

Sri Lankan president appeals to Muslim voters with apology over forced cremation

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Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, the ruthless imposer of the harsh International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity agenda, is desperately posturing these days as a great democrat, anti-racist and a man working to improve living conditions of masses. He is contesting the presidential election scheduled for September 21 as an independent candidate because his United National Party (UNP) has been reduced to a rump.

He is now posing as a sympathiser of Muslims and Christians who were forced to cremate the bodies of victims of COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020-2021. Ignoring the opposition of the Muslim community, which always buries its dead, the government of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse ordered the cremation of all bodies.

On July 23, on the initiative of President Wickremesinghe, his cabinet issued a public apology to all communities affected by compulsory cremation. Cabinet statement noted: “The decision created displeasure among the various religious groups and human right activists especially Muslim religious persons.”

On September 3, the Cabinet approved a draft bill on Burial and Cremation Rights to be published in the government gazette and to be submitted it to the parliament for approval. Reportedly, the bill will “award the right to an individual to decide whether that person’s body should be disposed of by burial or cremation after his death.”

This is a cynical bid by Wickremesinghe to cover up the UNP’s support, along with other opposition parties, for the Rajapakse’s communalist decision to force the cremation of Muslims who died of COVID-19.

Rejecting the World Health Organisation’s recommendations, the Rajapakse government declared its “experts” advised that the burial of COVID victims would contaminate ground water and banned their burial.

This unscientific decision was part of an anti-Muslim campaign in Sri Lanka since the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks on churches and luxury hotels by an ISIS-backed Islamic extremist group that killed 269 innocent people and injured around 500.

The ruling party, backed by all opposition parties, diverted the anger over the carnage by whipping up anti-Muslim chauvinism. Organised racist groups violently attacked innocent Muslims and their properties, injuring dozens. At least one person was killed.

Wickremesinghe was prime minister at the time in the government of President Maithripala Sirisena which took no measures to protect Muslims and allowed the mayhem to proceed. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) parliamentarian, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, joined the fray with a speech to parliament on May 7, 2019, demanding Muslims brand the attackers as “terrorists.” “This destructive embryo is being developed inside Muslim womb,” he declared.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse won the 2019 presidential election on the basis of a vicious anti-Muslim and anti-Tamil campaign, promising to establish “national security” and to combat “terrorism.” In power, he continued to exploit poisonous communalism to divert mass opposition to his government’s attacks on living conditions and democratic rights amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The Muslim community was singled out for a filthy campaign claiming they were the source of the deadly pandemic in Sri Lanka.

None of the opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and JVP, opposed this vicious communal campaign. Instead they took part and boosted it. The UNP and its leader and sole MP, Wickremesinghe, were no exception.

Muslim parties, including the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and All Ceylon Muslim Congress, expressed opposition but only to capitalize on anger within the Muslim community over forced cremations in particular.

The Supreme Court, the country’s highest court, also endorsed the government’s position when it dismissed petitions, including those filed by Muslim civil society members on December 2, 2020.

A UNHRC expert report, issued on January 25, 2021, sharply criticised the Rajapakse government, saying: “We deplore the implementation of such public health decisions

based on discrimination, aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism amounting to persecution of Muslims and other minorities in the country.” It added: “Such a policy deters the poor and the most vulnerable from accessing public healthcare over fears of discrimination.”

Facing mounting opposition locally and internationally, Rajapakse ended the forced cremations in March 2021. However, burials were only allowed in the remote Oddamavadi area in the island’s east under strict military supervision and without the participation of bereaved families.

Wickremesinghe’s law to enshrine the right to decide on burial or cremation is a cynical ploy to win Muslim votes. At a campaign rally at Kattankudy, a Muslim majority area in the island’s east, on August 31, he declared that there was “no place for racism and bigotry” in the country, adding that he would establish a “committee to investigate the accountability of those who recommended the cremation of Muslims during COVID.”

Wickremesinghe did not bother to explain his failure to oppose the “racism and bigotry” of the Rajapakse government which implemented the forced cremations. Public apologies, bogus committees and laws on burial will do nothing to address the decades of communal discrimination against Muslims and Tamils.

The entire Colombo political establishment is steeped in communal politics that is whipped up and exploited to divide the working class and prop up bourgeois rule.

The UNP, which formed the first government after formal independence from British colonial rule in 1948, abolished the citizenship and voting rights of Tamil plantation workers, aiming to communally divide the working class.

In every political crisis, successive governments have resorted to anti-Tamil racism, fomenting violence and pogroms against the Tamil minority that culminated in bloody 26-year civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The war only ended in 2009 in military offensives that killed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians. Thousands more “disappeared” and the entire country was devastated.

The two main parties of the ruling class—the UNP and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—ruthlessly prosecuted the racist anti-Tamil war. Both have since fractured but all of the fragments, including the opposition SJB, are grounded in communal politics. The JVP formed on the basis of Sinhala populism was an ardent supporter of the war.

For their part, Tamil and Muslim parties posture as defenders of their respective communalism only in order to bargain with the Colombo governments for greater rights to exploit their “own” working class.

All these parties collaborated with the Rajapakse regime’s

disastrous “let it rip” pandemic policy that placed profit before human life—like governments around the world. Lockdowns were ended amid unsafe conditions, forcing workers back to work while cutting jobs and wages thus imposing the burden of the crisis on working people.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which has opposed all forms of nationalism and chauvinism and fought politically to unite the working class, opposed the anti-Muslim campaign at the time.

In his speech to the online International May Day Rally in 2020, organised by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the SEP’s late general secretary Wije Dias denounced governments throughout South Asia for “whipping up communalism, to disorient and divert the working masses from the failure of the ruling elites to meet the challenge posed by the pandemic.

“In both India and Sri Lanka, the ruling elites are promoting anti-Muslim xenophobia as Sri Lankan Muslim families are held responsible for creating the so-called ‘virus clusters’.”

He commented: “The analyses of the ICFI and its sections, based on Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, have been vindicated. Neither independence from imperialism, nor the unification of working people against communalism, are possible under the rule of the bourgeoisie, in Sri Lanka or anywhere else, because it is nothing but the rotten agency of finance capital.”

The SEP candidate in the current presidential election, Pani Wijesiriwardena, fights politically for the international unity of the working class and opposes all kinds of racism, chauvinism and nationalism.

The developing class struggles across ethnic divides in Sri Lanka against the government’s austerity measures have underscored the objective unity of the working class and exposed the nationalism and chauvinism of the trade unions and fake lefts.

The defence of democratic rights and elimination of all forms of discrimination can only be achieved by overthrowing its source—the capitalist system—in a fight for socialist policies and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government.



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