

Sri Lankan president desperately tries to rally support

By W.A. Sunil
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Recent public remarks by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena underline the growing crisis of the “unity” government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP) and the president’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Sirisena became president in 2015 after a US-backed regime-change operation to unseat the former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government in the presidential elections. The US and India were hostile to Rajapakse close relations with Beijing and wanted Sri Lanka brought into line with Washington’s geo-strategic buildup against China. Sirisena and his political allies won support by exploiting popular anger over Rajapakse’s socially-destructive policies and his autocratic methods of rule.

Just two and half years later, wide layers of workers, students and youth have drawn the conclusion that the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s retrogressive social program is no different to that of Rajapakse and the current administration is even more ruthless in implementing its policies.

Like its predecessor, the current administration is imposing the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), attacking workers’ jobs and living conditions and cutting its minimal subsidies for small farmers and the poor. Rather than honour Sirisena’s phony reform promises during the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, the new government is systematically undermining basic democratic rights.

Former President Rajapakse now heads a breakaway parliamentary faction of the SLFP known as the Joint Opposition (JO) and hopes, with the support of former coalition partners, to bring down the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration and return to power.

In an attempt to bolster support for his factionally-riven party, Sirisena decided to hold a mass rally on September 3 to celebrate the 66th anniversary of the founding of the SLFP. On August 30, Sirisena invited media heads and newspaper editors to a special meeting at his home to promote the rally.

Answering a pre-arranged question about the dissenting voices in his own party and Rajapakse’s threats to bring down his government, Sirisena declared: “It’s not me but the SLFP parliamentary group that is in the consensual government. Although some say their party will soon form government on their own, under the current composition of the parliament no single party could form a government ... Even if there is another coalition, I will fulfill my responsibilities towards the people as president of the country until the end of my term.”

In other words, Sirisena, contrary to his previous promises to restore parliamentary democracy, was reminding the media indirectly that he will retain the dictatorial executive presidential powers previously used by Rajapakse. It was yet another demonstration that Sri Lanka’s political elite cannot tolerate any form of genuine democratic rule.

Sirisena, through his political proxies, has also indicated that he will seek a second presidential term after 2020. On July 18, SLFP general secretary Duminda Dissanayake told the *Daily Mirror* that the party’s candidate in the next presidential election will be “none other than President Maithripala Sirisena.”

In the days leading up to the commemoration rally, Sirisena used the state-owned electronic and print media establishment, government ministers and the pseudo-left organisations to promote the event, and the so-called achievements of his unity government. No expense was spared with over 2,000 buses hired and

free lunches provided to transport people from distant areas to the rally.

Addressing the event, Sirisena pompously declared: “I ask every learned and intelligent person to ask their conscience where this country would be if I had not been elected at the presidential election in 2015 January. At that time we faced an election, the international community was pointing guns at us and economic sanctions were hanging over the head of our beloved motherland.”

Sri Lanka, however, he continued “regained” the support of the “international community” by establishing “consensual government.” Then, in a direct appeal to the military and Sinhala chauvinist elements, he boasted that he had blocked UN Human Rights Council plans for an international investigation into Sri Lankan war crimes.

Sirisena then compared the current situation with the crisis faced by SLFP founder and former prime minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike from 1956 to 1959. Bandaranaike began his parliamentary career as a member of the first UNP cabinet. He broke from the UNP and founded the SLFP in 1951, as an alternative Sri Lankan capitalist party in order to prevent a left-wing regime coming to power under the leadership of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party.

The SLFP, after forming a coalition with petty-bourgeois opportunist formations, Sinhala communalist and the Stalinist parties, won the 1956 election. The new government was challenged by a series of powerful national strikes involving all sections of the working class. In 1959, Bandaranaike was killed, the victim of an assassination plot hatched by far-right groups within his own party.

Sirisena invoked this episode in an attempt to win sympathy from politically-naïve followers of the SLFP who have rallied around Rajapakse and to threaten workers and youth involved in the current protests and strikes.

Sirisena claimed students and workers opposing his regime were “abusing” the democratic conditions created by his government. “Some are enjoying democracy inappropriately, using Facebook [and holding] campaigns, demonstrations and agitations. They are unaware that there are limits and they exceed them frequently. The country cannot tolerate such a situation,” he said.

Sirisena’s democratic posturing is a fraud. His government has deliberately strengthened the police and the army and systematically mobilised against striking workers and protests by students and the rural poor. Eight years after the three-decade war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Sri Lankan armed forces still occupy the North and East of the island, hundreds of Tamil families are displaced and little war rehabilitation work has been completed.

Rather than Sri Lanka enjoying a flourishing democracy, the government has postponed local council elections for more than a year and plans to pass a constitutional amendment deferring the scheduled Provincial Council (PC) elections until 2019.

Although the combined votes of the UNP and SLFP allow the government to make a range of repressive laws and constitutional changes, the Sri Lankan government is heavily dependent on the police and the army. This was clearly indicated in the show of armed strength as Sirisena addressed the rally.

Sirisena used the rally to denounce Brazilian legal moves for a war crimes investigation against Jagath Jayasuriya, a former army commander and current Sri Lankan ambassador. “I state very clearly,” he declared, “that I will not allow anyone in the world to touch Jagath Jayasuriya or any other military chief, or any of the war heroes in this country.”

Sirisena’s threatening remarks are a serious warning to the working class and further highlight the increasingly desperate crisis of Sri Lankan unity government. Facing intensifying economic problems exacerbated by the ongoing global financial crisis, the Sri Lankan ruling elite will step up their assault on democratic rights in preparation for military forms of rule.

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