

# Sri Lanka's acting president orders military, do "what is necessary to restore order"

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In a political conspiracy against the Sri Lankan population, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, as he fled the country in a military aircraft in the early hours yesterday morning, formally appointed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as acting president.

Wickremesinghe immediately exercised the sweeping powers of the country's executive presidency to declare an island-wide state of emergency. He also imposed a 24-hour curfew across Colombo and the surrounding province and mobilised soldiers and police to enforce it. Afterwards, the curfew was extended island wide.

However, as has repeatedly occurred over the past three months, anti-government protesters defied the curfew and took to the streets. Pitched battles occurred as police and military personnel used tear gas and water cannon in a failed attempt to prevent thousands of demonstrators from taking over the prime minister's offices. Scores of people were injured in the clashes with at least 84 being hospitalised.

In a televised statement, Wickremesinghe ominously announced that he had instructed the military and police to do "what is necessary to restore order." He has appointed a committee, comprising the chief of defence staff, commanders of the Army, Air Force and Navy, and the inspector general of police to carry out his instructions.

Given that the security forces had failed to hold back the protesters with tear gas and water cannon, the presidential order can only signify that the police and military have been ordered to gun down unarmed civilians.

"We can't tear up our Constitution," Wickremesinghe stated. "We can't allow fascists to take over. We must end this fascist threat to democracy." The official buildings occupied by

protesters, he added, must be returned to state control.

What a disgusting slander! Just days ago, in the wake of a massive anti-government protest of hundreds of thousands, Rajapakse announced that he would resign as of yesterday. Wickremesinghe declared that he would also step down once an all-party interim government had been installed.

Behind the scenes, however, both men connived with the armed forces to cling onto power. Rajapakse fled the country in the manner of a criminal, with the assistance of the military, after emigration officials at Colombo International Airport stymied his efforts to leave via a commercial flight. He is in the Maldives seeking asylum in Singapore, and has not yet tendered a resignation.

His co-conspirator Wickremesinghe has no prime minister and no cabinet. He is the sole elected parliamentarian of his rump United National Party and his offer to step in as president was rejected by the overwhelming majority of parliamentary parties at an all-party meeting on Sunday.

The constitution that Wickremesinghe vehemently defends is a thoroughly anti-democratic document that enshrines an executive presidency with the powers of an autocrat: to appoint and dismiss ministers and governments, to assume ministerial posts, to impose a state of emergency, and to call out the military.

As the despised Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe cabal takes a big step towards military dictatorship, the acting president employs the technique of the Big Lie pioneered by the Nazis to declare that he is defending "democracy" against "the fascists"—in reality, the millions of workers, rural toilers, youth and professionals who have taken to the streets over the past three months calling for Rajapakse to resign and

for an end to the social disaster they confront.

Masses of working people are having to deal with intolerable conditions—soaring inflation and shortages of essential items including food, fuel and medicines, and lengthy daily power outages. Hunger is rife and starvation is staring many people in the face. The public health system is in a state of collapse.

Moreover, Wickremesinghe is committed to implementing the severe austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund in return for emergency finances. These policies, including further privatisation and deep cuts to public spending, will dramatically worsen the social crisis facing the vast majority of the population.

All of the opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), support the IMF's austerity agenda to heap the burden of the country's deep economic crisis onto working people. Their efforts to hold back the mass uprising and to steer it behind the political charade of an all-party, interim government opened the door for the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe conspiracy.

While Wickremesinghe remains in the presidency, he will determine the shape of any interim government as well as its policies. The agenda announced earlier this week by the parliamentary speaker to elect a new president next Wednesday is now in question as Rajapakse has not submitted his resignation. Wickremesinghe has called on parliament to nominate a prime minister acceptable to all parties.

Opposition leaders have issued feeble protests against the installation of Wickremesinghe as acting president, but they are just as terrified as he is of unleashing a new round of massive protests and strikes. Right-wing SJB leader Sajith Premadasa tweeted: "An MP with one seat is appointed as PM. Now the same person is appointed as acting president... What a farce. What a tragedy."

JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake warned Wickremesinghe that his actions threatened to trigger an "unprecedented crisis." Far from calling for any action by working people, he made an appeal to the very body that facilitated the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe conspiracy—the military.

"We appeal to the tri-forces and police to listen to people," Disanayake declared. "We hope that the security forces will be with the people rather than using

their weapons to protect a clique hell-bent on clinging on to power."

The JVP, a party mired in Sinhala communal politics, which in the past falsely claimed to be revolutionary and Marxist, is now frantically endeavouring to prop up bourgeois rule. Disanayake is thrusting himself forward as the leader of an interim government to defend the interests of big business and the country's international creditors.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka has consistently called on the working class to take matters into its own hands and to form democratically-elected action committees throughout factories, suburbs and plantations, independent of all the capitalist parties and the trade unions that have blocked and betrayed its struggles.

The SEP has flatly rejected any support for a capitalist interim government, which cannot resolve any of the pressing issues facing working people and will pave the way for dictatorial forms of rule, unless the working class intervenes to fight for its class interests on the basis of a socialist perspective. The party has advanced a series of policies as the basis for such a political struggle, including the repudiation of all foreign debt, the nationalisation of the banks and major corporations, and the seizure of the wealth of the billionaires.

It has insisted that there is no progressive solution to the present excruciating crisis within the framework of capitalism and the nation state. The SEP bases itself on the fight for a government of workers and peasants that will implement a socialist program as part of the fight for socialism internationally.



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