

Sri Lanka's parliamentary opposition attempt to exploit popular anger against Rajapakse government

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Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Sri Lanka's main parliamentary opposition party, held a protest rally in Central Colombo last week. It was part of its efforts to exploit the rising mass anger against the government's attacks on living and social conditions and present itself as a political alternative.

Widespread unrest and working-class struggles have been rising in recent weeks in response to runaway inflation, shortages of food and other essentials, such as cooking gas, and extended daily power cuts. Long queues for gas and fuel are commonplace in every part of the country with normal life for millions of people completely disrupted. Spontaneous protests have erupted in several parts of Colombo over shortages and high prices.

The SJB is a right-wing bourgeois party formed in early 2020 when a majority of parliamentarians split from the long-established right-wing United National Party (UNP). Notwithstanding their current political posturing, SJB leaders have been members of previous UNP governments, backing their big-business policies and attacks on the living conditions and democratic rights of workers and the poor.

Last Tuesday's protest, according to some estimates, involved about 20,000 people and included SJB members and supporters, as well as sections of the lower-middle class, such as small shop owners. Others participating included the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, a Muslim communal party, and leaders of the National Union of Workers and the Democratic People's Front, both based among plantation workers, which are in an electoral alliance with the SJB. No plantation workers were present.

SJB politicians and officials accused the government

of destroying the country and provided placards with slogans condemning the rising cost of living and shortages of essentials. They chanted "Go Gota [President Gotabhaya Rajapakse], Go."

SJB leader Sajith Premadasa, the UNP's presidential candidate in the 2019 elections, briefly addressed the rally and called for a presidential election. He demagogically declared: "If President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse cannot build this country, hand it over to us. We will show how to build it."

Premadasa provided no details on how he planned to "build" the economy. He made the ridiculous claim that unnamed Middle Eastern countries had promised to provide oil for two years without advance payments to a government led by his party.

Two weeks ago, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Executive Board released a report on the Sri Lankan economy calling for major austerity measures. In fact, while the SJB was holding its Colombo rally, senior IMF officials were meeting with Rajapakse and discussing how to impose the full burden of the country's acute economic crisis on working people.

The Executive Board proposals included devaluation of the rupee, increasing tax incomes, slashing subsidies, privatisation and commercialisation of state enterprises, and higher fuel and electricity prices.

Neither Premadasa nor any other SJB leader interviewed by the media said a word about the IMF proposals. The economic program presented by Premadasa during the 2019 presidential and 2020 national elections was not fundamentally different from Rajapakse's party.

The Sri Lankan economy was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic with a drastic decline in exports and remittances and a collapse of tourist income, which has led to negative economic growth and a potential default on foreign loans.

Like the government and other capitalist parties, the SJB previously called on the Rajapakse government to seek IMF “assistance.” As Premadasa told a media briefing last August: “We propose the government go to the IMF immediately and seek their help to get out of this economic turmoil we are in right now.”

Just a day after the SJB rally, President Rajapakse declared in a national address that he had decided to work with the IMF. Senior SJB leader Harsha de Silva responded by declaring: “It’s a good thing [seeking IMF assistance] but if the problem was anticipated, why were the discussions with the IMF delayed up to now.”

In other words, the government should have been implementing the IMF austerity measures long ago. So much for the SJB’s bogus sympathy about the worsening situation now facing the masses.

A measure of any party in the present crisis is its position on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like other opposition parties, the SJB, notwithstanding its vague criticism of government “mishandling” of the crisis, fully backed Colombo’s criminal response to the pandemic, including its unsafe reopening of the economy.

Like the Rajapakse government, the real concern of Premadasa and the SJB is not the desperate situation now facing the masses but that growing strikes and protests by workers and the poor will challenge capitalist rule.

The trade unions have betrayed the struggles of tens of thousands of health workers, teachers and other public sector workers. Union leaders have publicly declared that they “understand” the economic crisis facing Colombo.

The Rajapakse government’s response to the mounting social unrest has been to turn to the military and the use of police state measures. The SJB does not oppose the militarization of the state apparatus. Like every other Sri Lankan bourgeois party it depends on the military, which has become a decisive factor in Sri Lankan political affairs.

In January, Premadasa told a Colombo seminar that

Sri Lanka “needs an elected dictatorship which goes beyond elections... I won’t say elections should be scrapped but am only suggesting an approach similar to the Margaret Thatcher administration in UK. Ms Thatcher was called ‘Iron Lady’ because she did what she had to do without fear.”

That Premadasa is openly praising the Thatcher government and its class-war program against the working class underscores that the SJB has no fundamental differences with the Rajapakse regime and will do whatever is necessary to defend capitalist rule.



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