

Sri Lanka: Stop the repression of anti-government protesters! Release all political prisoners!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe has intensified the police crackdown against anti-government protesters which began under the Rajapakse regime. According to police reports, about 3,800 people have been arrested since mass protests started in April, with 1,400 still being held in remand or detention camps.

On Thursday, police arrested the well-known teledrama and film actress Damitha Abeyratne, a prominent leader in the protest group that occupied Galle Face Green in central Colombo and launched the GotaGo Gama [Resign President Gotabhaya Rajapakse] campaign in April.

Abeyratne was forced into a police jeep on the outskirts of Colombo, straight after she had participated in a protest opposing the ongoing state repression. A magistrate remanded her until September 14, following police requests. Amid mass outrage, she was granted bail yesterday but faces bogus police charges, including forcibly entering the presidential secretariat and obstructing police.

On Friday, another activist Lahiru Weerasekera, secretary of “Youth for Change,” a front organisation of the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), was arrested. He was bailed on Saturday.

Late last month, Wickremesinghe signed a 90-day Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) detention order to incarcerate three activists of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), including its convener, Wasantha Mudalige. They are being held at a detention camp in Tangalle, 180 km south of Colombo.

Notwithstanding our fundamental differences with the political views of those arrested and their organisations and parties, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns this vicious witch hunt, and demands the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and the dropping of all charges.

The FSP and various middle-class activists prominent in the mass protests demanding Rajapakse’s resignation and an end to rampant inflation and chronic shortages directed working people into the arms of the country’s bourgeois opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). In promoting an all-party interim government, they bear political responsibility for facilitating the installation of Wickremesinghe as president who is now imposing the IMF’s austerity agenda and cracking down on political opposition.

The SEP opposed this perspective from the outset, warning that it kept workers and the poor trapped within the capitalist framework. From the very beginning, we campaigned for the independent mobilisation of the working class on a revolutionary socialist perspective.

Rajapakse fled the country in response to mass protests and general strikes, appointing

Wickremesinghe as interim president as he left. Wickremesinghe has no legitimacy and is widely despised, having been a senior minister in governments that prosecuted the protracted and bloody anti-Tamil communal war and in 1987–1990 unleashed a state terror campaign against rural youth, massacring at least 60,000.

Within hours of being installed as president by the discredited parliament, Wickremesinghe ordered the violent military-police eviction of protesters occupying the presidential secretariat. Nine campaigners were arrested and dozens injured in this assault. He has denounced protest leaders as “fascist” and “terrorists.”

Police have concocted flimsy charges against the protesters, such as entering the presidential secretariat and the president’s and the prime minister’s residences and damaging property in these buildings. Police and military intelligence are combing through CCTV and media

photographs to identify more people to arrest. Some have been arrested solely on the basis of “evidence” provided by Rajapakse’s supporters.

Addressing police on September 3, Wickremesinghe hailed their repression as the defence of democracy. “We must work in accordance with the constitution. If they do not work in accordance with the constitution, action should be taken against them... if democracy is to be preserved in this country, the constitution of the country must be preserved,” he declared.

What are the implications of these claims? It means that any action taken by workers and the poor to defend their social and democratic rights, or to oppose the country’s thoroughly anti-democratic constitution, the state and the capitalist system, is illegal!

In fighting for their interests, the working class and the poor are not bound to obey the dictates of Wickremesinghe and the ruling elite. The Sri Lankan capitalist class, like its counterparts around the world, has created a social disaster for millions, imposing the burden of the deepening economic crisis on the masses.

The popular uprising that began in April, which involved the active support of millions on workers and the poor, shook the Sri Lankan ruling class to the core and raised alarm in international capitals. Wickremesinghe knows that this mass opposition will erupt again as he imposes the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on working people.

Wickremesinghe’s terror campaign and the ongoing arrests are the preparation for all-out class war. The working class should take this as a warning and prepare for its own counteroffensive.

The SJB, the main parliamentary opposition party, has issued feeble criticisms of the Wickremesinghe’s state repression. Its empty phrases are in order to exploit and derail the mass anger over the government attacks.

The JVP, having helped the trade unions shackle the mass opposition, is calling for a general election to form a government with “new mandate” to better implement the next round brutal social attacks. The SJB and the JVP both support the IMF’s austerity agenda and would be just as ruthless and anti-democratic as Wickremesinghe in its implementation.

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The trade unions, supported by the JVP, FSP and the IUSF, have come together under the guise of opposing state repression. At a recent seminar attended by the SJB, along with several Muslim and Tamil capitalist parties

and representatives of key imperialist countries, they claimed it was possible to pressure the Wickremesinghe regime to end the state repression.

The sinister role of the trade unions and the pseudo-left FSP is to block the development of an independent political movement of the working class to oppose state repression and defend all democratic and social rights on the basis of a socialist program.

In opposition to all these pro-capitalist parties, the SEP urges workers and youth to fight for following demands:

The immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners!

The repeal of all repressive laws, including the PTA, Essential Public Services Act, and Public Security Ordinance Emergency Law!

As part of this campaign, we also call for a vigorous campaign to abolish the autocratic executive presidency, which is the strategic cockpit of the ruling class for unleashing state repression.

The fight for these demands requires the independent mobilisation of the vast social power of the working class. Workers need to build action committees in their workplaces and neighbourhoods and to assist the rural poor to build their own action committees. These must be independent of the trade unions and all the capitalist parties.

The root cause of Colombo’s rising state repression is the deepening crisis of capitalism and reflected in the turn by the ruling classes in every country towards fascist and dictatorial forms of rule.

The SEP urges workers to link the battle against the Wickremesinghe’s anti-democratic assault to the struggle against capitalism and for an internationalist and socialist program. We advance a series of demands to meet the pressing needs of working people, including the repudiation of all foreign debts, and the nationalisation of the banks, large companies and the estates under democratic workers’ control.

The SEP is campaigning for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on delegates from action committees of workers and the poor, to advance the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government for the socialist reorganisation of society.



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