

Newly-installed Sri Lankan President Wickremesinghe oversees brutal police-military assault on protesters

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In the early hours of this morning, hundreds of Sri Lankan soldiers and police officers attacked the main protest encampment in Colombo's Galle Face Green. Their faces covered with balaclavas and carrying heavy weaponry, the state forces indiscriminately assaulted demonstrators, leaving dozens hospitalised.

The 2 a.m. raid is the first act of Ranil Wickremesinghe, since he was installed as president by Sri Lanka's parliament on Wednesday. It is a stark warning of what the right-wing, imperialist-backed leader of the United National Party is preparing.

Since his predecessor, former President Rajapakse, fled the country like a criminal last week, Wickremesinghe has pledged to crack down on the massive protest movement that has rocked the island for the past three months.

This morning's attack was directly instigated by Wickremesinghe, who declared on Wednesday night, shortly after his installation: "We will deal with them firmly according to the law. We will not allow a minority of protesters to suppress the aspirations of the silent majority clamoring for a change in the political system."

The claims that the protesters are a "minority," suppressing a "silent majority," are pathetic lies that no one will believe. The demonstrations and strikes have been the largest in Sri Lankan history. What Wickremesinghe was really foreshadowing, was the deployment of massive military force to try to crush this immense movement.

The raid this morning proceeded, despite the fact that protesters said they would end an occupation of the Presidential Secretariat in front of Galle Face Green. Their assurance was in response to warnings by Wickremesinghe that any occupation of government buildings were illegal and those involved would be dealt according to the law. It was timed in the dead of the night, to catch the demonstrators while most were sleeping and to ensure that the attack was not met by a broader mobilisation.

The state brutality included a police assault on a British Broadcasting Corporation journalist. An untold number of those attacked required hospital treatment, with some sustaining serious injuries.

The assault is one prong of a feverish campaign by the political elite to restabilise capitalist rule. This is occurring, under conditions of mass hostility to the entire political establishment. Protesters, having demanded the ouster of Rajapakse, are calling on Wickremesinghe to resign. He has no popular backing and was elected president, not by ordinary people but by the parliament.

"Down with all 225 parliamentarians" has been a long-standing popular demand of the working class and the protest movement.

While overseeing the onslaught on protesters, Wickremesinghe reiterated his appeal for all parliamentary parties to back him. Referring to Wednesday's bogus election process, he declared: "We were divided for the last 48 hours. That period is over. We now have to work together."

Dallas Alahapperuma, a Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) parliamentarian and candidate in the presidential election, and Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) leader Sajith Premadasa, who backed the former in the election, have already indicated their readiness to work with Wickremesinghe.

Premadasa met with Wickremesinghe at a party leaders' meeting in parliament yesterday, declaring that he had "a cordial and frank exchange of ideas and reiterated the opposition's determination to provide constructive support to avert misery and disaster." All of the parliamentary parties have previously stated their willingness to implement the austerity measures being demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The response of big business to Wickremesinghe's installation was summed up by a five-week high on the Colombo stock market after his election on Wednesday, indicating confidence that his ruthless implementation of austerity measures will boost their profits.

The US and Indian ambassadors in Colombo have welcomed Wickremesinghe's election. Two days before Wednesday's election, the parliamentary speaker Abeywardena had a high-level joint meeting with the US, UK, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand ambassadors.

US Ambassador Julie Chung later tweeted that she looked forward to working with Wickremesinghe and echoed his appeal for all parliamentary parties to collaborate. “In these challenging times, it will be essential for all parties to redouble efforts to work together to tackle the economic crisis, uphold democracy & accountability, and build a stable & secure future for all Sri Lankans,” she said.

Given Wickremesinghe’s record as a reliable agent of US imperialism, Washington will work to more closely integrate Colombo into its military-strategic offensive against China.

Sensitive to the deep-seated hatred of the Sri Lankan masses against Colombo’s ruling establishment and the worsening economic crisis, the Indian High Commission in Colombo issued a carefully worded statement acknowledging the new president.

“As a close friend and neighbour of Sri Lanka and a fellow democracy we will continue to be supportive of the quest of the people of Sri Lanka for stability and economic recovery, through democratic means and values, established democratic institutions and constitutional framework,” it said.

An anonymous senior Indian official quoted in the *Indian Express* declared: “He faces very tough challenges... winning the election is one thing, getting the job done [in time], this is his real test.”

These statements point to the Indian ruling elite’s concerns about the ability of the new regime to suppress the inevitable eruption of opposition by the already starving working masses to the planned IMF measures. The escalating socio-economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka is the sharpest expression of global economic turmoil, exacerbated by the persisting coronavirus pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia using Ukraine.

In recent comments to the international media, Central Bank governor Nandalal Weerasinghe said that the Sri Lankan population would face serious difficulties over the next five months. He previously predicted that Sri Lanka’s current inflation rate of about 50 percent would quickly climb to 70 percent, and emphasised that “stable” government was required in order to finalise a deal with the IMF.

A few hours before Wickremesinghe officially became president, IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva declared that she hoped its so-called rescue talks would be concluded “as quickly as possible.” She also warned that, “[T]here is an understanding that protracted negotiations are simply not viable, that there has to be decisive action as early as three weeks after a [new] government is in place.”

In other words, the IMF is reinforcing its message to Wickremesinghe, who has demonstrated time and time again that he will do whatever it takes, including the ruthless use of police-military force to crush all political opposition and

impose the IMF’s austerity attacks on the working class and oppressed masses.

The measures that are planned include the privatisation of essential services that remain in state hands, hundreds of thousands of job cuts across the public sector, the dismantling of public health and education and the withdrawal of limited subsidies upon which hundreds of thousands are depending just to survive.

This onslaught will inevitably intensify social opposition from the working class.

As executive president, Wickremesinghe has wide-ranging autocratic powers to unleash police military repression against all opponents of the austerity agenda. Friday’s attack is a warning of what he is planning more broadly.

Wickremesinghe’s elevation to the presidency and his attempts to implement this program depend entirely on the opposition parties and their hangers on.

As the SLPP, SJB and other parliamentary parties work with Wickremesinghe to establish an interim, all-party government, various pseudo-left organisations and the trade unions are tirelessly working to divert workers, young people and the rural poor behind these reactionary manoeuvres.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) alone has warned that the Sri Lankan working class must politically and organisationally prepare for mass struggles against this brutal pro-IMF regime and the capitalist profit system on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

In a crucial statement yesterday, the SEP called for preparations to be made for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. This congress would be composed of action committees, established by workers and the toilers themselves, to organise and coordinate the struggles they are entering into.

The statement explained that the fight for a Democratic and Socialist Congress, bringing together a vast network of such committees, provides “a political strategy for the working class to consolidate its forces, win the active support of the rural masses and lay the basis for its own rule through a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to restructuring society on socialist lines.”

Workers, youth and the rural masses must study, discuss, and act on the revolutionary program elaborated in this statement.



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