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Huge rally in Colombo demands Sri Lankan President Rajapakse resign

Last weekend tens of thousands of people from across Sri Lanka joined major demonstrations at Galle Face Green, near the Colombo port, calling for the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. The government is being denounced for skyrocketing prices, shortages of fuel and other essentials and hours of daily electricity blackouts.



Protesters marching on Galle Face Road [WSWS Media]

The Galle Face Green protests, the largest single demonstration in the past fortnight, were largely organised via social media under the hashtag #GoHomeGota2022.

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Workers, youth, students, professionals and housewives united across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities at the protest, chanting, “We need a responsible government,” “Give our stolen money back,” “Arrest the corrupt politicians,” “Our children need a better future” and “Enough is enough.”

By Saturday evening around 20,000 protesters had gathered for about two kilometres along both sides of the road adjacent to Galle Face Green. In a desperate and unsuccessful bid to block the demonstration, the government on Friday announced a ban on the public use of Galle Face Green.



Police mobilised around Fort area to prevent demonstrators entering high security areas, including the presidents’ palace [WSWS Media]

Some demonstrators staged marches on the road while others performed street theatre and protest songs. The police and the military, with water cannons and tear gas on standby, were deployed to prevent protesters entering the nearby Presidential Secretariat.

The protest continued throughout the night with more groups joining on Sunday morning. Various organisations and individuals provided food and drink on Saturday night and Sunday morning while motorists honked their horns in support.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members intervened as the only political party with their own slogans, including: “Bring down the Rajapakse government!” “Abolish the executive presidency!”

“Defeat the government’s austerity program!” “Build Action Committees!” “Reject interim government!” and “Repudiate foreign debt!”.



SEP and IYSSE members campaigning at April 9 Colombo demonstration [WSWS Media]

SEP campaigners distributed hundreds of statements outlining the party’s program of action, winning enthusiastic responses from protesters, with many engaging in lengthy discussions about its perspective.

One young woman carrying a placard calling for the abolition of the executive presidency approached SEP campaigners. She decided to stand with the SEP group after she saw its demands. Abolition of the executive presidency, she said, was very crucial in the current struggle.

Sisira Chandra, a retired bank employee from Ratnapura, about 140 km from Colombo, said: “I decided to travel to here because I cannot bear my difficulties anymore. Rajapakse and his government should be toppled but I was thinking what government would come to power after that. Even if a separate group comes to power in parliament, the same thing will happen. Even if an interim government is established, the president has the power to appoint and remove ministers.”



Sisira Chandra, in the centre [WSWS Media]

SEP members pointed out the president can also impose curfews and essential service orders and could use the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. They warned that Rajapakse was biding his time and could later attempt to suppress the mass movement using these powers.

Chandra responded: “The SEP’s demand to abolish executive presidency is very much relevant now. The country is facing much hardship, not because they [the government] got loans for people. I understand that the largest loan was spent for the war against the LTTE, and another large sum to create infrastructure for international capital investors. We do not need to bear others’ sins. The SEP’s demand that all foreign loans must be repudiated is entirely correct.”

Bishan Esith, a young worker from a private company in Colombo, said: “Our wages are not enough to live on in this situation where prices are rising so rapidly. The basic problem is the shortage of essential goods, but none of these ‘Gota Go Home’ protests have a single slogan about how to resolve these problems.



Bishan Esith, second from right [WSWS Media]

“Even if Rajapakse is sent home, my question is what will happen after that. In the 2015 election, the people overthrew the previous Mahinda Rajapakse government, paving the way for another capitalist government. At first, I thought that sending good leaders to parliament would solve our problems but I have no faith in that now.

“As you say, these governments are capitalist governments. I totally agree with your view that no matter what capitalist government comes they will implement policies that protect the profits of the capitalists.”

During the discussion SEP campaigners explained that the crisis was not simply a result of fraud and corruption, as claimed by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), but the profit system itself.

Esith agreed, adding: “The capitalist does not work in the factory but makes profit from the labour of the workers. It’s very logical to take the means of production into the hands of the working class, the real producers.

“Although many have argued that a system change is needed, I learned from this discussion that a real system change is the abolition of the capitalist profit system. I would like to join you in that struggle.”

Esith said he was interested in the SEP’s fight for action committees to prepare the working class for the overthrow of capitalist rule.

“The demarcation between the SEP’s campaign and the ‘Gota Go Home’ campaign is made very clear by your slogans,” he said, and decided to participate in the SEP contingent at the protest.

Suresh Silva, a private English tutor, said: “I came to this protest to help oust Gotabhaya Rajapakse. I thought it was the thing to do first. Following my discussion with you, I realise that ousting Rajapakse and forming a government that will solve our problems should be inseparably included in a process.



Suresh Silva [WSWS Media]

“I believe this crisis was caused by the Rajapakses and their cronies misusing public funds. But now I agree with what you’re explaining—that the problems we face are as a result of the crisis of the world capitalist system.”

Silva said he knew something about the globalisation of production and did not believe that the current problems could be solved within national boundaries. “We have to fight global capital, so I accept that our fight must be formed as an international movement,” he said.

Malinga, a second-year student at the University of Kelaniya, asked why the SEP was involved in the protests because political parties had not been invited.



A section of the Galle Face Green demonstration [WSWS Media]

SEP campaigners explained that the SEP was not like the capitalist parliamentary parties that were trying to exploit the protests for their own political purposes. The SEP offered a perspective for the working class to fight for its own class interests.

Malinga read the SEP's statement, then said: "Previously I identified political parties as those who attempt to mislead the masses for their own benefit. Now I realise there's a big difference when reading the SEP's program. I think the demands in this statement are relevant to our struggle."

A political party that genuinely represents the interests of the people, he concluded, was needed now.

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