

President Rajapakse flees Sri Lanka after popular uprising

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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse fled the country in the early hours of Wednesday morning on board a military aircraft that landed in the neighboring Maldives.

The secret operation followed a massive popular uprising on Saturday. Workers and young people stormed the presidential palace in Colombo and insisted on an immediate end to the widely-despised regime.

That upheaval, which involved hundreds of thousands of workers and young people, followed three months of continuous demonstrations. There is mass anger over a soaring cost of living, shortages of essentials, and a government austerity agenda aimed at making working people pay for the deepening economic crisis.

After Saturday's uprising, Rajapakse and his Prime Minister (PM) Ranil Wickremesinghe announced that they would step down, a demand they had rejected for months.

Increasingly isolated, Rajapakse flew to Male, the capital of the Maldives, arriving at about 3 a.m. local time. His brother Basil Rajapakse, the former finance minister, has also fled. Both had reportedly attempted to leave the country yesterday, but had been blocked from departing by immigration officers.

The ignominious departure of the president points to the immense power of the movement that has emerged in the working class.

The Sri Lankan upheaval is part of an international upsurge of the class struggle.

The acute social, economic and political crisis in the island is the sharpest expression of a global crisis of capitalism intensified by the criminal "let it rip" response of governments around the world to the COVID-19 pandemic and exacerbated by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Everywhere, workers are entering into conflict with the capitalist program of austerity, mass COVID infection and a stepped-up offensive on wages and living conditions amid skyrocketing inflation.

The scenes of a president sneaking out of his country in the dead of the night have no doubt been watched with

concern by governments all over the world. In every country, the traditional parties of capitalist rule are in a deepening crisis and explosive social opposition is building up.

There are also real dangers as the Sri Lankan ruling class desperately seeks to salvage its rule. Immediately prior to his departure, Rajapakse was involved in shadowy talks with the military.

On Monday, he reportedly came out of hiding for a closed-door meeting with the commanders of the Army, Navy and Air Force. No details were released. However, hundreds of security personnel were deployed yesterday to the country's main public TV stations—the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation and Independent Television Network.

Rajapakse is due to quit his post today. Until he formally resigns, he retains the sweeping powers of the executive presidency, including to dismiss the government, declare a state of emergency and mobilise the military.

Whether Rajapakse stays in the Maldives and resigns or not, the threat remains of a military intervention against the mass movement of workers and rural poor, with the social and economic crisis deepening and the official parties offering nothing but further austerity.

The official annualized figure for food inflation hit 80 percent last month and prices for all essentials continue to skyrocket. The health system is breaking down amid acute shortages of medicines and medical supplies. Workers' real wages have fallen by more than 50 percent this year. More than 70 percent of the population has been forced to skip meals due to the lack of food.

The outpouring of popular anger is triggering intense fears in ruling circles. The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce issued a statement on Sunday calling on the president to resign and party leaders to ensure a smooth transition of power in accordance with the Constitution. "It is hoped that the party leaders will put aside their ideological differences and get together as Sri Lankans at this historic moment to save the country from falling into anarchy," it declared.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe issued a special statement

on Monday, declaring: “I will safeguard the Constitution. No one can go beyond it and no one can force or dictate [to] parliament from outside.” His defence of the Constitution, which enshrines the autocratic powers of the executive presidency, is nothing but the defence of the capitalist state, private property and the exploitation of workers.

Wickremesinghe has declared that he will step down once an interim, all-party government, which is being hurriedly cobbled together behind closed doors, is installed. Parliamentary party leaders participated in a meeting convened by Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardhane on Monday, who announced parliament will vote to elect a new president on July 20.

The so-called ten-party alliance, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the breakaway “independent” group of Rajapakse’s own Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), met last Sunday. It decided to nominate SLPP parliamentarian Dullas Alahapperuma and SJB leader Sajith Premadasa as its candidates for president and prime minister. The SJB is the largest parliamentary opposition party.

On Monday, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake also assured the ruling class of his readiness to rule on its behalf. He told the media: “We are ready to take over the government for a certain period of time... We are ready to take up the responsibility.” He received encouragement from the US ambassador to Colombo, Julie Chung, who, after meeting with JVP leaders, declared the JVP to be “a significant party” with “a growing presence”, with which she has “a good understanding.”

The leaders of the Galle Face Green protests in central Colombo met with opposition parties, trade unions and so-called “mass organisations” yesterday to discuss their “Action Plan”. It is completely directed towards pressuring an interim government to implement measures to alleviate the social crisis. To that end, these self-appointed leaders call for the establishment of “people’s councils” to engage with the interim government.

The pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), which has been prominent in the protests, is playing a particularly insidious role in promoting the illusion that an interim government and new elections would alleviate the suffering of the masses. Its leader Kumar Gunaratnam told the media that an interim government “should implement nothing but the objectives of the struggle” and create the conditions to hold a “free and fair” election.

Any interim government will do the exact opposite. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) alone has repeatedly emphasized that there will be no solution to the intense suffering of the masses under bourgeois rule and the capitalist profit system. It has warned that the interim

government is a political trap for working people.

All the parliamentary parties clamouring to form an interim government are committed to implementing the severe austerity program demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF agenda will not end the social crisis, but will rapidly intensify it and cannot be imposed democratically. Any election that is held will neither be free nor fair. Its aim will be to gain time for the ruling class by confining the mass movement to safe parliamentary channels, while paving the way for police state measures and dictatorial forms of rule.

The SEP calls on workers to reject the interim government, however it is formed, and to mobilise independently to fight for a revolutionary socialist solution to the burning issues confronting them. We call for the formation of action committees—independent from the unions, which have blocked and betrayed every struggle by workers—to fight for their class interests, not “people’s councils” to plead with the interim government for crumbs.

The SEP advocates measures that the working class, through its action committees, can directly fight for to meet their pressing economic and social needs, including workers’ democratic control of production and distribution, the repudiation of all foreign debt, the rejection of the IMF austerity program, a state monopoly on foreign trade, the seizure of the wealth of the billionaires and corporations, and the restoration and expansion of all price subsidies, including on fertilisers for farmers.

The SEP calls for the unity of the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—and the rejection of all forms of communalism and nationalism. A turn by Sri Lankan workers is needed to the working class in India, throughout the region and internationally. Such a struggle by the working class will rally to its side poor farmers and youth, and will provide the basis for establishing a government of workers and peasants, committed to socialist policies. This is part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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