

Sri Lankan parliament to draft new constitution to shore up capitalist rule

By Rohantha De Silva
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The Sri Lankan parliament passed a proposal presented by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe on March 9 to convert itself into a constitutional assembly to and to draft a new constitution. Wickremesinghe painted this proposal as a step towards re-establishing “democratic good governance.” In reality, it is an effort to strengthen the government’s ability to impose austerity measures and deepen its integration into the US “pivot to Asia” against China.

The government boasted that the resolution was passed “unanimously,” but the process dragged out for two months amid infighting within the ruling elites. The proposal was first presented to the parliament on January 9—one year after Maithripala Sirisena ousted Mahinda Rajapakse. About two dozen parliamentarians aligned with Rajapakse opposed the resolution unless it incorporated their demands.

Sirisena split from Rajapakse Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led government to contest the 2015 presidential election in a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington with the help of former president Chandrika Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe. The US wanted to scuttle Rajapakse’s close relations with Beijing and line up Sri Lanka with its war preparations against China.

Sirisena with the support of the opposition parties—Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) as well as the pseudo-left organisations—exploited the opposition of voters to Rajapakse’s autocratic methods. He and Wickremesinghe promised to abolish the executive presidency, strengthen parliamentary rule, reconciliation with Tamil parties and improved living conditions.

After the election Sirisena took control of the SLFP and appointed Wickremesinghe as prime minister. The pair consolidated the grip on power after the UNP won parliamentary elections last August and formed a national

unity government.

Rajapakse’s backers from the SLFP and its allies in the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) have formed a “joint opposition” in the parliament. They finally backed the resolution to rewrite the constitution after the government agreed to delete the preamble and wording referring to the abolition of the executive presidency and for a “constitutional resolution of the national issue.”

The “national issue” is a reference to the systematic discrimination and oppression of the island’s Tamil minority, which resulted in a protracted and brutal war that only ended with the crushing of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Tamil elites represented by the TNA are seeking a so-called political solution through the devolution of the extra powers over land and the police to provincial governments.

Rajapakse and his allies are bitterly opposed to any concessions to the Tamil minority. At a recent lecture, he explicitly opposed handing the powers of land and police to the provinces. The “joint opposition” is whipping up Sinhala chauvinist sentiment by accusing the government of dividing the country by preparing to boost the powers of provincial councils.

Sirisena and the government agreed to modify the resolution, but are working to undermine and isolate Rajapakse and his supporters. Sirisena has indirectly warned Rajapakse loyalists that they face removal if they oppose the government and its policies. He recently replaced some electoral district organisers including MPs with his own supporters and appointed a loyalist as UPFA general secretary. The government is using a so-called anti-corruption drive to put pressure on Rajapakse and his backers.

The constitutional resolution—even with its deleted preamble—has no concrete proposals. The so-called constitutional assembly will appoint “steering

committees” to discuss specific issues which will be incorporated into a new draft constitution. If two thirds of parliamentary members agree to the document then cabinet will approve it and put it to a referendum.

The government’s claim that democracy will be strengthened by shifting to a parliamentary form of rule is completely bogus. For three decades from formal independence in 1948 to the adoption of the executive presidency in 1978, successive UNP and SLFP governments operating through parliament carried out savage attacks on the democratic rights of working people. These included the abolition of the citizenship rights of Tamil plantation workers in 1948, the use of anti-democratic emergency powers, and discrimination against Tamils by making Sinhala the only official language in 1956 and Buddhism a state religion in the 1972 constitution.

The UNP government of President J.R. Jayawardene imposed the 1978 constitution with its autocratic executive presidency in a bid to strengthen the state against the working class and the rural poor. The government had provoked widespread popular opposition by initiating the open market agenda to attract foreign investment. As social tensions rose, Jayawardene resorted to whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide working people, plunging the island into communal war in 1983.

In their attempts to posture as democrats, Wickremesinghe and Sirisena have criticised the “errors” of past constitutions and governments. However, they have been leaders in successive UNP and SLFP governments that made those “past errors.”

Moreover, for all the talk about resolving the “national issue,” Wickremesinghe pledged in January that the new constitution would not change the unitary character of the state or the constitutional priority given to Buddhism. The government’s determination to maintain Buddhism as the state religion makes clear that whatever concessions are made to the Tamil elites, it has no intention of ending the systematic discrimination against Tamil workers and rural toilers. The military occupation of the North and East of the island continues and the government recently ordered the establishment of police and military check points under the guise of fighting the criminal “under-world.”

The formation of the national unity government last year is a measure of the depth of the country’s economic and social crisis and the fear in ruling circles of a movement of workers, youth and the rural poor against the deepening attacks on living standards. Wickremesinghe and Sirisena are seeking a “political

solution” to the island’s protracted war to more closely integrate the TNA and the Tamil elites into the political establishment in preparation for confronting the working class.

The government faces deepening economic turmoil with a balance of payment crisis and massive public debt. It has turned for a new loan to the International Monetary Fund, which is already demanding increased taxes, the privatisation of more state-owned enterprises and slashing the remaining price subsidies.

None of these “democrats” will hesitate in the slightest in using police state measures to suppress the resistance of working people. This government has used the police and military to violently attack protests and strikes by workers, students and peasants.

Washington is backing the Sri Lankan government’s moves for a solution to the “national issue” as a means of ensuring stability on the island and also in India where atrocities among Sri Lankan Tamils have provoked unrest in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. During the first ever Sri Lanka-US partnership dialogue, American officials “expressed support for the government’s plans for constitutional reforms.”

The transformation of the parliament into a constituent assembly—as was done in previous constitutional rewrites in 1972 and 1978—is an anti-democratic charade. The only class that will wage a genuine struggle for democratic rights is the working class by mobilising the urban and rural poor in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government. On that basis, a democratically elected constituent assembly should be established to abolish all of the existing anti-democratic laws and guarantee the democratic rights of all.

The struggle for democratic rights is indissolubly bound up with the building of a unified, independent movement of the working class and the fight for socialism. The Socialist Equality Party fights for the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for the Union of Socialist Republic of South Asia and internationally.

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