

The political lessons of Sri Lanka's 2022 uprising for Bangladesh 2024

Pani Wijesiriwardena, SEP (Sri Lanka) presidential candidate
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Just two years after the April-July 2022 popular uprising in Sri Lanka, neighbouring Bangladesh has been convulsed by mass protests during July-August 2024, sending shock waves through the ruling classes around the world.

Whatever the particular differences in origin, both uprisings were driven by the same crisis of global capitalism affecting every country. They are part and parcel of the upsurge of class struggle developing internationally as governments heap the burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of workers and the poor.

Drawing the necessary political lessons from these upheavals is essential for the working class in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and internationally in preparation for the revolutionary struggles ahead.

In 2022, protests and strikes erupted throughout Sri Lanka amid skyrocketing prices after supply chains were seriously disrupted by the deadly COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia. The crisis in Sri Lanka was particularly acute as foreign reserves plunged in early 2022, forcing the government to default on foreign debt and halt vital imports.

The government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse provided no relief as long queues formed to obtain what food, fuel and medicines were available. Lengthy power cuts became the norm each day.

The masses took to the streets with the demands that the president resign—"Gota Go Home"—along with all parliamentarians—"No to 225". The movement spread like wild fire with the eruption of spontaneous protests and pickets. Thousands permanently occupied Galle Face Green in central Colombo and repeatedly defied the threat of state repression when Rajapakse imposed a state of emergency and curfews.

Trade unions worked desperately to prevent the working class from entering the struggle as an organised force. However, as large groups of workers began to join the protests, the union bureaucrats were compelled to call limited action—two one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6. Millions stopped work, cutting across ethnic and sectarian lines, in opposition to attempts by the government and racists to foment communal hatred to divide the mass movement.

Faced with a mass uprising, the government collapsed and Rajapakse was forced to flee the country and resign.

However, what was to replace the Rajapakse regime was left in the hands of the defenders of capitalism—the parliamentary parties, their trade unions and fake lefts such as the Frontline Socialist

Party (FSP). The bourgeois opposition parties called for an interim government to stabilise capitalist rule, while the trade unions and the FSP subordinated the working class to this demand.

As a result, the discredited parliament was able to anti-democratically elect pro-IMF, US stooge Ranil Wickremesinghe as executive president to replace Rajapakse. Over the last two years he has ruthlessly implemented the IMF's austerity program using police-state repression backed by draconian legislation to suppress the opposition of workers.

As a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) election statement said: "It was not inevitable that the 2022 uprising should end in the coming to power of the Wickremesinghe regime."

The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), insisted there was no solution for working people within the capitalist system. The working class therefore had to take initiative in rallying the urban and rural poor in the struggle to defend democratic and social rights on the basis of socialist program.

We called workers to build action committees in every workplace, in the plantations and rural areas to take matters into their hands independent of all bourgeois parties and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

In what was a significant political advance in this fight, the SEP urged working people and youth to campaign for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses comprised of delegates of these action committees. In contrast to parliament, which is dominated by bourgeois politicians, such a congress would provide the means for representatives of working class to thrash out a strategy to defend their vital social and democratic rights.

However, the critical issue in any mass movement is that of political leadership. To wage a political struggle against capitalism and all its defenders, we explained that the SEP had to be built as the mass revolutionary party necessary for the working class to take power and establish a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

In Bangladesh, under the banner of Students for Anti-Discrimination (SAD), university students began their protests in early July against the regressive and divisive job quota system reenacted by the judiciary, under the aegis of Awami League government. As tens of thousands of students joined the demonstrations, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina unleashed the police and military, along with Awami League thugs, killing

scores of students.

The accumulated mass anger against this bloody crackdown, and repressive measures banning internet and imposing curfews, exploded. The SAD called a march to Dhaka in early August in which millions joined, expressing deep-seated anger over grinding poverty, social inequality and the ruthless exploitation of workers. They demanded Hasina and her government resign.

Unable to hold back the tide, the military stepped in to force the prime minister to resign and flee the country to India. Then the military-installed interim administration with the backing of SAD and so-called civil groups, appointed Mohammad Younus, a former banker, as chief adviser.

Younus, who has close connections with the US and European imperialist powers, immediately made clear he would “undertake robust and far-reaching economic reforms to restore macroeconomic stability and sustained growth, with priority attached to good governance and combating corruption and mismanagement.”

“Robust and far-reaching economic reforms” has only one meaning: savage pro-market austerity measures to make working people pay to ensure the profits of big business and foreign investors. Moreover, the interim administration, backed by the military, remains in power indefinitely to ensure the measures are implemented. No election has been announced.

The right-wing Bangladesh National Party (BNP) has pledged its full support for interim rule as have the various Stalinist parties grouped in the Left Democratic Alliance and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

Like their counterparts in Sri Lanka, the Stalinist parties, which have history of backing the Awami League and the BNP, worked alongside the trade unions to prevent the working class intervening as a class in the mass uprising to fight for its independent interests.

Working people are justifiably hostile to the Awami League’s autocratic and corrupt rule over the past 15 years. Its ruthless suppression of democratic and social rights is nothing but the ugly face of the capitalist class which is determined to preserve bourgeois rule at any cost.

The onslaught on workers, young people and the rural poor will only intensify under the interim regime and whatever capitalist government finally replaces it. Behind the administration stands the capitalist state, above all the military, that will stop at nothing to suppress any opposition to its austerity policies.

The lesson from Sri Lanka in 2022 is that the working class cannot fight for its class interests outside of a political break from all the capitalist parties, their left appendages including the Stalinists, and their trade unions. Independent rank-and-file committees democratically elected by workers are necessary to prosecute any genuine struggle.

There is no solution for working people to the immense social crisis they confront within the capitalist system. In his Theory of Permanent Revolution, Leon Trotsky demonstrated that the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, tied as it is to international finance capital, is organically incapable of meeting the democratic and social aspirations of the working class and rural toilers.

What is necessary is the fight for power—for a workers’ and peasants’ government—to fundamentally refashion society to meet the needs of the masses, not the profits of the tiny wealthy elites. Such a struggle, as Trotsky explained, necessarily has to be waged on an international scale against global capital.

In the presidential election in Sri Lanka, the SEP is actively campaigning to build the unity of the working class in Sri Lanka, throughout South Asia and internationally as an integral component the ICFI’s struggle for world socialist revolution.

The recent mass uprisings in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka point to crucial issues encompassing the entire region. In 1947-1948 the British colonial imperialist rulers carved up the Indian sub-continent on a reactionary sectarian basis into a Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan to divide the working class and maintain their influence. Sri Lanka was established as a separate state as a base of British operations in the region.

The ruling classes in South Asia have only maintained their rule through the same reactionary methods—promoting divisive communalism and nationalism that has led to pogroms, civil conflict and wars. The struggles against brutal exploitation and repression that led to the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971 have resolved none of the fundamental issues facing working people.

The SEP in Sri Lanka urges workers in Bangladesh to form their own independent action committees to defend their interests against the interim administration’s austerity agenda and to link up with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees—an initiative of the ICFI to unify the struggles of workers internationally.

Above all, what is needed in Bangladesh is the building of a section of the ICFI, the international Trotskyist movement, to join with us in waging a struggle for a federation of socialist republics in South Asia as part of the struggle for international socialism.

We urge young people and workers in Bangladesh to take up this political challenge. Read the World Socialist Web Site, study our program and perspective and contact us through the WSWs. We stand ready to offer you our political assistance.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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