

Sri Lankan president orders all state employees to commit to his election manifesto

Pani Wijesiriwardena
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In an unprecedented move, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on January 1 demanded all public employees swear allegiance to his “Vision of Prosperity” election program. The manifesto was used by Rajapakse and his ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) in the November 2019 presidential ballot and the August 2020 parliamentary elections.

It is the first time since the formal independence of Sri Lanka 73 years ago that a Colombo government has compelled state employees to endorse a political manifesto. The blatantly anti-democratic move is another step by President Rajapakse towards autocratic rule backed by the military.

According to the pledge, all public officers must be “committed” to creation of a “disciplined, law-abiding, virtuous and healthy society.”

A January 3 editorial in the *Sunday Times*, which backed Rajapakse in the presidential election, noted that state officers had previously taken an oath to uphold the constitution and the public good. This year, however, they had to endorse and “implement the President’s election manifesto.”

The editorial likened Rajapakse’s demand to fascist German dictator Adolf Hitler, adding: “Students of modern history will recall another country where civil servants (state officers) were ordered to swear a similar oath of loyalty,” which then extended to ‘loyalty for the dictator.’”

These lines reflect nervousness in sections of the ruling elite that working people will see through Rajapakse’s dictatorial moves and, combined with Colombo’s escalating austerity measures, will provoke mass opposition.

President Rajapakse’s “New Year Message” on December 31 referenced his new demand on state workers. “No room should be left for the erosion of confidence people placed in the government,” he

declared.

“If each and every public servant properly performs the duties and responsibilities entrusted to them, it is not a difficult task for the government to conquer any challenge it faced.”

In other words, public employees must assume responsibility for ensuring the government’s success. Under conditions where the Rajapakse regime plans to intensify the workload of all state employees, without any pay increase, this is an impossible task.

The president’s claim that his “Vision of Prosperity” is to serve the people is a sham.

Rajapakse came to power by exploiting the widespread popular discontent against the former administration of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and its austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

“Vision of Prosperity” consists of empty promises to alleviate poverty, solve unemployment and give concessions to farmers, while pledging “strong and stable” rule committed to “national defence.”

Over the past year Rajapakse’s regime has demonstrated its total commitment to big business and international investors even as COVID-19 has worsened the country’s economic crisis and foreign debt.

In November, his SLPP government passed the 20th Amendment to the constitution. This anti-democratic measure granted Sri Lanka’s executive president far-reaching autocratic powers, including the appointment of top state officials and higher court judges, the dissolution of parliament and the imposition of emergency bills.

These powers go beyond the 1978 constitution, which first introduced the country’s executive presidency to impose free market economic policies and IMF-dictated austerity.

On taking power, Rajapakse quickly began inserting retired and in-service generals to key government posts,

including the appointment of retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as defence secretary. When COVID-19 began infecting the country, Rajapakse used it as a pretext to put military officers in charge of key ministries and institutions such as ports, customs, health and foreign affairs ministries.

Over the past week Rajapakse has further bolstered the political role of the armed forces. On December 31, he promoted both Defense Secretary Gunaratne and Army Commander Shavendra Silva to the rank of general.

The president then appointed 25 senior military officers as coordinators for the country's 25 districts supposedly to oversee operations against COVID-19. This task had previously been assigned to district administrative officers. The real purpose of these appointments is not to "coordinate" logistics related to the pandemic but to tighten the military's grip over district administrations.

Several key divisions of the department of motor traffic and the Cooperative Wholesale Establishment (the state-run shopping chain for consumer goods) were also brought under the control of retired senior military officers.

As popular concerns rose about these measures—expressed in media comments and on social media platforms such as Facebook—Defence Secretary Gunaratne issued a statement.

The military was not taking over the motor traffic department, he declared, but would institute a temporary arrangement to print driving licenses. Gunaratne would not say, however, how long the "temporary arrangement" would last.

The militarisation of Rajapakse's administration has nothing to do with combating COVID-19, but is the preparation to suppress the rising anti-government unrest among workers and the poor.

Last month, Sri Lanka reported nearly 20,000 coronavirus infections, which is equal to the number of infections in the previous two months. As of yesterday, the total official national tally rose to over 46,000 and the number of deaths to 219. Many of these cases are from free trade zone workplaces and other factories, and in the tea plantations.

Yesterday, around 1,000 state health service workers held protests demanding proper health protection and the payment of outstanding wages and supplements. About 100 trainee teachers demonstrated outside the public education department demanding jobs for more than 3,000 trainees. About 1,000 workers at the Gartmore plantation remain on strike against the dismantling of the

estate and the threatened axing of their jobs.

These struggles provide just a glimpse of the rising tide of social unrest developing across the country.

In line with its dictatorial preparations, the Rajapakse government is attempting to divide the Sri Lankan working class by whipping up Sinhala chauvinism against the Tamil and Muslim minorities.

According to Sri Lanka's current health authority guidelines, all those killed by COVID-19 must be cremated. This has provoked opposition and protests by Muslims who want to observe their religious burial traditions.

The government has rejected these calls, despite the fact that both cremation and burials have been approved by the World Health Organization and renowned epidemiologists. Extremist Sinhala-Buddhist groups, who are backing the government, have been holding provocative counter demonstrations against Muslim protesters.

Opposition parties in Sri Lanka including Samagi Jana Balavegaya, the United National Party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Tamil National Alliance have not uttered a word against Rajapakse's anti-democratic measures and his bolstering of the military's power. The concern of these parties, which serve the same class interests as the current regime in Colombo, is what to do about the developing social unrest among workers and the poor.

The working class must take Rajapakse's measures seriously and prepare to defend its democratic and social rights. It can only advance this struggle by mobilising its political strength independent of all factions of the bourgeoisie, rallying rural poor and fighting for a workers' and peasants' government on the basis of an international socialist program. This is the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge workers, students and youth to study the SEP's policies and join its ranks.



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