

Wickremesinghe threatens state repression following his formal installation as acting Sri Lankan president

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16 July 2022

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was officially sworn in yesterday as Sri Lanka's acting president by the chief justice, following the formal resignation of Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who fled the country on Wednesday amid the largest demonstrations and mass strikes in the country's history.

Wickremesinghe, the sole parliamentarian from the right-wing United National Party, was initially appointed prime minister by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on May 12 after his elder brother Mahinda Rajapakse was forced to resign from the premiership on May 9. Rajapakse then appointed Wickremesinghe acting president three days ago, on July 13, as he flew out of Sri Lanka early Wednesday morning.

Having been Sri Lankan prime minister six times since 1993, Wickremesinghe is a long-standing pro-US defender of bourgeois rule and committed supporter of International Monetary Fund austerity measures.

Soon after being sworn in, Wickremesinghe issued a media release threatening the ongoing protests centred around Galle Face Green in Colombo.

"I will take immediate steps to establish law and order in the country," he declared, while claiming he was "not against the peaceful struggle." It was, however, necessary, he added, "to identify the difference between the insurgents and protesters."

Wickremesinghe then referred to recent clashes between army personal and anti-government protesters, during which 24 soldiers were injured and weapons of two soldiers were allegedly stolen. "These insurgents are trying to create unrest next week. We cannot allow it," he said.

Referring to his earlier move to assign the military and police powers to crack down on protesters if they challenge bourgeois rule, Wickremesinghe said: "I have appointed a committee comprising service commanders and the IGP [Inspector General of Police]. They are in charge of maintaining law and order."

Wickremesinghe then cynically linked the "law and order"

situation with the catastrophic economic crisis and the desperate situation facing millions of Sri Lankans. "A breakdown in law and order will impact the economy. Fuel, power and water supply and food supply can crumble," he declared.

In other words, the ongoing protests by workers, youth and the rural masses over the skyrocketing price of food, fuel, cooking gas and other scarce essentials is worsening the crisis and state repression is required to supply essentials and "restore order."

Later that day, Wickremesinghe, accompanied by journalists, photographers and television crews, visited the injured 24 soldiers in hospital. He made no reference to the 84 protesters assaulted by police and army officers this week and now in hospital, or the young demonstrator killed during these clashes.

The corporate sector, civil society organisations and the religious establishment, along with the US and other embassies, have said the Constitution and the constitutional framework must be maintained—code words for capitalist rule.

The Sri Lankan Constitution includes the executive presidency, which allows Wickremesinghe to impose a range of repressive measures, including the Essential Services Act, Prevention of Terrorism Act, Public Security Ordinance and other anti-democratic actions, measures already used by former President Rajapakse.

On Thursday, US ambassador Julie Chung tweeted that "A peaceful transfer of power within SL's democratic and constitutional framework is essential."

While voicing these "concerns"—a reflection of her nervousness about the extreme political instability in Sri Lanka, Chung and various "quiet Americans" are manoeuvring behind the scenes with the political opposition, the military and the police, offering advice about how to deal with the ongoing mass anti-government movement.

Defying threats to use the military and police in a broader

crackdown, workers, youth and the rural masses are continuing their protests. Low flying helicopters threatened the protesters on Wednesday, while the media showed huge contingents of police and military being brought near the Galle Face Green protest site on Thursday.

An article yesterday in the English-language *Island* headlined, “Nod given for use of lethal force,” reported that the Armed Forces had been ordered to “use lethal force if it is necessary to protect public property, key installations, vulnerable points and human lives.”

The intensifying political turmoil is driven by the worsening socio-economic crisis, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and the US-led NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Hundreds of thousands of distressed people are continuing to wait in fuel queues for several days at time. The number of deaths that have occurred on these lines rose to a total of 19 on Thursday.

Health services and public hospitals are breaking down due to shortages of medicines, equipment and staff, with health workers, including doctors, forced to wait in fuel queues. School closures continue and public transport is crippled due fuel shortages. Almost 75 percent of the population is skipping meals and starving due to skyrocketing food prices. Last month, the official annualized food inflation rate hit 80 percent.

Yesterday, Parliamentary Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena said a new president would be elected by parliament on July 20, but would hold that position only until the end of 2024.

A flurry of backroom wheeling and dealing between the political establishment and leading contenders for the presidency and premiership is underway.

Sagara Kariyawasam, general secretary of Rajapakse’s fractured Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which holds the largest number of parliamentary seats, announced that the SLPP would back Wickremesinghe for the presidency. However, SLPP Chairman G.L. Peiris declared that the party had to support its own candidate. SLPP parliamentarian Dullas Alahapperuma has announced his candidacy for the presidency.

Other presidential contenders include Sajith Premadasa, leader of the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya, a breakaway group from Wickremesinghe’s rump UNP. The suggestion has also been made to share the presidency and premiership between Premadasa and Alahapperuma. Other parliamentary parties, such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance, have yet to issue a statement on the presidential elections.

The establishment of an interim all-party government, following the election of the prime minister and president, is

crucial for Sri Lanka’s ruling elite to begin imposing the still under negotiation IMF austerity agenda. Its measures will only impose new burdens on the working masses, including through subsidy cuts, privatisations and increased and more broadly based taxes.

Giving voice to the nervousness within the ruling class, Central Bank Governor Nandalal Weerasinghe told the international media that unless a stable government is soon established in Sri Lanka, the country will come to a standstill.

The trade unions continue to play an utterly reactionary role. The response of the unions to the largest island-wide anti-government protest in Sri Lankan history on July 9, and the subsequent mass storming of the homes of the president and the prime minister, was to block all independent action by the working class.

The Trade Unions Coordination Centre and the Trade Unions and Mass Organisation Collective declared they would launch a general strike, along with a hartal (closure of businesses), on July 14 if Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe did not quit by July 13. When this did not happen, they declared they would organise action for July 18.

Even if this occurs, the walkout, like all the other one-day general strikes they were forced to call—on April 28, May 6 and May 10—will be used to let off steam and divert workers behind calls for an interim all-party government.

In opposition to this pro-capitalist agenda, the Socialist Equality Party calls on the working class to independently intervene into this political situation, rallying youth and the rural poor to meet their burning needs by fighting for their own revolutionary solution, based on socialist policies.

For that, action committees of workers and rural poor must be urgently formed at every workplace, factory, plantation, neighborhood and rural area, independent of all bourgeois parties and their union agencies. Networks of these action committees need to be established and linked up with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to take forward this fight.



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