

Mass protests demanding Sri Lankan President Rajapakse resign continue in Colombo

Our correspondents
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Popular protests at Galle Face Green in the centre of Colombo to press for the immediate resignation of Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his entire government have continued, day and night, since last Saturday.

Cutting across the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communal divides that the ruling class systematically cultivates, tens of thousands of people from across Sri Lanka have participated in the now nearly week-long protest.

On Sunday night, protesters started installing temporary tents so that they can stay nights, with supporters providing food, water and other essentials.

The government has adamantly refused to heed the popular outcry for it to step down. In an address to the nation on Monday evening, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the President's elder brother, made a thinly veiled warning that the government will unleash brutal repression against the anti-government protests if they continue.

The government is being denounced for skyrocketing prices, shortages of fuel, medicine, and other essentials and hours of daily electricity blackouts. The Galle Face Green protest has largely been organised via social media under the hashtag #GoHomeGota2022. Following a demonstration last Saturday that drew more than 20,000, thousands of people have continued the protests, with large numbers flocking to join despite rainy weather.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have been intervening at the protest site daily. They are distributing copies of a SEP statement that outlines a program of action to mobilize the working

class, and behind it the rural masses, to fight for its own socialist solution to the devastating social, economic, and political crisis.

The SEP/IYSSE campaigners have engaged in wide-ranging political discussions with workers, youths and professionals participating in the protests. Some of the protesters hail from Colombo and its suburbs, while others have travelled from faraway cities to voice their opposition to the government.

On Tuesday, the SEP/IYSSE supporters met a group of three youths—a software engineering student and two students from technical colleges—who reside in Horana about 50 kilometres from Colombo. Explaining the purpose of their participation in the anti-government protest, one of the technical students said, “Corruption is rampant. The protests at city junctions (in cities and towns across the country) are less effective. Here the people are well disciplined, they have a goal, without making any trouble. And this protest is ongoing.”

Joining the discussion, the engineering student said, “We are making the maximum contribution possible for us.” Commenting on the price rises and power cuts, he added, “It has impacted on us, like all the other people. The power cuts mean we cannot do our school work as usual. We have to do group work in online classes, but when my friends do not have electricity I cannot work. Actually, we are unable to keep with our studies.”

Commenting on the government's plans to impose another brutal round of austerity to secure an emergency International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, the engineering student said, “The revenues and expenses will be calculated by the government according to their priorities. EPF (Employee Provident

Fund, a benefits scheme) and ETF (Employee Trust Fund) and pensions will be curtailed. The government may stop expensive projects such as road-building projects. But all the debts will have to be paid by us. The rich will not be taxed, because this is the capitalist system.”

The SEP/IYSSE campaign met two young women, Nethmi and Dimitri, and their friend Ushan, who come from Piliyandala and Ratmalana, about 25 km from Colombo. They are all working, while going to school.

Explaining why he has joined the protests, Ushan said, “We have no other option, than demanding the government go. We keep trying. I prefer that we had younger people in government, instead of the current corrupt politicians. ... Because in our political system, from the small-time political operators to the top level ministers—they are all thieves.”

Ushan then referenced the address the Prime Minister made to the nation on Monday, in which he defended the Sri Lankan state’s communal war on the Tamil minority and its massacre of 60,000 youth in the predominantly Sinhalese-speaking south in the late 1980s. “He repeated the same thing: War, war and war, then the 1988-89 events, and that the Rajapakse family is not to blame for the terrible situation. In reality he was just warning, ‘We can do what we want. We can open fire on you,’ or something like that.

After reading the paragraph in the SEP statement that points to the massive growth in social inequality, Ushan said: “Correct, after 74 years (of “independence” from British colonial rule) this is what they have done.”

Nethmi drew attention to the deepening poverty resulting from the food price increases and shortages and the ruling class’ failure to provide social support during several brief and improperly-prepared COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns: “How can those without food live?” she asked “When the country was shut down, how was a daily labourer (without income) supposed to buy food? When you observe the condition in the slums, they are starving.”

Wednesday the campaign team met Prasad Aluthwatte, a freelance artist. He said, “The Rajapakse regime has largely degraded the living standards of the general masses in this country. We need to get rid of it soon. I think the executive presidency (which gives Rajapakse quasi-dictatorial powers) should be abolished under any government after this.”

He added, “I heard the speech of the new Governor of the Central Bank. He said that the oppressed masses will have to bear more austerity, but did not talk about ceasing the flow of profits to the capitalists.”

Later he added, “It has become clear to me as a result of our discussion that we, the artists, the students, the youth or any oppressed group can only be liberated by joining a mass movement under the leadership of the working class. It is the workers who produce the wealth under capitalism. The profits from their labour should stop going into the pockets of the capitalists. The wealth they create must be channelled to meet the real needs of the people.

“I have not seen any other party presenting such a program. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) claim to be on the side of the people, but they are really on the side of the capitalists. JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake does not openly say whether he will implement IMF austerity or not if he comes to power. This is because the JVP definitely intends to do just that, impose IMF-dictated austerity.”

Lakmal Perera, a senior lecturer at the Open University in Nawala, an outer suburb of Colombo, said, “I have no faith in the existing political parties. We need a socialist program. I don’t believe these problems will be resolved within Sri Lanka alone. The war in Ukraine has great impact on us and the entire world. People have been dragged into a situation where they cannot live. It is clear that this is why people have come to struggle in this way. Social inequality has sharpened. As you say, an international program is needed to solve these problems.”



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