis. Such is the widespread disgust with all the establishment parties that nearly one-third of people registered to vote did not do so or spoilt their ballot papers.

Now that the elections are out of the way and the SLPP government has a solid majority, its phony election promises will be rapidly abandoned, setting the stage for a confrontation

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with the working class.

Even before the general election, opposition was emerging to Rajapakse and his minority SLPP government. Some 20,000 workers sacked by his regime in February have been involved in ongoing protests. Also in February, 200,000 teachers held a three-day strike. Numerous struggles have erupted among plantation and health workers.

Just three days before the August 5 elections, 10,000 workers downed tools for two days in Colombo port in protest against privatisation. Two days after the election, hundreds of Colombo Port City workers took part in three days of demonstrations to oppose wage and pay cuts imposed on the pretext of the pandemic. All these struggles united workers across, ethnic lines despite the racist campaign of the ruling party, opposition parties and chauvinist groups to divide them.

The resurgence of the class struggle has accelerated the decay and disintegration of the country's main two political parties—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP)—on which bourgeois rule has rested since formal independence in 1948. Both have split and exist in name only as rump organisations. The parties that succeeded the SLFP and UNP—Rajapakse's SLPP and the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) respectively—are highly unstable formations.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and pseudo-left groups are deeply compromised by their support for the previous Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government and its attacks on the social conditions or working people.

The crisis of the political establishment is being heightened by the US drive to war against China, Russia and Iran which Washington regards as threats to its global dominance. Throughout the region, the US has been engaged in bullying and intrigues to ensure that governments line up against China. Sri Lanka has already been drawn into the geo-political maelstrom with the ousting of Mahinda Rajapakse in 2015 in a US-engineered regime change operation because he was regarded as too close to Beijing.

Fearful of the impending class struggle, the bourgeois parties have increasingly come together to prop up bourgeois rule. The UNP, SJB, TNA, JVP, Muslim parties and plantation unions all attended the all-party meetings called by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse in April. All of them promised to back the president's anti-working class policies that were supposed to fight the pandemic.

On top of this, the opposition parties in parliament last Friday indicated their support for the Rajapakse regime's anti-democratic agenda, by allowing the president's policy statement to be passed without a vote.

In line with the Colombo political establishment, the various pseudo-left groups have also shifted to the right. The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) has aligned itself with the UNP to contest the national elections and cynically whitewashed this right-wing party's long record of attacks on the democratic and social rights of the working class.

The Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) wrote to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse twice in April expressing their support "despite differences" for the government's efforts to combat the pandemic. After the election, FSP leaders Pubudu Jayagoda declared: "We are ready to work with various political parties and movements… left, petty-bourgeois and progressive sections of the right-wing parties… on common issues."

The essential political role of the pseudo-left groups is to keep the working class tied to one or other faction of the ruling class and to block the development of an independent movement of the working class based on a revolutionary socialist program. Militant struggles of workers have been repeatedly dissipated and betrayed by the trade unions with the support of pseudo-lefts.

The Socialist Equality Party warns workers and youth that they face real dangers as the Rajapakse government prepares an all-out offensive against the social and democratic rights of working people. It will not hesitate to use brute force and police-state measures to crush any opposition.

The working class must prepare to fight against this danger with its own independent class strategy.

The first step is a fundamental political break with all the parties of the ruling class, including the pseudo-lefts and the trade unions. The SEP advocates the building of independent action committees in workplaces, plantations and neighbourhoods to fight the threat to posed by the pandemic as well as wage and job cuts and increasing workloads.

These action committees should turn to other sections of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally and seek to rally rural poor, the oppressed and youth against the attacks of the government and big business in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies.

The SEP alone fights for this revolutionary perspective based on socialist internationalism, as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. We oppose all forms of nationalism and chauvinism and fight to unite the working class across ethnic lines.

We urge workers and youth, including all those who cast a class-conscious vote for us in the election, to join and build this party as the necessary revolutionary leadership for the struggles that lie immediately ahead.

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