

Workers must adopt a socialist internationalist program to oppose Sri Lanka's authoritarian, communalist Rajapakse regime

the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Since winning Sri Lanka's November 16 presidential election, Gotabhaya Rajapakse has moved with great haste to concentrate governmental power in his hands. He bullied the right-wing United National Party (UNP) prime minister to resign, then appointed his brother, the former President Mahinda Rajapakse, as the head of a minority Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) government.

He has kept the armed forces on alert and earlier this week prorogued parliament for a month. Unless he can cobble together a majority through horse-trading and outright bribery, Rajapakse intends to keep parliament shut down, at least most of the time, until he gains the constitutional power to dissolve it and call a snap election for March. His aim—as he has frankly stated—is to secure the two-thirds parliamentary majority necessary to repeal a key constitutional amendment and give the president sweeping authoritarian powers.

These anti-democratic moves are aimed not just at Rajapakse's rivals within Sri Lanka's bitterly divided, crisis-ridden elite. Their principal target is the working class.

Rajapakse is keenly aware that the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie sits atop a social powder keg, one moreover that has begun to explode. The past 18 months have witnessed the most important strike wave since 1980, when the J.R. Jayewardene-led UNP government smashed the general strike that had erupted against its turn to “free market,” “pro-investor” policies.

During the election campaign, the trade unions succeeded in shutting down the strikes. But before Gotabhaya Rajapakse's presidency was even 10 days old, strikes involving thousands of plantation workers erupted against poverty wages and increased workloads.

These initial struggles point to the seething anger that has developed over many years within the working class over rising prices, mass unemployment and underemployment, privatisation and dilapidated public services.

Rajapakse's demagogic electoral promises of increased social spending notwithstanding, he and his SLPP government will be driven by falling economic growth and exports, and mounting corporate and government debt, to dramatically intensify the assault on the working class and rural toilers. Working people are already rebelling against International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity. Yet Colombo has pledged to the IMF that it will halve this year's fiscal deficit of 7 percent of GDP to 3.5 percent by 2020.

The growing resistance of the working class is the most important element in a broader crisis of bourgeois rule that has led all factions of the bourgeoisie, not least the previous Sirisena-Wickremesinghe “national unity” government, to increasingly attack democratic rights.

The Colombo political establishment is also torn by rapidly sharpening geo-political tensions. Because Sri Lanka abuts the most important Indian Ocean shipping lanes, US imperialism is determined to transform it into a frontline state in its military-strategic offensive against China—an offensive whose logic leads to nuclear war. Toward that end, Washington has repeatedly intervened in the faction fighting within Sri Lanka's ruling elite, most notably helping orchestrate Mahinda Rajapakse's ouster in the January 2015 presidential election.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has already served Gotabhaya Rajapakse notice that Washington expects Sri Lanka to join it in “fostering a free and open Indo-Pacific region”—a euphemism for US imperialist domination of the region. This no doubt includes the timely signing and activation of the pending US-Sri Lanka Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which reportedly opens the door to the establishment of US military bases and will provide all US personnel on the island with legal immunity.

Moreover, none of the issues that gave rise to the 30-year anti-Tamil civil war have been resolved.

Serving as defence secretary under his brother president, Gotabhaya Rajapakse presided over the massacre of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians with which the civil war ended in April–May, 2009. During the presidential election campaign, he shamelessly promoted Buddhist supremacism while touting himself as the foremost defender of the army “heroes” implicated in war atrocities. In his maiden presidential address, Rajapakse offered the Tamil and Muslim minorities a veiled fist. He claimed he is for “reconciliation,” while pointedly noting that he hadn't needed minority votes to win the election.

Meanwhile, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the other Tamil bourgeois parties that emerged from the ashes of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have sought to corral the Tamil masses behind Rajapakse's rivals within the dominant Sinhalese establishment. They have emerged as among the most vociferous advocates of close ties with US imperialism, in the hope that Washington will back their calls for greater “power-sharing,” i.e., enhanced access to power and privilege.

The corporate media are claiming that Gotabhaya Rajapakse's 6.9 million votes (52 percent) constitute a “massive mandate.” This is a lie—a lie that is being propagated to intimidate the working class and oppressed masses and legitimise the government's resort to state repression when it confronts popular opposition.

The vote for Gotabhaya Rajapakse was largely a protest vote on the part of workers and poor people, especially in the rural south, against the right-wing administration of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime

Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Its rule was widely despised for its imposition of IMF austerity and attacks on democratic rights.

That said, the election results starkly lay bare an acute crisis of working-class leadership and perspective.

Amid mounting and increasingly explosive social struggles—struggles that have united Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim workers and youth and provide an inkling of the social power of the working class—most working people electorally rallied behind one or the other of the two main reactionary camps of the political establishment.

The UNP is a party steeped in communalism. It launched the anti-Tamil civil war and as Sri Lanka's governing party waged it for more than a decade. Yet most minority voters cast their votes for the UNP's Sajith Premadasa, himself the son of a notorious former Sinhala chauvinist Sri Lankan president, on the grounds that he was the "lesser evil."

The working class and oppressed masses will soon come into headlong conflict with the Rajapakse-led SLPP government.

If they are to prevail, they must break free from the rightward lurching, communally-laced capitalist political framework and the politics of "protest votes" and "lesser evils."

None of the burning problems facing working people can be seriously addressed let alone resolved within the framework of capitalism—an outmoded socio-economic order that subordinates all social needs to the enrichment of a tiny capitalist oligarchy and threatens humanity with world war, as the rival imperialist and great powers jostle for markets, resources and strategic advantage.

The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie is mired in crisis and clearly has been shaken by the growth of social opposition. But it retains control of the economy and a large repressive state apparatus, and can rely on the support of New Delhi and Washington in defending its rule. Unless and until the working class constitutes itself as an independent political force and rallies the toilers and rural poor behind it in the fight for workers' power, the venal Sri Lankan bourgeoisie will be able to press ahead with its class war offensive. This will involve political manoeuvres, state repression, the incitement of communalism, and, no less crucially, its use of the pro-capitalist trade unions and various "left" parties, from the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), to defuse social opposition and divert it back into the sterile framework of capitalist electoral and protest politics.

The Socialist Equality Party intervened in the presidential election, standing Pani Wijesiriwardena as its candidate, precisely to provide the incipient mass movement of the working class with the socialist internationalist program and revolutionary political leadership it requires to become transformed into a political offensive for a workers and peasants' government and the socialist transformation of society.

From Mahinda to Gotabhaya Rajapakse: The lessons of the rise and fall of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government

A crucial part of the political preparation by the working class for the coming clash with the Gotabhaya Rajapakse government is to critically examine the experience of the past five years: what forces brought the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe "national unity" government to power; its record in office; and why Rajapakse and his SLPP were able to politically exploit the mass anger at its austerity measures as well its harnessing of Sri Lanka to US imperialism's anti-China war drive.

Just weeks before the January 2015 presidential election, Washington, working in league with its close ally India and former Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) President Chandrika Bandaranaike, coaxed Sirisena, a longtime henchman of Mahinda Rajapakse, into defecting from the government and standing as the "common opposition" candidate against his longtime boss.

The US was determined to be rid of Rajapakse because he was deemed

too close to China, and thus an obstacle to Washington's plans to use Sri Lanka as an "aircraft carrier" in the Indian Ocean. UNP leader and presumptive presidential candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe was eager to do Washington's bidding, but he was deemed unelectable because of his close ties to big business and his right-wing record. This led to the approach to Sirisena and the setting in motion of events that would ultimately blow up the SLFP, which since the 1950s had been one of the two main parties of bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka.

The hastily organised, US-orchestrated regime-change operation succeeded for two reasons.

First, Mahinda Rajapakse's government was widely discredited. His promise of a "peace dividend" at the conclusion of the civil war had proven a cruel hoax. Working people had instead faced fresh attacks on living standards and democratic rights, while the government maintained massive military expenditures.

Second, the TNA, numerous NGOs, many unions and the pseudo-left political parties all rushed to garland Sirisena, for years a hand-raiser for Rajapakse, and his new ally, the US-client Wickremesinghe, as the leaders of a democratic upsurge, and even—as in the case of NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne—a "democratic revolution."

Some pseudo-left groups like the NSSP openly supported Sirisena's election. Others, like the United Socialist Party (USP) and the Frontline Socialists, gave implicit support by emphasising the need to defeat Rajapakse's "dictatorial rule" and subsequently hailed the opening of "democratic space."

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) had warned, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe "national unity" government's promises of "democracy," "reconciliation" with the Tamils, and "good governance" proved no less fraudulent than Rajapakse's "peace dividend." It radically realigned the island's foreign policy in favor of Washington and New Delhi, and closely tied the Sri Lankan military, particularly the Navy, to the US Indo-Pacific Command, the Pentagon's frontline force against China.

In return for an IMF bailout loan, it implemented savage austerity measures, hiking taxes on essentials and further slashing welfare programs, health and education.

It maintained the army's occupation of the predominantly Tamil north and east, and, with the help of the US and its allies, suppressed war crimes investigations that Washington had previously used as a mechanism to pressure the Rajapakse government to diminish its ties with Beijing.

Growing popular opposition to the government found distorted expression in the gains the Rajapakses' newly created political vehicle, the SLPP, made in the February 2018 local council elections.

Soon after, a strike wave began that has continued and grown in the current year to involve ever wider sections of the working class. Over the past 18 months, strikes have been mounted by railway workers, health workers, teachers, non-academic university workers, electricity, petroleum, postal and plantation workers, and by workers at some Free Trade Zone enterprises.

Subservient to the capitalist state and the profit system, and often led by supporters of the government, the unions have invariably sought to smother the strike struggles, isolating them and then shutting them down.

The Tamil nationalists, the JVP and the pseudo-left organisations, all worked to keep the working class under the political thrall of the bourgeoisie, opposing any working class political challenge to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government and thereby enabling the Rajapakses and their SLPP to cynically project themselves as the only opposition.

The Frontline Socialist Party, the United Socialist Party and the NSSP responded to Sirisena's anti-constitutional October 2018 political coup, in which he removed Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replaced him with Mahinda Rajapakse, by rallying around the UNP's bogus campaign

for “democracy.”

Only the SEP fought for the working class to intervene independently in the political crisis in opposition to the two rival bourgeois factions, warning that both were turning toward dictatorial measures and exposing Washington’s blatant intervention in support of Wickremesinghe (see: “Fight for a socialist solution to the political crisis in Sri Lanka”).

Six months later, all the ostensible opposition parties fell into line when the government and intelligence agencies, despite being forewarned, allowed an ISIS-backed group to stage bombing attacks on Easter Sunday, 2019, killing hundreds of people. Sirisena exploited the attack to impose draconian Emergency Regulations, deploy the military throughout the country, and unleash a vicious anti-Muslim campaign. The opposition—and this includes the JVP, the TNA and the pseudo-left FSP, USP and NSSP—all supported the Emergency Regulations, declared the fight against “extremism” a national priority, and supported the unions’ immediate shutdown of all strikes.

In so doing, they helped provide a platform for Gotabhaya Rajapakse to use the Easter bombings to step up his militarist and communalist rhetoric and denounce the government for “weakening” the military-intelligence apparatus.

As they had done in 2015, so during the 2019 presidential campaign, the Tamil nationalist and ostensibly “left” parties sought to corral working people behind the UNP. Some did so explicitly. Others, like the FSP and USP, did so implicitly by railing against “Rajapakse fascism” while remaining silent on the UNP’s communalism, long record of attacks on democratic rights and role as satrap for US imperialism.

By politically suppressing the working class and tying it to the right-wing UNP, the Tamil nationalist and ostensibly “left” parties opened the door for Rajapakse to make a demagogic appeal to mass anger over IMF austerity. Through his Sinhala chauvinist and Buddhist allies, he even tried to exploit popular opposition over Washington’s demands that Sri Lanka serve as a pawn in its intrigues against China.

And while doing so, he simultaneously appealed for support from the bourgeoisie and the military apparatus by casting himself as strongman who has shown he can and will take ruthless measures against the working class.

Laying bare his intentions, Gotabhaya Rajapakse declared this week that he is determined to amend the constitution forthwith to give the president authoritarian powers so as to provide the “stability” demanded by foreign capital. “Without stability, investors won’t come,” he declared.

The way forward for the working class

Whatever illusions exist among working people in the Rajapakse-SLPP government will be quickly dispelled. The critical question, however, is what strategy and program will guide the coming mass struggles.

In order to assert its class interests, the working class must adopt a socialist internationalist strategy and build new organisations of struggle that incarnate it.

The growing strike wave in Sri Lanka is part of a global working-class upsurge that has seen mass strikes in India and the United States, the “Yellow Vest” movement against social inequality in France, and mass anti-government protests around the world from Chile and Ecuador to Algeria and Lebanon. In capitalism, the working class faces a global enemy. Transnational corporations scour the globe seeking the highest investor returns, while the major capitalist powers mount trade wars and regime-change wars and frantically rearm, just as they did in the 1930s.

To defeat globally organised capital, the working class must adopt a global strategy to unite and coordinate its struggles across national boundaries and continents.

In response to an insurgent working class, the bourgeoisie in every country is turning toward authoritarian methods of rule and cultivating ultra-right nationalist and communalist forces. This is as true of the US,

where a fascist billionaire sits in the White House; Germany, where the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany is the official opposition; India, where the bourgeoisie has embraced Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party; and Sri Lanka.

The defence of democratic rights requires the independent political mobilisation of the working class and a ruthless struggle against all those who, in the name of “defending democracy,” tie the working class to one or another faction of the bourgeoisie, such as the UNP.

Central to the SEP’s intervention in the presidential elections was the fight to make the objective unity of Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim workers expressed in the current strike wave a conscious political strategy.

Workers must reject the poison of communalism and nationalism. For decades, Sinhala populism has been the chief ideological weapon of the ruling class, used to bind working people to their class enemies and split the working class. The Tamil nationalist perspective of the Tamil bourgeoisie led the oppressed Tamil masses into a blind alley. Hostile to the working class, the LTTE based its strategy on seeking the support of India and subsequently US imperialism. In this, the TNA only follows in its footsteps.

The democratic rights of the Tamil and Muslim masses will be secured only through the overthrow of bourgeois rule and the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and the world struggle for socialism.

The SEP bases its struggle on the strategy of Permanent Revolution, which animated the victorious 1917 Russian Revolution and elaborates a global revolutionary strategy for the working class. A key tenet of Permanent Revolution is that the basic democratic tasks in countries of belated capitalist development can be realised only through a working class-led socialist revolution.

An independent political movement of the working class will provide a program to free the rural toilers from the domination of big business and thereby undercut the phony appeals of the Sinhala populists and Tamil nationalists.

The struggle against war is the cutting edge of the struggle for socialism. Workers and youth in Sri Lanka must vigorously oppose the US drive to harness the island to its war plans. A working class-led movement against war must be built across South Asia as part of a global anti-war movement.

Workers and youth should follow the lead of the Abbotsleigh plantation workers and build workplace and neighbourhood action committees, independent of the unions, to mobilise opposition to the attacks of big business and the state and unite the manifold struggles of working people into a working class political offensive.

Above all, the working class needs a revolutionary party that strives to mobilise the world working class against capitalism, austerity and war and is based on the strategic lessons of the revolutionary class struggles of the twentieth century. That party is the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International, of which the SEP is the Sri Lankan section.

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