

Discredited Sri Lankan ruling party attempts a comeback

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Just three months after former Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was forced to flee the country and resign amid facing a popular uprising, his discredited Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) is attempting to revive its political fortunes. Gotabhaya's elder brother and former Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapakse is leading the SLPP campaign under the banner "Let's rise together," with public meetings to test the waters. The first two such meetings were held in Kalutara and Nawalapitiya in western and central provinces on October 8 and 16 respectively.

The Rajapakses and their SLPP confronted a mass uprising from early April over the unbearable conditions confronting the working people, youth and rural toilers, including widespread scarcities and skyrocketing prices of essentials like food, medicine and fuel and long hours of daily power cuts. The working class played a central role, joining one-day general strikes in their millions on April 28 and May 6. Mass protests demanded the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government, and an end to the social calamity.

Mahinda Rajapakse was forced to flee his official residence and resign on May 9, amid mass outrage over a violent attack by thugs, which he instigated, on anti-government protesters outside the building and occupying Galle Face Green in central Colombo. His cabinet collapsed immediately but Gotabhaya Rajapakse adamantly refused to step down. As the protests continued, he fled the country on July 13.

Such has been the widespread public hostility towards the Rajapakses and SLPP parliamentarians that they were not able to attend public events, visit their constituencies and could only move about under heavy extra security.

The deeply unpopular Ranil Wickremesinghe, the lone MP of the right-wing United National Party (UNP), was installed as president anti-democratically by the discredited parliament, mainly through SLPP votes. He formed a new cabinet virtually the same old SLPP.

Despite mass opposition to its implementation of harsh International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity demands, Wickremesinghe and the SLPP are insisting that the government will see out the current parliament's term due to end in 2025. Since assuming the autocratic executive presidency, Wickremesinghe has carried out a ruthless crackdown on protests and protest leaders.

Working people face grave dangers as the Wickremesinghe government consolidates its position, seeks to impose the burden of the country's severe economic crisis onto workers, youth and

rural toilers, and to crush any popular opposition.

To defend its class interests, the working class needs to understand why the discredited SLPP has been able to raise its ugly head, after the mass struggles that shook the capitalist class to the core. The chief political responsibility rests with the opposition parties—Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—and the trade unions and the pseudo-left groups that promoted the dangerous illusion that these parties represented a genuine alternative.

The SJB and JVP have no fundamental differences with the Wickremesinghe government and fully support the austerity measures dictated by the IMF. Indeed, the SJB criticised the Rajapakses for not seeking an IMF emergency loans sooner. During the mass protests, the two opposition parties offered to salvage bourgeois rule by proposing an all-party, interim capitalist government to implement the same agenda.

The JVP, which in the past claimed to be socialist, now blames government corruption, not capitalism, for the current economic and social crisis. It is calling for early elections and offering its services to the ruling class to form a government with the legitimacy needed to impose new burdens on working people.

In a recent talk show on Hiru TV, JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake justified the government's approach to the IMF as a move "bound up with default of [foreign] debts." He emphasised that "the society must bear some burden to find a way out from the crisis." Dissanayake insisted that only a new government with a fresh "mandate" could implement the necessary austerity program.

Any government formed by the SJB or the JVP will be just as ruthless as Wickremesinghe in imposing the IMF's demands for massive public sector job cuts, new taxes on working people, extensive privatisation and the slashing of essential social services, and crushing any popular opposition.

The SLPP's revival has been politically facilitated by the betrayal of the popular movement against Rajapakse government by the trade unions and pseudo-left groups, including the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). Despite the powerful intervention of workers in their millions in the general strikes, unions limited them to one-day actions. At the same time, the unions and pseudo-lefts backed the calls by the opposition SJB and JVP for an interim government to stabilise capitalist rule.

By limiting and demobilising the working class, the unions paved the way for Wickremesinghe to take office and for the Rajapakses to attempt to resurrect their political fortunes and that

of their SLPP. A clear indication that political tide was shifting was the return of Gotabhaya Rajapakse to Sri Lanka unopposed on September 3.

The various middle-class groups and self-proclaimed leaders who launched the occupation of Galle Face Green in early April played a very similar role in demoralising the tens of thousands of workers and youth who rallied to their call to oust Gotabhaya Rajapakse. They also threw their support behind the opposition parties and the call for an interim government which was also backed by big business.

The pseudo-left FSP supported these middle-class elements and their pro-capitalist agenda, declaring the Galle Face Green occupation to be the epicentre of the political struggle. In the face of mounting state repression, the groups and leaders behind the occupation have fragmented and dispersed—some are supporting the government, others are backing opposition parties, and some are joining in the FSP's bogus campaign.

In the name of building a “mass movement” against the government, the FSP is using its Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) to forge an opportunist political front with the trade unions and opposition parties, which it promotes as champions of democracy, and encouraging the false hope that the Wickremesinghe regime can be pressured to halt its repression.

Wickremesinghe and the Rajapakses, while being bitter rivals in the past, have united in the defence of Sri Lankan capitalism. Wickremesinghe enjoys sweeping autocratic powers as executive president, but is dependent on the SLPP which provides virtually all the cabinet ministers, as well as a parliamentary majority.

Likewise, the Rajapakses rely on Wickremesinghe to help revive the SLPP by giving it a thin veneer of legitimacy. At the Nawalapitiya meeting, Mahinda Rajapakse's son, MP Namal Rajapakse, thanked Wickremesinghe for “wiping out the Galle Face Aragallaya [struggle].”

The deepening social crisis, however, is already propelling the working class into struggle as the government's austerity measures destroy jobs and contribute to soaring inflation that has reached 75 percent, with food inflation at 102 percent. Some public sector workers, including those from the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, have already taken strike action and engaged in protests in defiance of government threats under the repressive essential public service orders.

The ruling class is clearly fearful of a new round of strikes and protests. An editorial in the *Island* on October 17 declared: “Let the government be warned that it is testing people's patience and creating conditions for the next wave of popular uprisings, which will make the previous ones look like mere ripples in a puddle.”

The critical issue for the working class is to learn the essential political lessons of the first stage of the struggle: workers face disaster if they remain shackled to the trade unions and opposition parties. The Socialist Equality Party alone has called on workers and rural toilers to establish independent action committees in every workplace, factory, neighborhood and rural area, through which they can fight for their social and democratic rights.

In opposition to the claims of every other political party that there is no choice but to accept the dictates of the IMF and international finance capital, the SEP has advocated a series of

transitional demands addressing the basic needs of working people, including:

- * Put the production and distribution of all essential items and other resources critical for lives of working people under the democratic control of the working class.

- * Nationalise the banks, big corporations, plantations and other major economic nerve centres.

- * Repudiate all foreign debt and reject the IMF austerity demands.

- * Seize the colossal wealth of the billionaires and major corporations.

- * Cancel the debts of poor and marginal farmers and small-business holders. Reinststate all price subsidies, including for fertilisers for farmers.

- * Guarantee jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions. Index wages to the cost of living.

In opposition to an interim capitalist government, the SEP has called for the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based representatives from a network of action committees throughout the country, to spearhead the political struggle for these demands. To fight against the dangers posed before workers and the poor by the Wickremesinghe regime, we call on working people to build this congress as the necessary power centre to assert their class interests.

Workers in Sri Lanka can successfully wage this fight only by uniting with the international working class which is coming into struggle in the major capitalist centres as well as in the backward countries. In forming their own action committees, we urge workers to join the struggle to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees as the basis for establishing that international unity.

The struggle to establish a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses will pave way for the overthrow of the profit system and the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government committed to socialist policies, as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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