

Sri Lankan ruling party demonises last year's mass uprising

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On May 9, Sri Lanka cabinet spokesperson Bandula Gunawardena told a media briefing in Colombo that the cabinet had “discussed the violence [from] one year ago” and requested President Ranil Wickremesinghe appoint a presidential commission with absolute powers to prevent any future violent unrest. He provided no details of Wickremesinghe’s response.

Gunawardena was not talking about the vicious physical attack on anti-government protesters at the Galle Face Green on May 9, 2022 by pro-government thugs assembled at former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse’s official residence.

He was referring to the retaliatory violence that erupted across Sri Lanka in protest against the thug attacks on the protesters. This led to the killing of one MP, and the torching of the homes of dozens of parliamentarians and hundreds of government supporters.

Gunawardena told the media that cabinet ministers wanted Wickremesinghe to ensure that there would be no repeat of last year’s retaliatory actions against MPs and government supporters, and to ensure their “human rights” are protected.

If Wickremesinghe establishes such a commission it will certainly recommend that harsh anti-terrorist laws be developed and used against anti-government protesters, workers and youth. Confronted with widespread opposition to its attack on democratic rights, the government was compelled last month to postpone parliamentary discussion on its new Anti-Terrorism Bill. New draconian laws, however, are on its agenda.

The cabinet’s discussions are part of an intensifying political campaign to denigrate and vilify *Aragalaya*, last year’s nationwide uprising that demanded the resignation of then President Gotabaya Rajapakse and an end to his government’s intolerable social attacks on the masses.

Confronted with this mass movement, Rajapakse fled the country and then resigned. His regime collapsed and the politically discredited Wickremesinghe was anti-democratically installed as president by the parliament. This political manoeuvre was made possible because the trade unions, backed by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and other political formations kept the mass working-class movement tied to the parliamentary framework, blocking any direct challenge to capitalist rule in Sri Lanka.

The Wickremesinghe regime is acutely nervous about the

rising opposition of workers and the poor currently underway against its savage International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity program that has already thrown millions into poverty, unemployment and near-starvation.

Last week, the police secured prohibition orders from a Colombo magistrate blocking demonstrations in Galle Face Green or at the president’s official residence and the presidential secretariat, to mark the first anniversary of the May 9 assault on anti-government protesters.

Moreover, for three days, starting on Friday night, the government deployed thousands of fully armed police officers and soldiers in Colombo in a major security operation. Police and military intelligence officials claimed that they received information regarding a planned protest by the FSP-controlled Inter University Student Federation (IUSF).

Now a slanderous campaign is underway to demonize the uprising last year. Members of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) are circulating the accusation that a “foreign hand” was behind last year’s mass movement that brought down Rajapakse.

SLPP MP Namal Rajapakse—the son of former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse—told the media last week, “[M]ore information on the foreign mission behind ‘Aragalaya’ [mass struggle] would soon be revealed.”

This was a reference to *Nine: The Hidden Story*, a recent book by National Freedom Front leader and parliamentarian Wimal Weerawansa. The “nine” is the period from May 9 to July 9, 2022 that led to Rajapakse’s downfall. Weerawansa was the minister of industries in Rajapakse’s government until he resigned in March last year.

A virulent Sinhala chauvinist, Weerawansa was a former leader of the communalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and a rabid supporter of the communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Bitterly opposed to last year’s anti-government uprising, Weerawansa claims this movement was a product of the political machinations of the US Ambassador in Colombo, Julie Chung.

Weerawansa’s allegations are a political slander against the historically unprecedented island-wide mass movement that

brought down the hated Rajapakse regime.

As the Socialist Equality Party has extensively documented, in 2015 the US was directly involved in the behind the scenes moves to oust President Mahinda Rajapakse over his close political and economic relations with China. The regime-change operation, which elevated Maithripala Sirisena into the presidency, was backed by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Wickremesinghe and other sections of the ruling elite, and layers of the upper-middle class.

By contrast, the mass movement that exploded last year against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, united millions of workers and the rural masses across ethnic lines with protests, demonstrations and powerful one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6.

This terrified all sections of Sri Lanka's ruling class and their imperialist masters. While the US ambassador at the time certainly engaged in discussions with the Colombo political establishment, neither she nor those that she spoke to controlled this mass movement.

Thoroughly discredited government ministers and MPs, fearful of the eruption of another uprising on an even larger scale, are now stepping up their campaign of slanders and lies against last year's mass protests.

Minister of Urban Development and Housing Prasanna Ranatunga told parliament last Thursday that the demonstrators were "vagabonds." He ludicrously claimed that "protesters who were inside the tents [last year] did not even know how to [use] birth control and now the delivered infants are being abandoned in the streets and trains."

SLPP MP Rohitha Abeygunawardena alleged, without a shred of evidence, "When someone raids a bank it's an activist from the protest, when there's a rape, that's activist of the protest, when there's a murder, an activist from the protest is involved."

Amid this toxic political environment, government-backed goons recently assaulted social media activist Piyath Nikeshala, prominent in last year's protests. He was hospitalised after the attack. The police were compelled to arrest Chandika Abhayaratne, the SLPP former deputy mayor of Kaduwela, and other thugs implicated in the attack.

Some sections of the ruling elite are nervous that this campaign of vilification and violence will backfire and trigger another eruption of political opposition.

A May 12 editorial in the *Island* said: "It may be easier to demonise Aragalaya than to tackle the causes thereof, but such action will not help prevent mass uprisings in the future." The government, it advised, could step down, "allowing the people to elect a new government," and "to vent their anger."

The SEP warns the working class that the ruling party's slanders against last year's mass movement are preparation to crush the inevitable social explosion against Wickremesinghe's IMF-dictated social attacks.

Denunciations of the Wickremesinghe regime by all the opposition parties—including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, JVP and Tamil National Alliance—are cynical attempts to politically exploit mass anger. These parties all support IMF intervention and its austerity demands.

Last year the trade union bureaucrats, the pseudo-left parties and various middle-class formations—which now claim to be fighting the Wickremesinghe regime—diverted the working class into the political dead-end of appealing to these capitalist opposition parties.

Compelled to call strikes and demonstrations, the trade unions made sure these were limited and politically controlled. Declaring that "the protest is 'non-political,'" they attempted to block the SEP and its fight for an independent working-class strategy and socialist perspective.

Behind the façade of "no-politics," the unions promoted the perspective of the SJB and JVP for an interim capitalist government. In doing so they paved the way for Wickremesinghe to come to power and unleash the state against the protesters.

The SEP intervened in the mass uprising explaining that it was not enough to demand Rajapakse's removal. He was only the ugly face of a corrupt and reactionary executive presidency and the capitalist system. The SEP fought to free the working class from the straitjacket of the unions and vigorously campaigned for the building of independent action committees.

The political experiences of the past year confirm the urgency of the SEP's call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on the representatives from independent action committees. This congress will provide the political and organisational framework for the working class to consolidate its forces, win the active support of the rural masses, and lay the foundations to establish its own rule through a workers' and peasants' government committed to restructuring society along socialist lines.



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