

Sri Lankan government presses ahead with plans for a presidential dictatorship

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President Gotabhaya Rajapakse is pushing ahead with the reactionary 20th constitutional amendment to the constitution. The Colombo media has reported that Rajapakse wants the amendment ratified in parliament before the government presents its annual budget on November 17.

Last week Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the president's brother, met with several media editors. He brushed aside reports about fissures within the ruling party and declared that the government would win the necessary two-thirds parliamentary majority to change the constitution.

Facing an economic catastrophe exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, President Rajapakse wants new anti-democratic measures to suppress the eruption of mass social struggles by the working class and the poor.

Although the amendment has been presented to parliament, debate cannot begin until the Supreme Court has ruled on petitions opposing the proposed change.

Parliamentary opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), United National Party (UNP), Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and several civil organisations and individuals have filed dozens of petitions in the Supreme Court.

The SJB, UNP and TNA want the Court to rule that the amendment must be endorsed not just by a two-thirds parliamentary majority but a national referendum.

On Tuesday, a Supreme Court bench of five judges concluded hearing arguments for and against the amendment. It is not clear when the Court's ruling on the amendment will be sent to the parliamentary speaker.

The Sri Lankan judiciary is notorious for its political bias. Workers and the poor should have no illusions that this arm of the capitalist state will defend their democratic rights.

The proposed 20th amendment gives sweeping autocratic powers to the president. These include the

appointment or removal of the prime minister and cabinet ministers without consulting the prime minister; the dissolution of parliament within one year of its election; and the appointment of chairmen of commissions on elections, police, human rights, bribery and corruption and finance.

The president, who is also given immunity from litigation, is the appointing authority for top judges and the attorney general. The president may consult with a parliamentary council, which includes the prime minister, parliamentary speaker and the opposition leader, in the appointment of these top officials, but it is not mandatory.

The 20th amendment will repeal the 19th amendment which imposed a two-term limit on presidents; prevented the president from dissolving parliament until after it had served four and half years; established independent commissions to appoint top state officials and judges; and mandated that the appointment of ministers could only occur with the advice of the prime minister. Former President Maithripala Sirisena introduced the 19th amendment, which was enacted in April 2015.

Prior to his election as president, Sirisena had pledged to completely abolish the executive presidential system. Like his predecessors, Sirisena dropped this promise after coming to power and instead put forward the limited 19th amendment.

The executive presidential system, which was introduced in 1978 and is widely hated by Sri Lankan workers and the poor, has been used to suppress democratic and social rights and to conduct Colombo's 30-year brutal communalist civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The Rajapakse government falsely claims that the 20th amendment is needed to boost economic development. President Rajapakse and the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) came to power by exploiting popular opposition to the austerity measures of the previous

government of President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. While falsely pledging to improve social conditions, the SLPP promised big business it would establish “strong and stable” rule.

Rajapakse is rapidly moving to establish autocratic forms of rule. President Rajapakse made this abundantly clear to a meeting in the remote central hills village near Haldummulla on September 25. In a sinister reprimand to state officials for their alleged lethargy, he declared: “Take my orders as circulars; no written circulars are necessary. I am the executive president of this country. What is beyond me?”

Soon after coming to power last November, Rajapakse began militarising his administration, appointing retired and in-service generals into key state positions, including retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as the defence secretary.

The media has reported that some government members have criticised aspects of the 20th amendment. The concerns are from members of the Sinhala-extremist National Freedom Front and the Pure National Heritage Party who contested the last general election in alliance with the SLPP.

These racist organisations oppose any weakening of laws to strip dual citizens of election rights and argue the 20th amendment could open the way for members of the Tamil diaspora to stand in the elections. They have also criticised any removal of the auditor general’s scrutiny of companies where a majority of shares are held by the state and any undermining of the power of the president to pass emergency acts without gazette notifications.

However, these “critics” sat with the prime minister this week when he met with media editors, making clear their allegiance to the government. None of them has opposed the president assuming dictatorial powers.

Legal counsel for the SJB, UNP, TNA and other formations have raised various concerns in the Supreme Court. These include the concentration of power in just one branch of the government; reduction of the auditor-general’s powers and the enabling of dual-citizenship holders to obtain senior posts in the government. While the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) did not petition to the Supreme Court it shares these positions.

While these parties posture about democratic rights, they all have, in one way or another over the decades, backed the repressive executive presidential system. It was the UNP that introduced the autocratic presidential system.

Nor have they at any time opposed President

Rajapakse’s militarisation of the government. All participated in the all-party meetings convened by the prime minister in March and April, expressing support for the president’s military-based response to the coronavirus pandemic.

JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake has downplayed the grave threat of Rajapakse’s dictatorship by dismissing the president as a “tribal leader” and blaming those who voted him into power.

The JVP, which previously backed the autocratic rule of former President Mahinda Rajapakse and then switched to supporting the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, prepared the political ground for Gotabhaya Rajapakse and the SLPP to come to power. The JVP is now calling for a broad front to defeat the 20th amendment. This is nothing other than an alliance with various bourgeois formations to divert any opposition into harmless protests.

The Bar Association of Sri Lanka has expressed fears in ruling circles that the reactionary amendment will produce a mass rebellion. “If the public do not have access to remedy a grievance against the unlawful exercise of powers by an all-powerful President the only remedy will be to take arms against the State,” it declared.

Indeed, the turn to dictatorial methods of rule makes clear that the fight for basic democratic rights is bound up with the political struggle to abolish capitalism.

The Sri Lankan working class must oppose the Rajapakse government’s reactionary agenda as well as its bourgeois “critics” on the basis of its own independent program. Against capitalist dictatorship, it must fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government, rallying the rural poor and oppressed on the basis of a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program. This is the perspective on which the Socialist Equality Party fights and we call upon workers and youth to join us in this struggle.



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