

New Sri Lankan president appoints his predecessor's cabinet

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Last Friday, Sri Lankan president Ranil Wickremesinghe appointed virtually the same cabinet of 18 ministers as his predecessor, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, making clear that there will be no change in the government's agenda. In response to the country's unprecedented economic and political crisis, it will impose the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and brutally suppress any opposition.

Just prior to appointing the cabinet, in the early hours of Friday, Wickremesinghe gave the go-ahead for a violent crackdown on unarmed, anti-government protesters on Galle Face Green in central Colombo demanding his resignation. Thousands of soldiers and police attacked protesters and journalists and tore down tents and makeshift structures. Galle Face Green has been the central protest site in the three months of mass strikes and protests, fuelled by extreme shortages and skyrocketing prices for essentials, which forced Rajapakse to flee the country and resign.

Wickremesinghe was appointed "acting president" by Rajapakse as he fled then installed as president in a parliamentary vote last week. Wickremesinghe, a longstanding right-wing political hack known for pro-US and pro-IMF loyalties, has no popular support and depended on the votes of Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). He has assumed the powerful ministerial posts of defense and finance, as well as wielding the sweeping autocratic powers of the executive presidency.

As prime minister, Wickremesinghe has appointed Dinesh Gunawardane, a close confidant of the Rajapakse brothers and parliamentary leader of the House who has held senior ministerial posts in SLPP-led governments. Gunawardane, who entered parliament in 1983, is leader of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), a Sinhala chauvinist party established by his father Philip

Gunawardene—a renegade from the Trotskyist movement in the 1940s.

Gunawardane takes over from Wickremesinghe who was appointed as prime minister in May, after Mahinda Rajapakse was compelled by mass strikes to step down. The only other change in the cabinet line-up is the omission of the previous foreign minister, G.L. Peiris, who refused to back the Rajapakses' choice of Wickremesinghe as president. Instead, Peiris openly called for the SLPP to vote for one of its own MPs, Dallas Alahapperuma, in last week's parliamentary vote.

The Rajapakses strongly supported Wickremesinghe, even though he is the only parliamentarian of the rump United National Party (UNP), as the political figure most able to carry out the anti-working class agenda demanded by the ruling class. He also undoubtedly had strong backing from the country's corporate elite, US imperialism, the IMF and Sri Lanka's international creditors.

Ali Sabry, Gotabhaya Rajapakse's personal lawyer and trusted confidante, was appointed foreign minister. He was justice minister in the Rajapakse government then briefly finance minister in April.

According to media reports, Wickremesinghe told the first cabinet meeting that the security forces are empowered to uphold the constitution and to create an environment for people to live without fear. This is a pledge to the ruling class, not working people, that the government will do whatever is necessary to protect the wealthy, their property and bourgeois rule. The attack on the Galle Face Green protesters on Friday was to underscore this promise.

Wickremesinghe had already declared a state of emergency which gives the military wide powers to ban protests, arbitrarily arrest and detain people, and carry out searches. He issued another decree on Friday, deploying the military throughout the island to maintain "public

order.”

On Friday evening, Wickremesinghe, along with Inspector General of Police and foreign ministry officials “unofficially” briefed Colombo-based diplomats. This followed token expressions of concern by some diplomats, including US ambassador Julie Chung, over the early morning raid on protesters. These “concerns” were not for the protesters, but rather that the crackdown could provoke further widespread popular unrest.

The social crisis facing working people is dire. Annual inflation has hit nearly 60 percent and there are chronic shortages of essential foods, fuel and medicines. A recent FAO report found “6.3 million people are food insecure, while another 6.7 million people are not consuming acceptable dietary food as of June” in Sri Lanka.

Wickremesinghe emphatically defended the military’s actions, reportedly asking the assembled diplomats whether “protesters could illegally occupy the President’s Office in their respective countries.” He called on diplomats “to check with the relevant officials when making statements, as statements based on social media reports alone could damage Sri Lanka’s image.”

Wickremesinghe is attempting to dress up his regime as an all-party government. Prime Minister Gunawardane has been assigned to negotiate with opposition parties and, if one or more is prepared to join the government, the cabinet reportedly could be expanded from the current 18 to 25 or more members with parliamentary approval. Wickremesinghe is desperate to present a united political façade for the brutal measures that the government will carry out.

The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), led by opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), led by former president Maithripala Sirisena, had indicated their willingness to join an all-party government depending on what was proposed. However, last Friday’s attack on protesters prompted them to maintain their distance for the time being.

Premadasa declared last weekend: “We are prepared to play a role in the government through (parliamentary) committees, but do not intend to accept ministerial portfolios.” After meeting with some trade union leaders, he announced that he will set up a national council including representatives of the trade unions and civil organisations on Tuesday that will function from his office.

All of the government and opposition parties are committed to carrying out the IMF’s austerity agenda but are fearful of the reaction of the working class and rural

masses to the intolerable conditions they confront.

Over the past three months, the opposition parties and the trade unions have been instrumental in undermining the mass popular uprising and sabotaging the independent intervention of the working class. All of them have backed the formation of an all-party, interim government as the means of keeping working people shackled to the political establishment and blocking a political struggle against the source of the social crisis—the capitalist system. A “national council” is just a variant of the same political trap.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has warned the working class against Wickremesinghe’s preparations for a bloody crackdown and emphasized the importance of workers and peasants establishing action committees, independent of the trade unions and opposition parties, to fight for their social and democratic rights.

In its July 20 statement, the SEP launched a campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses to provide the means to politically oppose the agenda of the ruling class. Such a congress, it stated, “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. The faster the workers and rural masses take up the political fight to build action committees, the sooner a congress of workers and rural toilers can be convened to oppose the disaster being prepared by the ruling classes. We offer every political assistance to those who want to take up this fight.”



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