

Sri Lankan government endorses and extends President Wickremesinghe's state of emergency

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In an ominous sign of the repressive measures being prepared, the Sri Lankan parliament voted yesterday to extend the current state of emergency by another month. The state of emergency gives sweeping powers to the military to ban protests and strikes, arbitrarily arrest and detain anyone, search property and vehicles and censor the media.

After being installed anti-democratically as president by a parliamentary vote last week, Wickremesinghe's first act was to authorise the security forces to violently disperse anti-government protesters on Galle Face Green in central Colombo. The protest site has been a central focus for the three months of strikes and protests fuelled by the country's unprecedented economic and social crisis that has led to chronic shortages and huge price rises of essential food, fuel and medicines.

Wickremesinghe decreed the state of emergency after being appointed acting president by former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse who fled the country on July 13 in the face of massive popular opposition. Last week Wickremesinghe, a veteran political hack, stooge of US imperialism and advocate of pro-market restructuring, was installed anti-democratically through a vote in parliament, despite overwhelming popular opposition.

Wickremesinghe, the only parliamentarian of his rump United National Party (UNP), is completely dependent on Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which used its parliamentary majority to ram through the extension to the state of emergency. The vote was 120 to 63 in the 225-member parliament with some 40 MPs abstaining.

Wickremesinghe has been installed to impose the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) in return for emergency funding and to suppress the widespread opposition of workers and rural toilers. The IMF measures will mean a further acceleration of prices as subsidies are eliminated, sweeping public sector job losses, increased taxes on those least able to afford them and a raft of privatisations. All this is on top of already intolerable living conditions with large sections of the population in hunger and facing starvation.

As executive president, Wickremesinghe has sweeping powers, including to call out the military, to arbitrarily dismiss and appoint ministers and governments, and to take on ministries himself. He has reappointed virtually unchanged the hated cabinet of his predecessor but kept a swathe of ministries for himself, including the key portfolios of Finance and Defence, as well as Technology, Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment, Ports, Shipping and Aviation, and Investment Promotion.

As defence minister, Wickremesinghe has overall command of the repressive state apparatus, including the the military, and will not hesitate to use it to crack down on opposition. As defence secretary, the defence ministry's top bureaucrat, Wickremesinghe has reinstalled Rajapakse's appointee—retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne.

Yesterday, as parliament extended the state of emergency, the police announced the arrest of two anti-government activists, Kusal Sandaruwan and Weranga Pushpika, on bogus charges of unlawful assembly. A third, student leader Dhaniz Ali, was arrested on Tuesday night at Colombo's international airport as he attempted to leave on a Dubai-bound flight.

While Wickremesinghe is dependent on the SLPP's

parliamentary majority, he is being backed by the country's corporate elite, international investors and creditors, and the major powers, including US imperialism, as the political figure to impose the agenda of austerity and repression.

Significantly, US ambassador to Colombo Julie Chung met with Wickremesinghe yesterday to assure him of Washington's support. In what was described by the state-owned *Daily News* as "a friendly conversation," Chung tweeted that Sri Lanka's economic and political crisis had been discussed and she had assured the Sri Lankan president that the two countries would "work together to navigate toward a brighter future for all." No mention was made of Chung's token "concerns" about the vicious military-police crackdown on the Galle Face Green protest site.

Wickremesinghe was prime minister in the "national unity" government installed in a US-orchestrated regime-change operation that ousted President Mahinda Rajapakse, Gotabhaya's brother, at the 2015 elections. Washington was hostile to Mahinda Rajapakse's dependence on and strengthening ties with Beijing. Wickremesinghe was instrumental in shifting Sri Lankan foreign policy into the US camp and integrating the country more closely into the escalating US-led confrontation with China.

While the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) criticised the government and voted against extending the state of emergency, it has no opposition to Wickremesinghe's anti-working class agenda. Indeed until 2020, all of the SJB leaders were part of the UNP led by Wickremesinghe and their breakaway was not as a result of any fundamental policy differences. Like Wickremesinghe, the SJB's criticism of the Rajapakse government was that it had not sought an IMF emergency bailout, with its harsh austerity demands, sooner.

Desperate to prop up bourgeois rule, the SJB along with other opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—have been desperate to corral the mass popular opposition behind the demand for an all-party interim government. Such a regime would implement identical policies to those of Wickremesinghe.

SJB parliamentarian Sarath Fonseka yesterday declared that he and his party would join the final battle to get rid of the present corrupt government and

nominated August 9 for a showdown with the government. The root cause of the current crisis is not corruption as such but the profit system, which subordinates all to the profits of the wealthy few. Fonseka is simply proposing another reshuffle of venal capitalist politicians—replacing Wickremesinghe as president with the current prime minister, Dinesh Gunawardena.

Field Marshal Fonseka was formerly head of the military in which he collaborated with Mahinda and Gotabhaya Rajapakse in the bloody final offensives of Colombo's protracted communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). All three are responsible for war crimes including the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in the last months of the war in 2009.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party that is charting an independent political course of the working class and rural toilers to resolve the immense social and economic crisis they confront. It has urged workers and peasants to establish their own 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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