Sri Lankan president threatens to crush anti-government struggles

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On Wednesday, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe threatened to take police state action to suppress anti-government protests. Speaking in parliament during the budget debate, he declared: "There are plans to initiate another 'Aragalaya' (struggle) to change the government. But I won't give space for that. I will get the military and the forces and I will impose a state of emergency."

Wickremesinghe was referring to a possible repeat of the mass upsurge of workers and poor from April to July that ousted former president Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his regime.

The declaration of a state of emergency gives the president draconian powers to deploy the military, proscribe any organisation including political parties, ban protests and strikes, arbitrarily arrest or detain anyone, search property and censor the media.

The mass protests that began in April demanded the resignation of Rajapakse and his government and an end to the intolerable inflation, shortages of essential items, and long hours of power cuts. This four-month struggle, involving millions of workers and the poor, and directed against the entire ruling class, forced Rajapakse to flee the country as his government collapsed.

The mass movement was betrayed by the trade unions, backed by pseudo-left groups including the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). These forces lined up with the bourgeois opposition parties to pave the way for the pro-US stooge Wickremesinghe to come to power through an anti-democratic vote by the discredited parliament.

Wickremesinghe's elevation did not resolve any of the burning issues facing the masses. Instead, his regime intensified the attacks on living conditions, fuelling hyperinflation and starvation.

Significantly, Wickremesinghe made his threat to crush popular opposition during the debate on a budget dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It contains savage austerity measures, including spending cuts, exorbitant taxes and privatisations, and foreshadows hundreds of thousands of job cuts in the public sector.

The government and the entire ruling class fear that these measures will spark a new wave of working class struggles and opposition among the rural poor.

Wickremesinghe cynically stated: "Anyone has the freedom to protest," then added that such actions would require police permission. "Go to the police to take permission and then walk on the roads, shout that I am a dictator or I am like Hitler" but "don't obstruct traffic," he declared.

The president insinuated that the months of protests against his predecessor were terrorist-instigated actions. He referred to "violence" erupting across the country against ruling party MPs and their supporters. In fact, violent attacks were carried out by thugs, mobilised by former prime minister Mahinda Rajapakse, against anti-government protesters in front of his official residence and at Galle Face Green on May 9. This had nothing to do with the mass protests.

At the time, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned that violence against MPs by some politically unstable elements would only strengthen the state.

The president dismissed the opposition parties' call for parliamentary elections, saying: "I will not dissolve parliament early until the economic crisis is resolved." This pretext could be used to illegally prolong the Wickremesinghe government's rule indefinitely, under the guise of recovering from the unprecedented economic crisis.

The call for a general election by the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has nothing to do with defending the democratic and social rights of the population. Rather, these parties are seeking to divert mass opposition behind their campaign for political power.

Wickremesinghe's claims of FSP-instigated violence was made without a shred of evidence. Despite the SEP's fundamental political differences with this group, we unequivocally condemn the president's threats against the FSP. His statements are aimed at intimidating all political opposition, especially in the working class, where there are many signs of rising anger.

Five hundred plantation workers at Glenugie Estate in Upcot, in Nuwara Eliya, recently went on strike for 18 days against the back-breaking workload and associated pay cuts. On Tuesday and Wednesday, 1,200 Government Press employees went on strike against salary cuts. Yesterday, thousands of Telecom workers held protests throughout the county opposing privatisation.

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Wickremesinghe lacks any popular support. His political base, the ousted president Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), has fractured amid mass opposition: he was elected on the vote of 134 MPs in July but his budget was passed only by 121 votes.

Wickremesinghe has held onto power using the same authoritarian methods as his predecessor. His first act as president on July 22 was deploying the military and police to forcibly evict hundreds of protesters who had been occupying the presidential secretariat for months. Several weeks later, protesters occupying the Galle Face Green were also violently ousted by the police. While hysterically denouncing protesters as terrorists and fascists, the president unleashed a police witch hunt, arresting hundreds.

Wickremesinghe has imposed the draconian Essential Services Act banning strikes in electricity, petroleum and health sectors. On August 21, he signed a 90-day detention order under the repressive Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) against Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF) convener Wasantha Mudalige and Inter University Bhikkhus' Federation convener Galwewa Siridamma.

While education and healthcare are being starved of funds, the military and police have been allocated 539 billion rupees ($US1.46 billion) in the budget, in preparation for further state repression.

The main opposition parties have made token criticisms of Wickremesinghe's latest threats. SJB leader Sajith Premadasa said the president's statements were "reprehensible" and that his party "will not allow" repressive actions. He then declared that the SJB was prepared to lead a peaceful, democratic people's struggle and added: "[I]f anyone engages in violence, the security forces can act against it"—giving government carte blanche for repression.

JVP general secretary Tilwin Silva downplayed Wickremasinghe's statements, saying the "power of the people is greater than the presidency." "Who takes Ranil Wickremesinghe's stories seriously?" he blithely declared. "The JVP does not care about them."

Both parties are seeking to disarm the working class in the face of immense dangers. The SJB and JVP support the IMF's austerity measures, which they will implement if they come to power, no less ruthlessly than the Wickremesinghe regime.

The FSP's education secretary Pubudu Jayagoda similarly downplayed the government's threats, asking: "Does [Wickremasinghe] expect the people to listen to him and cower in fear? He knows people aren't afraid of him."

Another FSP leader, Duminda Nagamuwa, said that the president has displayed his undemocratic plans and urged "all political parties and civil society organisations to come forward to protect democracy in the country." The FSP advocates a broad political front with opposition bourgeois parties in the name of defeating the government's anti-democratic actions and attacks on social rights. This is a political trap to prevent the independent mobilisation of the working class against the anti-democratic actions and the IMF austerity on a socialist basis.

Also seeking to promote complacency, the JVP-controlled National Trade Union Centre's secretary Wasantha Samarasinghe issued a statement declaring that Rajapakse had not been able to prevent mass struggles, and nor would Wickremesinghe. Other unions are maintaining a deadly silence. The unions are continuing to play a key role in suppressing workers' struggles for democratic and social rights against the Wickremasinghe regime and the capitalist class.

The SEP warns workers to take the president's threats seriously. The government is preparing to impose socially devastating policies, which cannot be done peacefully. As in the US, Europe and internationally, the ruling elite is responding to the economic crisis, exacerbated by the pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, by moving rapidly towards dictatorial forms of rule.

It is imperative for the working class to take the initiative in defending democratic and social rights. That is why the SEP urges workers to build action committees in every workplace, plantation and suburb, independent of the trade unions, capitalist parties and their pseudo-left hangers on.

These committees must take up the fight to abolish the executive presidency and repeal the Emergency Laws, Prevention of Terrorism Act, the Essential Public Services Act and other repressive laws.

The only way workers can defend their living standards and social conditions is by rejecting the IMF's brutal austerity program and taking control of the production and distribution of the essentials of life. All foreign debts must be repudiated and the banks, large companies and plantations nationalised, under workers' democratic control.

To fight for this program, the SEP calls for the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on elected representatives from workers' action committees. This strategic centre for workers, supported by the rural poor, will be the foundation for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies, as part of the international struggle to reorganise the world economy along socialist lines.

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