

Sri Lankan president prorogues parliament to try to consolidate his rule

By Saman Gunadasa
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Just a month after being elected and quickly setting up a minority government, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on December 2 issued a gazette notification proroguing the parliament for a month, until January 3. This is a clearly an anti-democratic act by Rajapakse, aiming to seize all governmental powers and thereby strengthen his hand against the working class, as well as his political rivals.

A temporary shutdown of parliament via prorogation is a common practice, but this one-month suspension goes far beyond that. Moreover, if his government fails to obtain a majority in the parliament by January 3 through various backroom manoeuvres, Rajapakse is likely to prorogue it again until he can dissolve it completely in March.

Although the five-year term of the current parliament does not end until next August, Rajapakse wants to use his presidential powers to dissolve parliament and hold early elections in the hope of securing a majority to consolidate his government before popular opposition intensifies.

As soon as he was sworn into office last month, days after the November 16 presidential election, Rajapakse bullied Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of the big business pro-US United National Party (UNP) to step down as prime minister and appointed his brother, former President Mahinda Rajapakse, in his place.

Rajapakse's authoritarian moves are part of a deepening political crisis. His administration already faces a resumption of strikes and working-class struggles, which were shut down during the election campaign by the trade unions, following directives by the election commissioner. Thousands of plantation workers joined strikes last week over increased workloads or non-payment of promised salary increases.

Since last year, Sri Lankan workers and the poor have been involved in mass strikes and protests against the imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures—the biggest wave of stoppages since a previous UNP government crushed a general strike in 1980.

The upsurge, which is part of a global resurgence of working-class struggles, included an 11-day strike last December by hundreds of thousands of plantation workers. They demanded a 100 percent wage rise, only to be betrayed by the unions, which imposed a paltry 30-rupee increase.

For all his phony election promises about improving the living conditions of working people and rural toilers, Rajapakse will have to implement the IMF's dictates, which will inevitably intensify unrest. His moves are a warning of the dictatorial measures his regime will pursue to seek to crush the growing struggles of the working class.

The US government also has put Rajapakse on notice not to diverge from the pro-US foreign policy adopted by Wickremesinghe and the previous president, Maithripala Sirisena. In 2015, Washington helped engineer the election of Sirisena as president in order to oust Mahinda Rajapakse, who the US regarded as moving too close to China.

In October-November 2018, the Trump administration then supported Wickremesinghe in defying an attempt by Sirisena to sack him as prime minister in order to make way for Mahinda Rajapakse.

Although Gotabhaya Rajapakse won this year's presidential election, and the media depicts him as having a powerful "mandate," he secured only 52 percent of the vote. Large sections of the population, especially Tamils and Muslims, voted against him, fearing a return to the violent repression he led as

defence secretary under his brother's presidency. Many voted for the UNP, seeing it as a "lesser evil," but the UNP is equally steeped in Sinhala chauvinism as a means of splitting the working masses.

The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) of the Rajapakse brothers remains a minority in parliament, which is controlled by the UNP. Before reconvening the parliament on January 3, the Rajapakse regime will seek to cobble together a majority by seeking parliamentary defections via various means, including bribes, intimidation and threats. The Sri Lankan parliament has a notorious record of such horse-trading.

President Rajapakse is aiming to establish an authoritarian government by obtaining two-thirds majority via an early general election. That could enable him to repeal the 19th amendment to the constitution, passed in 2015, which shifted some of the extensive powers of the executive presidency to a Constitutional Council and limited a president to two terms in office.

In an interview to the *Hindu* during a recent visit to India, Rajapakse said: "The 19th amendment is a failure and if we get a two-thirds majority in parliament we will drop it from the constitution." He added: "For a country to be governed successfully, you need stability. This was not the case during the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, where they were fighting all the time and there was no development. Without stability, investors won't come."

Hence, Rajapakse emphasised the importance of a "stable" government in order to facilitate foreign investment. This means suppressing popular opposition to the cheap labour conditions demanded by global corporations and financiers.

The prorogation of the parliament follows other anti-democratic measures taken by Rajapakse. He has continued the mobilisation of the army, navy and air force, in the name of maintaining "law and order," initiated by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe.

Several incidents last month were reminiscent of Mahinda Rajapakse's administration from 2005 to 2015. Just after the presidential election, police raided the offices of some web sites that allegedly supported the UNP election campaign. The raids are a further warning of the repressive measures that the Rajapakse

government will take.

Also, by proroguing the parliament, several parliamentary committees were dissolved, including the Committee for Public Enterprise (CoPE), which is meant to oversee financial irregularities in the state sector. Rajapakse prorogued the parliament just a day before a CoPE report was to be tabled on a Central Bank bond scam that began during Mahinda Rajapakse's presidency.

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