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Sri Lanka's parliament to elect president Wednesday with vast authoritarian powers in fraudulent anti- democratic exercise

Sri Lanka's parliament will elect a president Wednesday to complete the more than two years remaining in the term of the would-be autocrat Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who was chased from power by months of mass strikes and protests. These culminated in an explosion of popular anger on July 9, when more than a million people descended on the capital, Colombo, in defiance of government emergency orders and threats of mass repression.

In a statement issued Monday, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) denounced today's vote as "a fraud and a conspiracy against the working class, youth and rural poor." Noting that many of the protesters have demanded the resignation of all 225 parliamentarians, the SEP statement emphasized: "The parliament does not in any way represent the political sentiments and interests of the working masses, that is, the absolute majority of society."



For several days starting July 9, protesters occupied the presidential palace.

All three candidates nominated to succeed Rajapakse at Tuesday's parliamentary session—Ranil Wickremesinghe, Dissanayake Alahapperuma and Anura Kumara Dissanayake—are ready to implement sweeping austerity measures to secure an emergency loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). They all have long records as capitalist politicians dedicated to upholding the interests of big business and international finance capital against the working class and rural toilers.

Wickremesinghe, the leader of the right-wing United National Party (UNP), is a corrupt political hack, notorious as a lackey of US imperialism and a ruthless implementer of IMF austerity measures. Despite his being his party's sole MP, a beleaguered Gotabhaya Rajapakse installed him as prime minister for the sixth time since 1993 on May 12, after his brother, Mahinda Rajapakse, was forced to resign after initiating a failed attempt to suppress the mass anti-government protests through goon and state violence.

Wickremesinghe manoeuvred to have himself appointed as interim president by Gotabhaya Rajapakse as he fled the country last week, and since then has initiated steps to bloodily repress the popular uprising.

Wickremesinghe was formally nominated for the presidency yesterday by Dinesh Gunawardena, a senior leader of Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). He apparently enjoys the backing of the ousted president and much of the SLPP, which, while weakened by splits, still holds the majority of seats in parliament.

Dallas Alahapperuma, is also an SLPP MP. The bulk of his support in the parliamentary presidential vote, however, will come from the ostensible opposition, with whom he and a breakaway group of SLPP supporters have cut a deal.

At the beginning of his political career, Alahapperuma, tried to posture as a “left.” He served in the Peoples Alliance government, elected in 1994 under the leadership of then president Chandrika Kumaratunga and held several portfolios such as youth affairs and sports. Later he became a close confidante of the Rajapakses. He held various posts during the 10-year tenure (2005-15) of Mahinda Rajapakse as president, and was the minister of power and later mass media in President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government.

Now he is trying to distance himself from the Rajapakses, while remaining an SLPP parliamentarian, with the transparent aim of securing personal pelf and power.

Anura Kumara Dissanayake is the leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which emerged in the mid-1960s based on a toxic political mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala patriotism. The party, whose leaders changed their military fatigues to comfortable political suits, also backed the UNP-led administration that came to power in 2015 as the result of a regime-change operation sponsored by the US so as to closely integrate Colombo into its war drive against China. The JVP has consistently supported all the Sri Lankan bourgeois parties and leaders that have come to power since the early 1990s.

In 1994, it supported Peoples Alliance leader Chandrika Kumaratunga’s campaign to win the presidency, and in 2004 entered her government, with Dissanayake becoming the agriculture minister. The JVP was an ardent supporter of Colombo’s brutal communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—from 1983 until 2009—and backs the continued military occupation of Sri Lanka’s North and East. It also formed an alliance with the UNP in 2010 to support former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka’s presidential candidacy.

Sajith Premadasa, the leader of the Opposition and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), had declared himself a presidential candidate, but later withdrew and threw his party’s support behind Alahapperuma.

In exchange, the latter has agreed to name Premadasa prime minister. Premadasa was the Housing Minister in the previous UNP-led government that imposed IMF austerity and worked to integrate Sri Lanka into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China. Premadasa proudly invokes the political legacy of his father—the former UNP Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa, a notorious anti-Tamil chauvinist whose government killed around 60,000 rural youth between 1988 and 1990 to quell rural discontent.

Who will prevail in Wednesday's parliamentary vote cannot be said with any certainty. Wickremesinghe has put himself forward as the candidate of "order," ready to use the full gamut of authoritarian powers to bloodily try to suppress the mass movement. But under conditions where the masses have been galvanized into political action by the disastrous economic crisis and undoubtedly feel strengthened by Gotabhaya Rajapakse's ouster, significant sections of the ruling class calculate it would be wiser to provide a façade of change and play for time, while preparing the anti-democratic measures needed to impose the IMF's socially incendiary diktats.

Rather than alerting the working class and rural masses to the conspiracy being prepared against them through the presidential election, the pseudo-left parties, the trade unions and the leaders of anti-government protests centred in Galle Face Green in Colombo are all providing it support. As one, they have declared their support for upholding "constitutional rule," including parliament's installation of a new executive president, and the associated moves to cobble together an interim "all-party government" to stabilise bourgeois rule and launch a ruling class counter-offensive.

All these elements are portraying the constitution as a sacred document that should be followed. The leaders of the Galle Face Green protests have been going to the offices of opposition parties—the SJB and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party—and having cordial discussions with them on the need to "safeguard" the constitution, while voicing their hopes of working with a future pro-IMF, capitalist "all party interim" government to solve the economic crisis.

In reality, the current constitution is fundamentally anti-democratic. Brought forward in 1978 by the autocratic UNP government of J. R. Jayawardane, it gave the president vast autocratic powers that were used to implement sweeping capitalist restructuring in the face

of mass working class opposition and prepare the anti-Tamil civil war. Under the new constitution, the government brought in the Prevention of Terrorism Act in 1979, giving the police vast arbitrary powers, including to make arrests without charge or trial. The public security ordinance and essential services act have been used along with the constitution to consolidate dictatorial presidential powers and suppress working class opposition. According to a syndicated survey by Verite Research in June, 70 percent of the country favours abolishing the executive presidency, revealing widespread popular hostility to this cockpit of ruling class reaction.

Since the first day of his appointment as acting president, Wickremesinghe has been using these powers. The presidential election is itself being conducted in a parliament that by emergency executive order has been converted into a well-fortified fortress under military guard.

Yesterday anti-government protests by workers and youth took place in several places across the island. Over a thousand workers and students demonstrated in central Colombo, defying repressive measures imposed with the emergency regulations and demanding Ranil Wickremesinghe quit as acting president. The Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), controlled by the pseudo-left Front line Socialist Party (FSP), had declared July 19 as a day of protest to demand Wickremesinghe's resignation. Major union fronts had also called protests for yesterday.

However, it is clear that the trade unions and FSP student leaders did not mobilize workers and students for these demonstrations. Earlier, on July 14, the two main union fronts, the Trade Union Coordination Center (TUCC) and the Trade Union and Mass Organizations Alliance (TUMOA), said they would call a general strike from July 18 to demand Wickremesinghe's resignation. But they quietly dropped this. Instead they outlined a constitutional reform program and various demands for changes in government policy on July 17, and organized limited demonstrations on Monday and Tuesday.



Part of a TUC protest on Tuesday

The unions fear that mass strikes and protests could explode, going beyond their control as has happened repeatedly since anti-government protests erupted four months ago. Millions of workers, Sinhala and Tamil alike, participated in one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6, and in response to the May 9 government-instigated assault on protesters at Galle Face Green.

Since then, the unions have systematically blocked any mass worker mobilization, frequently announcing strikes only to call them off or limiting job action to one or another group of workers.

The program put forward by the TUCC, which boasts that it is the country's largest trade union federation, is no different than that of bourgeois opposition parties. Like them, its central demand, amid chronic shortages of fuel, food and medicine and a growing threat of starvation, is for an interim government to be formed with the involvement of all the capitalist parties in parliament.

As if changing the faces of those leading the various government ministries will halt the social disaster produced by global capitalism and its Sri Lankan henchmen!

On the contrary, the crisis, the burden of which successive governments are pushing on to the working masses and poor, and which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and now the US-NATO war on Russia, exposes the failure of capitalism and the irreconcilable conflict between the needs of the masses and the profit system.

Workers in Sri Lanka must advance their own solution to the socio-economic crisis, one that begins with the needs of the workers and toilers and therefore rejects all attempts to tie them to the reactionary, corrupt official political framework or limit them to what is “affordable” under Sri Lankan capitalism.

The SEP fights for the building of rank-and-file action committees in all factories, workplaces, plantations, neighbourhoods and rural farming areas, independent of the trade unions and all the political representatives of the bourgeoisie, to mobilize against IMF austerity and develop the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government.

As Monday’s SEP statement, entitled “Down with the anti-democratic Sri Lankan presidential election!” explained: “The SEP advocates democratic and socialist demands, directly addressing the burning needs of working people, around which the action committees can fight. These include the nationalisation of big business and banks, the seizure of the wealth of billionaires, the repudiation of all foreign debts, the cancellation of the debts of poor peasants, the establishment of a monopoly of foreign trade, and indexing workers’ wages to inflation.”

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