

Sri Lankan minister urges President Rajapakse to act like Hitler

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19 April 2021

In extraordinary remarks at an April 12 press conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka's state minister of transport, Dilum Amunugama, declared: "If the public are blaming the government for its lack of progress then they do so because the people voted [President] Gotabhaya Rajapakse into power expecting him to play the part of the dictator and get things done."

Amunugama said Buddhist monks also wanted Rajapakse to act like Hitler. "If he is pushed to become like Hitler through the action of various groups, if he will turn to Hitler, then no one will blame him. Everything will be fine."

Significantly, Rajapakse did not distance himself from his state minister's sinister remarks. Government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella attempted to gloss over the comments, saying they were just Amunugama's "personal opinion," not the government's "collective stance."

The Nazi dictator, Adolf Hitler, was brought to power in 1933 by the German imperialism amid a profound economic and social crisis. Having been assisted to power by the disastrous policies of the Soviet Stalinist regime, the Nazis crushed the working class and smashed its organisations, carried out the systematic murder of six million Jews and other minorities, and paved way for the catastrophic World War II between Germany and the other imperialist powers.

Sri Lanka is not an imperialist country. However, Amunugama's statements urging Rajapakse to become a Hitler are part of a campaign by sections of the ruling elite for a ruthless presidential dictatorship amid a deepening political crisis intensified by the global pandemic.

Amunugama's claim that 6.9 million people voted for Rajapakse because they wanted him to act like a dictator is utterly false. Lacking any alternative, many

voted for him to express their opposition to the previous "national unity" government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, which implemented harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Rajapakse and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) exploited this opposition by making phony promises to improve living conditions. In the same breath, he pledged to the ruling class to establish a "stable and strong" government. He rallied Sinhala extremist groups, the Buddhist clergy and sections of military by whipping up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism and promoting Sinhala Buddhist supremacism.

It is these extreme right-wing, chauvinist layers for whom Amunugama is speaking. At a ceremony for Rajapakse's 69th birthday in June 2018, Vendaruvey Upali, a chief prelate of one of the prominent Buddhist sects, advised him: "If they call you a Hitler, then be a Hitler and build the country." Far from condemning Vendaruvey Upali, Rajapakse denounced those who criticised the prelate for his comments. After coming to power, Rajapakse rapidly began to install former and serving senior military officers in key administrative positions, including retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as defence secretary. Using the pandemic as a pretext, he accelerated the militarisation, appointing two dozen or more officers to top posts.

Last November, parliament passed the 20th amendment to the constitution, giving autocratic powers to the executive president, including to appoint senior state officials and judges, to dissolve parliament and impose emergency bills. These powers go beyond even the anti-democratic 1978 constitution.

The push for dictatorial measures takes place amid

fear in ruling circles of a mounting crisis. The *Sunday Times* political columnist wrote on April 11 that the government, “now 17 months in office, is plunging catastrophically from one crisis to another... The economy received a devastating blow from COVID-19. Businesses, both big and small, were hit triggering large-scale unemployment. The bigger ones received relief packages and not the others...”

The column noted the emergence of mass anti-government opposition over the skyrocketing price of essentials, the shortage of vaccines, rampant corruption and environment destruction. It made no mention of the main factor intensifying the government’s crisis—the eruption of class struggles as part of a global upsurge of the working class amid the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

From 2018, the previous Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government confronted a growing movement of the working class against its austerity measures. Now working-class struggles are re-emerging. During the first two weeks of April, thousands of state sector employees, including in education, health, water, electricity and the banks, held one-day strikes or demonstrations demanding higher salaries and better conditions.

In response, the Rajapakse regime is intensifying its anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim campaign to divide the opposition. On Friday, the police arrested five Tamil youth, accusing them of seeking to “revive terrorism”—that is, the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that was militarily defeated in May 2009. Several Muslim leaders have been arrested under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Rajapakse has introduced into parliament the recommendations of the presidential commission on political victimisation. If passed, many of those in the ruling party who have been convicted or face court cases will go scot-free. At the same time, those who made complaints against the so-called victimised persons, including political opponents, will face charges.

Last week, the justice minister told *Aruna* that he would soon submit a cabinet paper on sweeping new censorship laws to curb “false news,” including related to national security, public health, law and order, state finance and relations with other countries. Also banned will be any “false news” allegedly aimed at

undermining confidence in the government’s actions.

Amunugama’s remarks are a warning that the ruling class is pushing for dramatically increased dictatorial measures to crush opposition, particularly in the working class. This is part of the promotion of extreme-right forces internationally, including the fascistic Alternative for Germany party and neo-Nazi groups in Germany. In the US, the centre of world capitalism, former President Donald Trump instigated a fascist coup on January 6 in a bid to prevent the inauguration of Joe Biden as president.



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