

Former Sri Lankan President Wickremesinghe arrested

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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Former Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe was arrested last Friday by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on charges of misusing public funds during an overseas trip. He was remanded in custody until a second hearing today.

Wickremesinghe's arrest, which is unprecedented in character, has taken place amid intensifying political crisis confronting the government of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, compounded by growing popular opposition to its devastating International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity program.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government is committed to slashing the budget by imposing taxes on working people, cutting price subsidies and making further deep inroads into essential social services, including education and health. More than 400 State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are slated for privatisation or restructuring, which will result in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

In office for less than a year, the government is facing a growing wave of strikes and industrial action. Thousands of postal workers were on an indefinite national strike for a week over 19 demands on pay and conditions before their action was shut down by the trade unions on the basis of empty government promises.

Non-academic workers from state universities throughout the country held a one-day strike last Wednesday against the 2025 budget cuts to their salaries. Workers at the state-owned Ceylon Electricity Board held a sick leave stoppage on July 22 against the government's restructuring plans and have threatened further action. Protests have taken place by students, unemployed graduates and farmers.

Unable to meet any of the workers' demands, the government has increasingly resorted to repressive measures. Last Friday, the same day that Wickremesinghe was arrested, it deployed the military to try to break the postal strike. Army personnel were sent to the Central Mail Exchange in Colombo to clear the large backlog of parcels that had accumulated. The government also threatened to

sack striking postal workers.

The government's decision to arrest Wickremesinghe, who was president from 2022 to 2024, on flimsy charges of corruption is a desperate attempt to divert public attention from its ruthless attacks on the social and democratic rights of working people.

Wickremesinghe is accused of misusing public funds to attend his wife's graduation ceremony in London after an official visit to the US. The allegations barely rank on the scale of corruption that is rife in the Colombo political establishment, even if proven true.

Wickremesinghe has been singled out because he is widely despised by working people for initiating the IMF austerity program in 2022 and cracking down on popular opposition to his government's measures. He was, however, installed in office with the assistance of all the parliamentary parties, including the JVP, which also agreed on the need for IMF assistance amid the country's deep economic and political turmoil.

Confronted by a profound balance of payments crisis fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, the previous government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was compelled to default on its foreign loans. Prices and shortages of essentials immediately soared, provoking widespread protests throughout the country. Electricity blackouts occurred daily. The mass uprising in April–July 2022 involving millions of workers, youth and the rural poor, defied the mobilisation of the military and forced Rajapakse to resign and flee the country.

The right-wing Wickremesinghe was installed as prime minister, then president, not because he enjoyed any popular support. Indeed, he was the only parliamentarian of his United National Party (UNP). But with his long pro-US and pro-IMF record, he was seized upon as the figure who could salvage Sri Lankan capitalism and shore up bourgeois rule.

During that acute political crisis, the JVP and other opposition parties were instrumental in diverting the mass movement into the political dead end of parliament with their demand for an interim parliamentary government—that

is, one composed of the discredited capitalist parties. Wickremesinghe was installed in power anti-democratically through a parliamentary vote, not an election.

The Wickremesinghe government reached an agreement with the IMF for a \$US3 billion bailout loan that put the country on rations. The IMF instalments temporarily overcame the balance of payments crisis, but at a terrible social cost. Working people are being made to bear the burden through the imposition of drastic austerity measures that the IMF insists must be met if the instalments are to continue.

The widespread hostility to the entire political establishment, traditionally dominated by a handful of powerful families, of which Wickremesinghe is one representative, was demonstrated at last year's presidential and parliamentary elections. The JVP and its NPP electoral front, which only held a handful of seats in the previous parliament and had never held office, won both the presidency and a majority in parliament.

The JVP, a party rooted in Sinhala chauvinism and petty bourgeois radicalism, did so on the basis of lies: that it represented a genuine alternative to the longstanding parties of bourgeois rule; that it was a "clean" party opposed to the corrupt political establishment; and that it would negotiate a better deal with the IMF to end the misery of working people.

The last claim was immediately exposed. Within days of winning the parliamentary election in November, President Dissanayake, who is also finance minister, declared that his government would implement the IMF's demands to the letter.

Ten months on, Dissanayake is well aware that the bulk of the IMF's savage austerity agenda is yet to be implemented, the underlying economic crisis has not gone away, and Sri Lanka will have to recommence paying off foreign loans.

The economic difficulties have been compounded by the Trump administration's imposition of a 20 percent tariff on Sri Lankan exports to the US, which will hit the garment industry in particular. The Institute of Policy Studies warned this month that the tariffs could lead to a loss of \$634 million in Sri Lanka's exports and 16,000 jobs.

The JVP/NPP government's budget for 2026, which will be presented to the parliament in November, will undoubtedly have to make even deeper inroads into the social position of the working class and poor.

The government, as it implements the IMF's demands, is fearful that the rising anger among workers, youth and the rural poor could erupt in a mass movement that could eclipse the 2022 uprising. That is why it is cynically playing the corruption card and targeting a scion of the traditional Sri Lankan elites, knowing full well that layers of working

people will rejoice that Wickremesinghe is getting what they regard as his just desserts.

Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala boasted in parliament last Friday: "The government has proved that it will implement the authority of law despite the rank of an individual whether being a former IGP [Inspector General of Police] or former MP or former minister or former president."

As in its election campaign last year, the JVP/NPP's claim that the economic and social crisis is the product of corruption and waste is a complete fraud. While corruption is widespread in Sri Lankan ruling circles, as it is elsewhere, the capitalist system is responsible for the worsening conditions facing working people in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The main opposition parties have denounced Wickremesinghe's arrest, declaring it to be "undemocratic" and a "petty act of political vengeance." All these parties, including the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and UNP, have long track records of anti-democratic actions. All of them are committed to IMF austerity program, but they fear that the arrest will undermine the necessary unity of the political establishment against the working class in troubled times.

The working class, however, must take a serious warning from Wickremesinghe's arrest. If the JVP/NPP is prepared to arrest and make an example of a prominent member of the political establishment, of which it is an integral part, then it will stop at nothing to impose the demands of the IMF and big business. It has already shown that it is ready to mobilise the military against postal workers and threaten them with mass sackings.

Workers need to politically and organisationally prepare for a head-on confrontation with the government. What is required is the building of an independent political movement of the working class, rallying youth, the rural poor and other oppressed layers, to abolish capitalism and establish a government of workers and peasants. Society must be reorganised along socialist lines to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not feed the profits of the wealthy few. This must be a part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally for which the unity with the working class globally is crucial.



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