

Sri Lankan regime extends its arrests of leading anti-government protesters

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Newly installed Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe is extending the state repression of leading figures in the popular uprising that has already forced Gotabaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign as president. Calls are already being made for the resignation of Wickremesinghe who is determined to impose the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that will only worsen the already intolerable conditions facing working people.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its youth and student wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) strongly condemn this state repression. Despite our fundamental political differences with the protest leaders, we call on workers and youth to come to their defence. The government repression is the preparation for a far broader crackdown on the working class and rural masses.

Following his swearing in as president last Thursday, Wickremesinghe oversaw a violent military-police crackdown on Galle Face Green in Colombo, the main protest site, in the early hours of the following morning. Thousands of police and soldiers attacked sleeping protesters, including women and children, and some were severely beaten. Their temporary structures, including tents were destroyed and nine were arrested.

Other arrests have followed. On Tuesday night student leader Dhaniz Ali was arrested at Colombo's international airport while he was boarding a Dubai-bound flight. On Wednesday, police announced the arrest of two more anti-government activists, Kusal Sandaruwan and Weeranga Pushpika on charges of unlawful assembly.

Yesterday, social media activist Pathum Kerner, who has played a leading role in the protests, was arrested by the Colombo Crimes Division which accused him of involvement in a protest at an entry road to the parliament early this month. On the same day, a police team raided a Catholic church in Ratnapura, 85 kilometers from

Colombo, searching for a priest, Fr. Amila Jeewantha Peiris, another prominent protest leader, claiming to have an order for his arrest.

The government is clearly preparing for a police dragnet. On July 27, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) announced that its investigation teams had identified some 150 people involved in breaking into the Presidential Palace, Temple Trees (the prime minister's official residence), the Presidential Secretariat and Prime Minister's Offices and damaging property.

Retired Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera, the former public security minister in the Rajapakse government, told the media yesterday that fingerprints found in the government administration buildings occupied by protesters would be sent to the airport to prevent those involved from leaving the country. Yesterday a Colombo magistrate ordered a travel ban on 21 protesters.

The *Morning* reported yesterday that other protest activists, including attorney Nuwan Bopage, Catholic priest Jeewantha Peiris, Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) convener Wasantha Mudalige and former IUSF convener Lahiru Weerasekera were being intimidated by security forces who were tapping their phones and following them. Protesters told the newspaper that they had been prevented from reestablishing tents on the protest site at Galle Face Green after last Friday's raid.

The government used the parliamentary debate on Wednesday on extending the state of emergency to justify its police state measures. In his inaugural speech as prime minister, Dinesh Gunawardena, a close confidant of Gotabaya Rajapakse, effectively denounced anti-government protesters as "terrorists." He said the government would listen to the demands of peaceful protesters but would not yield to acts of "terrorism."

No such distinction was made by the police and soldiers who descended on the Galle Face Green protest site last

Friday where everyone including women and children were treated as “terrorists.” The term is simply the crude pretext for the police repression that is underway.

“Terrorism was the greatest threat to democracy, and the parliament, which upholds democracy would not support such acts of terrorism,” Gunawardena added. Far from upholding democracy, parliament upholds the rule of the capitalist class and defends the interests of the country’s wealthy elite and international finance capital.

The fraud of parliamentary democracy was exposed again last week when a parliamentary vote installed Wickremesinghe as president, who has no public support and is the sole parliamentarian of the rump United National Party. Wickremesinghe then installed Gunawardena as prime minister and re-appointed virtually the entire hated cabinet of Gotabhaya Rajapakse to their posts. The millions who have joined protests and strikes over the past three months had no say at all.

Needless to say, the parliament extended the state of emergency for another month, giving sweeping powers to the military to ban protests and strikes, arbitrarily arrest and detain people, search property and vehicles and censor media.

Wimal Weerawansa, one of a group of the parliamentarians who broke away from Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), bluntly explained that these so-called “independents” had voted for the state of emergency to prevent the capitalist state from being destroyed. Without the emergency, he said, “If the activists continue to protest to evict everyone who is in power, we cannot do anything. We have to accept that this is a legitimate government, whether we like it or not.”

The parliamentary opposition parties—Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—while voting against the emergency, have no fundamental differences with the Wickremesinghe government and would, if in power, implement the savage IMF austerity agenda just as ruthlessly.

The opposition parties are calling for an all-party interim government as a means of diverting public opposition into safe parliamentary channels and shoring up bourgeois rule. The SJB and SLFP, while criticising the government, are keeping their options open for some type of collaboration with it. An SLFP delegation led by party chairman and former president Maithripala Sirisena held talks with Wickremesinghe on the proposal for an all-party government yesterday.

Pseudo-left organisations, like the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), also back the formation of a bourgeois all-party interim government. Speaking to the media yesterday, FSP education secretary Pubudu Jagoda attacked the government and the emergency regulations not from the standpoint of defending democratic rights, but for “further undermining Sri Lanka’s credibility.”

Jagoda criticized Wickremesinghe for failing to ensure “political stability”—in other words, the stability of bourgeois rule demanded by the IMF as a pre-condition for financial assistance. “No one is going to help a man like Wickremesinghe. It is obvious that he is incapable of ensuring political stability. Countries like the EU, China or Japan will not help a state mired in political instability,” he said.

The SEP is the only party providing an independent revolutionary socialist program and perspective for the working class and the rural masses to fight for securing their social and democratic rights against the entire political establishment as well as its pseudo-lefts and trade union agents. The SEP is calling on workers and rural toilers to form their own action committees independent of all capitalist parties and the trade unions.

In a major statement issued on July 20, the SEP has launched a campaign to build “a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses” to provide “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.”



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