

Sri Lankan president tries to cover up crisis in lengthy national address

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5 July 2021

The national address on June 25 by Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was a desperate attempt to hide the political crisis of his government which is facing rising disaffection by workers and the poor over its attacks on social and democratic rights as well as its negligent response to COVID-19.

Rajapakse's 69-minute speech was pre-recorded near Ruwanwelisaya Dagoba, a sacred Buddhist site in Anuradhapura, the first ancient Sinhala kingdom. The choice of venue was to further reaffirm his Sinhala-Buddhist credentials and bolster his right-wing base among Sinhala extremists.

Rajapakse began by attempting to deflect rising anger over his government's criminal response to the pandemic. Last year, Colombo reopened the economy, following a brief one-month lockdown in March, allowing the virus to spread across industrial workplaces, the plantations and in rural areas. Health experts warned that Colombo's measures would produce a health catastrophe.

Developed countries have "largely contained the risk of virus spread" by vaccinating most of their citizens, Rajapakse claimed. Promising that Sri Lanka would soon receive about 19 million vaccine doses, he declared 13 million people over the age of 30 would be vaccinated by September, which "is a very satisfactory situation."

The situation in Sri Lanka, in fact, is disastrous with the number of COVID-19 infections increasing by 2.5 times between May 1 and June 30 to a total of 260,120 since the pandemic began, with the death toll rising to 3,120, a fourfold increase. According to a Reuters report on Friday, only 8.5 percent of the country's population has been vaccinated.

Contrary to his insistence that COVID-19 has been contained in the developed countries, the highly infectious Delta variant is now rampaging across the US, UK, Europe and the rest of the planet.

Listing his second "achievement," Rajapakse said his government had "satisfactorily ensured national security"—the reason why "6.9 million people voted for me" in the 2019 presidential election.

This is another lie. Rajapakse won the election, not because he promised a strong, anti-democratic government. He was able to exploit the mass opposition to the austerity measures of

previous President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime, he continued, had weakened the country's military and intelligence services, leading to a re-emergence of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) terrorism with the forcible occupation of "places of worship" and destruction of "archaeological sites."

The government changed this situation, he declared, and created "a peaceful environment" for "all communities." As examples, he cited the protection of cultural and religious heritages, such as the Muhudu Maha Vihara, Kuragala and Deegawapiya," which, he insisted, were threatened by "extremists."

Again, these statements are patently false. Responding to unfounded allegations, Rajapakse established a taskforce to "save" archaeological sites in the East where a majority of Tamils and Muslims live. Headed by the defence secretary retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne and leading monks and ethnic Sinhala professors, the taskforce was used to promote land claims by Buddhist monks.

In May last year, the taskforce rushed to the Muhudu Maha Viharaya temple, where its chief monk had provocatively insisted that Muslims had grabbed Buddhist land. Defence Secretary Gunaratne established a mini naval camp, supposedly to protect the site.

Since 1948, successive Sri Lankan governments have whipped up communalist tensions to divide the working class along ethnic lines. These policies led to the emergence of the separatist LTTE and the almost three-decade war that began in 1983.

The bloody conflict ended in May 2009—during President Mahinda Rajapakse's regime in which the current president was defence secretary—with the death of at least 40,000 Tamil civilians, according to the UN estimates. Claims by successive governments that the war's end would "bring prosperity" to the people, have been a cruel hoax.

"One of the weaknesses of our government," Rajapakse complained, was that it was not properly communicating its achievements. People were only hearing about problems and "questionable events" via social media. "Truth is being overshadowed today by lies," he said.

With a pliant media supporting the government's attacks assisted by the trade unions, workers, youth and the poor have increasingly turned to social media to express their anger, share information and communicate.

Nervous about the growing opposition, Rajapakse has intensified his government's crackdown on social media, establishing a police team to "patrol cyber space" and "arrest any person a without warrant." Directives have already been issued at the ports and in the universities to censor anyone "criticising" the government on social media.

In 2013, Rajapakse, as defence secretary, told a military gathering: "Although the likelihood of events such as the Arab spring transpiring in Sri Lanka is minimal... [T]his is yet another threat that needs to be monitored." Eight years on, the ruling elite is haunted by the prospect of a similar social explosion in Sri Lanka.

Rajapakse said that the previous government had left the economy in ruins and then referred to the impact of COVID-19 which has led to rising annual foreign debt repayments, a collapse in tourist income and declining export earnings and remittances.

Rajapakse claimed, however, that his government had created jobs for 65,000 graduates, 35,000 jobs for the unemployed, maintained welfare facilities, improved health and education and paid pensions and paid salaries to state employees. Poverty was being eradicated, he insisted, with farmers being provided subsidies and housing problems overcome.

In reality, the Rajapakse regime is imposing the economic burden of the crisis onto the backs of the people. As well as forcing workers to work in dangerous COVID-19 conditions, the government has given companies the go-ahead to impose wage and job cuts, along with longer working hours without increased pay.

In its 2021 budget, the government slashed health expenditure by 28 billion rupees (\$US140.5 million) and added only 10 billion rupees for pandemic treatment. Annual education spending was reduced by 40 billion rupees, down to 126 billion rupees annually. The jobs for new graduates are cheap labour positions that have led to demands for higher pay and better placements. The 35,000 unemployed provided with work are only being paid 22,500 rupees or \$US125 per month.

As the World Bank reported last year 11.2 percent of Sri Lanka's population live in poverty, earning less than \$US3.2 a day, with over 500,000 people expected to join these ranks as a result of the pandemic.

Rajapakse has also banned imports of fertiliser in order to cut \$400 million from foreign expenditure. He made clear in his speech that this decision, which has hit poor farmers hard, would not be changed despite ongoing mass protests.

By contrast, the government has made available some 300 billion rupees in loans to big business while handing out sweeping tax concessions, even as the country's nine largest conglomerates amassed a record 80 billion rupees in profits last

year.

A key element in the political crisis confronting Rajapakse government is growing pressure from US imperialism and its regional partner, the Indian government. Stepping up their preparations for war against China, Washington and New Delhi are demanding the Rajapakse government break its relations with China, a major source of investment and loans for Colombo. The Sri Lankan president, however, did not utter a word about these issues.

At the same time, the Rajapakse regime faces a rising tide of working-class resistance. Thousands of health, plantation, education, electricity, water and railway workers have coming into struggle during the past two months, as part of an unfolding wave of action by workers internationally.

At the end of his speech, Rajapakse declared: "I am ready to lead you today as I did then"—a clear reference to the bloody defeat of the LTTE and a clear threat to suppress future social opposition.

On May 27 and June 2, Rajapakse announced that the essential public services act now applied to about one million state sector employees. It bans all strikes enforced by harsh jail terms and fines. These repressive class-war measures have been silently approved by all the opposition parties and the trade unions. Like his counterparts around the world, Rajapakse is preparing dictatorial form of rule based on military and rallying fascistic racist forces.

The working class must prepare its counteroffensive against these measures, uniting across ethnic lines and rallying the rural poor against every faction of the ruling class. This requires breaking from unions and building action committees in every workplace to defend their wages, jobs and basic rights.

This struggle must be connected to the fight for workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist and internationalist program. This is the program the Socialist Equality Party is advancing.



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