

President Dissanayake's address to the nation—a commitment to global capital and Sri Lankan big business

Saman Gunadasa
26 September 2024

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's address to the "nation" on Wednesday evening must serve as a warning to the working class. His Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)/National People's Power (NPP) government will be a right-wing capitalist administration beholden to global capital and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

Dissanayake made clear that the first order of business will be to impose savage International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity.

From start to finish, Dissanayake's speech was a nationalist diatribe that demanded all must work under the government in a "disciplined society" to build the nation.

While claiming that the JVP's aim is to build a country "where everyone can proudly say, 'We are Sri Lankan citizens,'" the speech was laced with Sinhala chauvinist appeals and pledges to uphold the unitary Sinhala-dominated capitalist state.

Delivered against the background of giant national flags and an atmosphere of nationalistic Sinhala-Buddhist fervor, the speech was only broadcast in Sinhala, ignoring the more than 20 percent Tamil-speaking people across the country.

Reassuring big business and international finance, Dissanayake emphasised his total commitment to debt repayments to foreign creditors and the IMF's austerity program.

"Achieving stability and confidence in the current economy is crucial. We plan to begin negotiations with the International Monetary Fund immediately and proceed with activities related to the extended credit facility," he declared. The next stage of the IMF program Dissanayake is committed to involves the mass privatisation of state-owned enterprises, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, and the imposition of regressive tariffs and tax increases.

Immediately following his election, the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, the island's most powerful business lobby group, congratulated Dissanayake with a ten-point slate of demands, including no disruption to IMF austerity.

While the Colombo stock market and sovereign bond prices initially dipped on Monday, it rose again after Dissanayake's brief pro-business comments at the official poll declaration and

his swearing-in ceremony on September 22 and 23 respectively.

On Tuesday IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva wrote to Dissanayake stating: "I look forward to deepening the mutually beneficial relationship between the IMF and Sri Lanka..."

In his speech Dissanayake said it was necessary to dissolve parliament and hold national elections to implement his government's program. "We require a parliament that accurately reflects the will of the people. The existing parliament does not represent that will," he claimed.

But the "will of the people" is not the IMF's brutal social austerity measures. On the contrary, the millions of working people who voted for the JVP/NPP did so as part of the ongoing mass opposition to all the traditional parties of the political establishment that have imposed unprecedented social attacks.

Months of mass protests and two general strikes in April–July 2022 drove Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government from power. This movement has now voted out his replacement, Ranil Wickremesinghe and his administration.

The real reason Dissanayake has called a snap election is to try and transform the initial groundswell of support for the JVP/NPP, which only had three MPs in the outgoing 225-member parliament, into a parliamentary majority before realisation sets in that the JVP is another political instrument of big business and international finance capital.

Dissanayake and the JVP are desperately attempting to consolidate their power and move onto the next stage of IMF-dictated measures, which will involve suppressing the inevitable eruption of popular opposition by the working class.

In a thinly veiled threat against political opponents, he declared, "At this moment, I want to highlight the importance of engaging in politics with a collective focus on building our country. We are committed to providing that leadership... Our doors are open to all who are genuinely and positively committed to the progress of our nation."

In other words, Dissanayake's administration will not tolerate any dissent. These threats are directed against the tens of thousands of workers who protested and took strike action against the Wickremesinghe government's attacks. The JVP-

controlled trade unions played a critical role in suppressing these struggles, telling workers that they should not strike but vote for Dissanayake and support the election of a JVP/NPP government which would ensure workers' demands were granted.

Dissanayake's reference to "creating a law-abiding nation and fostering a disciplined society" must be considered in this light. But what sort of laws is he referring to?

Successive Sri Lankan governments have imposed a barrage of reactionary laws, including a new version of the prevention of terrorism act to detain opponents without charge and the Essential Public Services Act to punish striking workers with harsh prison sentences. Confronted with mass action against IMF austerity by the working class, Dissanayake's administration will not hesitate to use these repressive laws.

But for all his declamations Dissanayake's administration has no popular support for the IMF measures it has promised to implement and faces deep skepticism, if not outright hostility amongst the Tamil masses.

Almost at the very outset of his speech, Dissanayake, made a chilling declaration:

"We honour and remember the courageous men and women of previous generations who made sacrifices, some with their lives, for this victory. I see this victory and the prosperous nation we aim to build as a tribute to their legacy."

This was a homage, not to the tens of thousands of rural youth killed by government security forces in two JVP-led armed uprisings—in 1971 and later in 1988–89.

Rather it was a tribute to Rohana Wijeweera and other senior JVP leaders who were summarily executed by the Sri Lankan state in 1989, after they had colluded with the prime minister and later President Ranasinghe Premadasa in a rebellion against any weakening of the unity Sinhala-dominated state.

The JVP targeted hundreds of leftists and leaders of worker organisations, including members of the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, in these fascistic attacks.

The JVP has never repudiated its murderous attacks or the extreme Sinhalese chauvinism that motivated them, and, beginning with Wijeweera, routinely celebrates those who ordered them.

Dissanayake cynically declared that his administration was "launching a permanent program to build a unified Sri Lankan nation that respects diversity, fully ending the era of division based on race, religion, class, and caste." This claim is bogus.

Translated into plain language this will mean the suppression of the rights of Tamils and other minorities. While appealing for votes in the majority Tamil north earlier this month, Dissanayake made a veiled threat, warning that the Tamils should not be seen as blocking the will of the people in the south for a new government.

"Please think," he said, "what type of mentality could develop among southern people if you become opponents of

change when people have lined up for change in the south. Would you like Jaffna [the principal city in the North] to be branded as opponents of that change? Do you want the north to be branded?"

In one of his first decisions as president, Dissanayake appointed an accused war criminal Sampath Thuyacontha as the new secretary of defence. He takes over the post from another accused war criminal Kamal Gunaratne. Thuyacontha was Wing Commander of the No 09 squadron, a helicopter gunship squadron that fired almost 20,000 rockets, killing hundreds of Tamils in Puthukkudiyiruppu, an urban area, in April 2009.

Dissanayake's demagogic assertions that his government is poised to build the "nation" are a pledge to big business that his administration will do whatever is necessary to squeeze out of the working class and the oppressed the necessary funds to pay international finance capital.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns the working class that the JVP/NPP is rapidly preparing to crush the ensuing struggles that will erupt against the new regime's imposition of the IMF demands. We call on workers to make the necessary political and organisational preparations to fight this onslaught.

This means taking this fight into your own hands by building action committees of workers in every factory, workplace and in the plantations and neighborhoods, as well as among the rural poor, independent of all capitalist parties and union bureaucracies.

What is required is the development of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on democratically elected representatives of these action committees. Such a congress must discuss and fight for an independent political movement of the working class and an internationalist perspective, which rallies the rural poor, to overthrow capitalist rule and establishes a workers' and peasants' government to implement a socialist program.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact