

State of emergency imposed as parliament convenes to choose new Sri Lankan president

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Amid spreading anti-government protests demanding his immediate resignation, acting President Ranil Wickremesinghe formalised the state of emergency he initially announced on July 13 by issuing a government gazette on Sunday. The state of emergency gives wide powers to the president to deploy the military to arbitrarily arrest and detain people, suppress protests, search private property and impose censorship.

The declaration of the state of emergency takes place on the eve of tomorrow's illegitimate vote in parliament to install a new president, after Gotabhaya Rajapakse fled the country last week in the face of the country's largest ever anti-government protests on July 9. Wickremesinghe, who also declared last week that he would resign, was instead installed as acting president and now is one of the candidates in tomorrow's vote.

The gazette notice justified the state of emergency claiming it to be in the "interests of public security, the protection of public order and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to life," clearly implying it could be used against protests and strikes. Neither the acting president nor any of the other candidates vying for the post are concerned with maintaining the essentials for life. They are terrified by the mass movement that has erupted over the past three months against the social and economic breakdown that has devastated the living conditions of working people.

The declaration of a state of emergency underscores the anti-democratic character of tomorrow's vote in parliament. In a statement published yesterday, the Socialist Equality Party denounced the so-called election "as a fraud and a conspiracy against the working class, youth and rural poor." It declared: "The parliament does not in any way represent the political sentiments and interests of the working masses, that is, the absolute majority of society."

Along with Wickremesinghe, opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) leader Sajith Premadasa, Dallas Alahapperuma from the Rajapakses' Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna leader (JVP) Anura Kumara Disanayake have announced their candidacy. Whoever is installed as president will hold the position for the remainder of the Rajapakse's term—that is, until 2024.

Broad layers of the population are not only hostile to

Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe but all of the 225 venal politicians that sit in the parliament. The vote tomorrow has no legitimacy but, whatever the outcome, is simply a reshuffling of the whole corrupt pack. All of them back the imposition of severe austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and designed to defend corporate profits and international investors at the expense of working people.

Wickremesinghe has mobilised heavily armed security forces to prevent protesters getting anywhere near the parliament complex. All the entry roads have been closed off with roadblocks, prior to today's session to submit nominations for presidency. The security forces have been instructed to provide full protection for parliamentarians. While the rest of the country has to wait in lengthy queues for hours, the military has been told to provide parliamentarians with fuel to attend.

Wickremesinghe has also stepped up the attack on social media as well. He has instructed police to carry out a sweeping investigation on social media posts that could "influence or exert pressure" on parliamentarians in the presidential vote. This move signals a far wider crackdown on social media that has been widely used to organise anti-government protests over the past three months.

Workers, youth and rural toilers continue to defy Wickremesinghe's repressive measures and participate in protests. Now that Rajapakse has fled the country and formally resigned, protests centred in Colombo and regional towns have shifted their focus to demanding the resignation of Wickremesinghe. He is a longtime stooge of US imperialism and defender of IMF pro-market restructuring, who is widely despised. He is the only parliamentarian of his rump United National Party (UNP).

The trade unions and pseudo-left organisations are attempting to channel mass popular opposition behind the equally distrusted and detested opposition parties and the call for an all-party, interim government to shore up bourgeois rule.

The Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), controlled by the pseudo-left Front line Socialist Party (FSP), has declared today to be a day of protest to demand Wickremesinghe's resignation. The IUSF has called on the trade unions to join the protests, which include a march through central Colombo that could involve thousands.

Like the FSP, the trade unions have played a treacherous role over the past three months in sabotaging any political intervention by the working class. Where strikes have been called to let off steam, the trade union leaders have quickly called them off. Over the past week, the union apparatuses have threatened general strikes but none has taken place.

Their rotten politics is summed up in announcement yesterday by the main union alliance—the Trade Union Coordination Center (TUCC)—of “proposals from the working class” to ensure the triumph of the masses. It constituted a plea from the unions, not the working class, in line with the opposition parties for an interim government and elections within six months. Their “pro-constitutional” program is to demobilise the working class and steer opposition into meaningless elections so as to buy time for the ruling class.

Behind closed doors, the political horse-trading is continuing to secure a majority in tomorrow’s vote. The SLPP has the largest block of parliamentary votes but is deeply split after a section broke away to sit as “independents.”

Yesterday, Wickremesinghe and former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, who was forced to step down in May, met with SLPP parliamentarians to try to secure their backing for Wickremesinghe instead of SLPP parliamentarian Dallas Alahapperuma. In a crude attempt to buy votes, Wickremesinghe announced that he would use public money to rebuild the homes and properties of SLPP parliamentarians destroyed or damaged in recent protests.

In an equally crude bid for public support, the government announced a reduction in fuel prices by a negligible 20 rupees per litre, or about four percent. And, all of a sudden, Wickremesinghe declared that he is looking for the means to reduce the cost of living.

These announcements are insults to working people, as around 70 percent of families are skipping meals and face hunger and starvation. Even if they can afford to buy fuel, people have to wait for hours in lengthy queues with no guarantee they will get any. Patients have been turned away at hospitals due to shortages of staff who have to queue for fuel to get to work.

JVP leader Dissanayake told the media on Sunday that he was ready to withdraw his candidacy in favour of a caretaker president supported by all parties and who had no future political ambitions of his or her own. He did not nominate anyone in the parliamentary cesspool who had any public credibility and might fit the bill. This move is nothing but a desperate attempt to lend political legitimacy to the utterly discredited institutions of bourgeois rule.

Whoever is installed as president tomorrow, the next government will implement the draconian measures demanded by the IMF that will further slash public sector jobs, make deep inroads into public education and health that are already in crisis, increase and broaden taxes and drive up prices by abolishing what remains of subsidies. With the Sri Lankan

economy already in free fall, Fitch Ratings warned this week that a recession in Europe would hit Sri Lankan exports and tourism and further exacerbate its acute foreign exchange shortage.

In its statement yesterday, the SEP declared: “Against all the parties of the bourgeois political establishment, their pseudo-left hangers-on and the trade union bureaucracy, the Socialist Equality Party calls on the working class, youth and the rural poor to fight for a revolutionary socialist program, which is the only means for resolving the enormous social crisis they confront.

“We call for the formation of action committees of workers and poor farmers in every workplace, factory, plantation, neighbourhood and rural area throughout the island, independent of the establishment parties and unions, to fight for their democratic and social rights. A network of action committees should be established, linked with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, in a common struggle against capitalism.

“The SEP advocates democratic and socialist demands, directly addressing the burning needs of working people, around which the action committees can fight. These include the nationalisation of big business and banks, the seizure of the wealth of billionaires, the repudiation of all foreign debts, the cancellation of debts of poor peasants, the establishment of the monopoly of foreign trade and indexing workers’ wages to inflation.

“In rejecting the fraud of Wednesday’s vote in parliament for a new president, we demand the immediate abolition of the autocratic executive presidency.

“An independent movement of the working class, fighting for its democratic and social rights, will rally youth and the rural poor to its side and lay the basis for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies. This is a part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

“We call on to workers, youth, students and rural poor to come forward and join the SEP to fight for this revolutionary socialist program.”



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