

Sri Lankan parliament boosts president's autocratic powers

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Last Thursday, the Sri Lankan parliament rubber-stamped the 20th Amendment to the constitution, which gives sweeping autocratic powers to the executive presidency—in line with the demands of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who was elected last November.

Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)-led alliance government secured the votes of 156 MPs, or more than the two-thirds majority required in the 225-member parliament, to push through its constitutional amendment.

Several MPs from the Muslim parties, affiliated with Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), the main opposition party, voted for the bill as did a SJB member, who declared that the country needed a "strong president." Rajapakse visited parliament prior to the vote, ensuring that all his party's MPs endorsed the constitutional change.

The amendment repeals the 19th constitutional change introduced in 2015 that limited some of the president's powers. The restrictions included: preventing the president from dissolving parliament until after it had served four and half years; establishing independent commissions to appoint top state officials and judges; and ensuring that the president could appoint or remove ministers only on the advice of the prime minister.

Opposition parliamentary parties, including the SJB, Tamil National Alliance and the United National Party (UNP), and several other groups, filed petitions in the Supreme Court arguing that the 20th amendment nullified the "sovereignty of the people." They called on the court to rule that the amendment had to be endorsed by a referendum, as well as a two-thirds parliamentary majority.

The Supreme Court, however, gave a green light to the amendment, with changes to some of the clauses but keeping intact the amendment's key dictatorial provisions. It ruled that if its proposed changes were adopted, the bill could be passed with just a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Accordingly, the government made some cosmetic modifications and the amendment was put to the vote.

Under the amended constitution, the president is empowered to appoint or remove the prime minister and

cabinet ministers; dissolve parliament after only two and a half years; appoint the chairmen of commissions on elections, police, human rights, bribery and corruption and finance. The president can also appoint top judges and the attorney general.

A parliamentary council, which includes the prime minister, parliamentary speaker and the opposition leader, will be established to offer advice on the appointment of these top officials. The president, however, is not bound by the council's opinion.

Presidential immunity from litigation was proposed in the original 20th amendment, but was dropped after the Supreme Court ruled that this clause required endorsement by a referendum.

Presenting the 20th amendment to parliament, Justice Minister Ali Sabry claimed that there was nothing new, it only reestablished the 1978 constitution. The country had been ruled under that constitution for four decades and so there was nothing to fear, he declared. "Our attempt is to enable the president to exercise people's power once again."

Sabry's claim that the president will be exercising "people's power" is ridiculous. Every constitution since Sri Lankan independence has been an anti-democratic conspiracy by ruling elites against the working class and the poor. He failed to explain why Rajapakse needed such sweeping autocratic powers enshrined in the 1978 constitution today.

The 1978 executive presidential constitution, which was established by the then UNP government and appointed its leader, J.R. Jayawardene as president, was introduced in response to a deep political crisis of the Sri Lankan ruling class.

The president's autocratic powers were used to crush popular opposition to the government's open-market economic policies, and the associated assault on the social rights of workers and the poor. These powers were also used to invoke and conduct the 30-year communal civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and to divide, weaken and suppress the working

class and oppressed masses.

The move towards dictatorship in Sri Lanka is in line with the drive by the ruling classes in every country towards fascist and autocratic rule. The Trump administration is rallying fascistic forces and preparing a coup, amid the November presidential elections, while in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is bolstering his own autocratic government. Rajapakse has even promised to go beyond the existing laws and introduce a new constitution.

Since coming to power, Rajapakse has installed many retired and in-service generals into key government posts and repeatedly claimed the need for special powers. On October 9, he summoned ruling alliance MPs to a meeting, in order to address some “differences” over the 20th amendment.

While all of the alliance parliamentarians had agreed that the president should be given strong powers, some Sinhala extremist MPs were critical of allowing people with dual citizenship to be given government office positions. The *Sunday Times* reported that some of these critics were “shouted down” and that Rajapakse “kept repeating the words, ‘I want to deliver’ several times during interventions.”

In fact, the Rajapakse government will respond to the increasing impact of the pandemic and collapse of the Sri Lankan economy with even more ruthless attacks on workers and the poor. While COVID-19 cases now exceed 7,800 and many parts of the country are under curfew, the government, like its international counterparts, is determined to keep the factories open and wants everyone to keep working.

The opposition parties made bogus protests and criticisms inside parliament, but let the government pass the legislation. Many grossly inflated the “positive sides” of the 19th amendment and made futile appeals to the government.

The 19th amendment was introduced by the President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe-led government that came to power in 2015.

During the 2015 presidential election campaign, Sirisena and the parties now in the opposition pledged to abolish the executive presidency. Once in power, however, the “unity government” dropped its promise, turned against workers and the poor, and introduced limited changes in the 19th amendment.

Former President Maithripala Sirisena, skipped last week’s parliamentary vote but shamelessly directed MPs from his Sri Lanka Freedom Party, now in alliance with the ruling party, to back the new amendment.

Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa from the SJB, a recent split-off from the UNP, declared that there must be a rule

with “checks and balances” for democratic governance. SJB MPs arrived at the parliament in a motorcade, wearing “No to 20A” armbands. Premadasa did not explain why the UNP had introduced the 1978 constitution and maintained it for decades.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna leader (JVP) Anura Kumara Dissanayake demagogically declared: “Unlimited power was in the hands of the leader of tribal societies and the king of monarchies. This constitution is a return to those eras.”

In 2004, the JVP supported the autocratic executive presidency and joined President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s regime. It hailed the use of these anti-democratic powers which were utilised to conduct Colombo’s bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Last week, as COVID-19 infections rapidly spread across the country, the JVP declared that the “people should be united as a country,” echoing the positions of the SJB. As the economic and political crisis deepens, every faction of the bourgeois establishment is joining together in class unity, with the aim of covering up the real target of these new dictatorial powers: the working class.

There is no constituency among the bourgeois parties and their pseudo-left hangers-on for the defence of democratic rights. The working class can only defend its democratic and social rights by mobilising its political and industrial strength, and rallying the rural poor and the youth.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party insists that the only answer to capitalist dictatorship is the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government, based on an international socialist program.



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