Sri Lankan parliament elects rightwing, pro-US Ranil Wickremesinghe as president

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20 July 2022

Yesterday, the Sri Lankan parliament installed Ranil Wickremesinghe as the country's president by a vote of 134 out of the 223 cast by parliamentarians. The other candidates, Dallas Alahapperuma, an MP from the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), and Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the leader of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), received 82 and 3 votes respectively.

Wickremesinghe assumes the executive presidency with its sweeping powers amid an unprecedented economic, political and social crisis. He will serve out the remaining two years of the term of Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who fled the country and then resigned following massive anti-government protests on July 9.

It is a ruling class under siege. Working people not only had no say in selecting the president but were completely excluded. The vote was held behind closed doors in parliament that had been turned into a fortress surrounded by heavily armed soldiers, police and barricades.

Wickremesinghe has no popular base and is widely despised among the masses. He is the only parliamentary representative of the rump United National Party (UNP) that was all but obliterated in the 2020 election. Nevertheless, he was installed as prime minister in May when Mahinda Rajapakse was forced to step down, as acting president when Gotabhaya Rajapakse fled, and now president. Already protests and protest sites in Colombo and regional cities are demanding he resign.

Wickremesinghe has been selected to ruthlessly impose the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to strangle the popular uprising that has erupted over the past three months. He made his pitch for the presidency, not to the mass of working people with promises to alleviate their suffering, but to the Sri Lankan ruling class, international finance capital and US imperialism as the candidate able to reestablish capitalist "order."

Wickremesinghe's first acts as acting president were to declare a state of emergency, impose a curfew and give a free hand to the military and police to suppress protesters, who he denounced as "fascists." After being installed as president yesterday, he, in effect, declared war on the popular uprising, saying: "If you try to topple the Government, occupy the President's office and the Prime Minister's office, that is not democracy, it is against the law." To underscore the message, he then went to personally thank the police and military personnel guarding the parliament building.

Wickremesinghe also made a plea to all the establishment parties to close ranks around him against the working class and rural masses. "Sri Lanka is in a very difficult situation… There are big challenges ahead," he declared, making a special appeal to Sajith Premadasa, leader of the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), and former presidents Mahinda Rajapakse and Maithripala Sirisena to work together with him. The opposition parties have been pressing for the formation of an all-party interim government to provide a threadbare charade of "democracy" while the bourgeoisie prepares a ruthless crackdown.

Premadasa, who had backed Alahapperuma for the presidency, immediately indicated his willingness to work together, saying "the opposition will give our utmost support… to put the economy on track and save this country." Alahapperuma added his voice, cynically declaring: "My effort was to support consensus-based policy-making to provide solutions to a deeply suffering population."

The entire anti-democratic parliamentary cabal is committed to implementing IMF austerity and police-state repression against the masses. Wickremesinghe was selected for the presidency because of his decades-long political record as an IMF enforcer, a stooge of US imperialism and his support for bloody state violence against workers and the rural poor.

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Wickremesinghe was first elected to the parliament in 1977. As the nephew of the right-wing President J.R. Jayawardene, he was quickly handed the portfolios of youth affairs and employment in the UNP government as it rewrote the constitution to establish an executive president with extensive autocratic powers and implemented sweeping open market restructuring that devastated the living conditions of working people.

When mass opposition erupted, he was part of the Jayawardene cabinet that sacked over 100,000 striking public sector workers in 1980. As the education minister he brought down the notorious White Paper on Education in 1981, which was the blueprint for slashing the government spending on public education.

To drive a wedge into the continuing opposition to the impact of its pro-market policies, the UNP resorted to foul anti-Tamil propaganda and provocations that culminated in the savage anti-Tamil pogroms in July 1983. Hundreds were killed by UNP-organised thugs, businesses and homes were burnt to the ground and forced tens of thousands of Tamils to flee. The pogrom marked the start of the reactionary communal war prosecuted by the UNP and subsequent Colombo governments against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that cost hundreds of thousands of lives and laid waste to large areas of the island.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the UNP government under President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the father of the current opposition leader, unleashed a wave of unrestrained violence directed at crushing rising discontent among unemployed rural youth in the south of the island. The armed forces and their associated death squads indiscriminately killed at least 60,000 youth.

At the time, Wickremesinghe, who now postures as the defender of democracy and rule of law, was publicly accused of overseeing the torture and murder of youth in the infamous Batalanda torture chambers. It is precisely because he has been so closely associated in carrying out the dirty work for the ruling class that he has been chosen to defend capitalist rule through every means including another bloody crackdown.

Like J.R. Jayawardene, Wickremesinghe is also a long-time lackey of US imperialism. He played a key role in the regime-change operation orchestrated by the US in 2015, to oust Mahinda Rajapakse as president and install Maithripala Sirisena. Washington was hostile to Mahinda Rajapakse, not because of his responsibility for the war crimes carried out by the military in crushing the LTTE by 2009, but because of his close ties to Beijing. As prime minister under Sirisena, Wickremesinghe was instrumental in dramatically realigning foreign policy towards the US and integrating Sri Lanka into US war planning against China.

Wickremesinghe is already broadly despised and hated. Whatever the exact composition of the government he installs, its agenda is clear: to defend the interests of the wealthy corporate elite and international financiers at the expense of the working class and rural masses. The ruling class has no money to offer any concessions of any substance. The next government will only heap more hardship and suffering on top of the chronic shortages and skyrocketing prices of essentials that have already created widespread misery.

The Socialist Equality Party warns that pseudo-left organisations like Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), and the trade unions are continuing to foster the illusion that the social crisis confronting the masses can be solved through the discredited parliament and the parties of the bourgeoisie. While demanding Wickremesinghe's resignation, they continue to support the call of the opposition parties for an all-party interim government—the very parties that yesterday declared their willingness to work together with Wickremesinghe to "save the country," in other words, to save capitalism.

The SEP calls on the working class to take an entirely opposite political road and establish their own independent organs of struggle. We call for the formation of a network of action committees by workers and rural toilers, totally independent of all the discredited capitalist parties and their trade union lackeys, to wage a fight for their democratic and social rights. By rallying youth and the rural poor to its side, the working class will 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.

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