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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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20.08.2019

Sri Lankan opposition party picks Gotabhaya Rajapakse as presidential candidate

The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the country's main opposition party, has picked Gotabhaya Rajapakse, ex-defence secretary and brother of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, as its candidate for the presidential election in December. The SLPP was formed more than two years ago by a breakaway faction from Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) headed by President Maithripala Sirisena.

The selection of Gotabhaya Rajapakse, a former army colonel, is highly significant. As defence secretary, he was directly implicated in war crimes during final stages of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and for the bloody repression of workers and poor. This clearly indicates that the SLPP and the Sri Lankan ruling class as a whole are rapidly lurching towards police-state forms of rule.

Former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse officially took over leadership of the SLPP at its national convention on August 11 and announced his brother's candidacy.

Addressing the convention, Gotabhaya Rajapakse said: "My top priority will be ensuring security in the country without allowing extremist terrorists to raise their heads."

Introducing his brother as the party's presidential candidate Mahinda Rajapakse said: "Sri Lanka needs a leader who will guarantee national security and rebuild the country. For that, we need discipline and law. Without discipline, no country can be developed."

Declarations about defending "national security," and establishing "discipline and law" is the rhetoric of leaders preparing for police-state rule, and echo the language and actions of

US President Donald Trump, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and far right leaders internationally.

Modi used “national security” as his rallying cry during the recent elections and is now employing it to justify the military lockdown of Kashmir and oppressive measures against the Indian masses.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse and the SLPP are systematically exploiting the April 21 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks by the Islamic extremist National Thowheeth Jamma’ath which killed almost 300 people and injured 500, to advance its law-and-order campaign. In fact, evidence has emerged that senior defence officials and political leaders, including Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and opposition leader Mahinda Rajapakse, were informed in advance by Indian intelligence of the impending attacks.

All Sri Lankan parliamentary parties, particularly the SLPP, immediately supported Sirisena’s imposition of emergency rule and the deployment of the armed forces against Muslims and to intimidate working people and the poor. The SLPP has led the way in whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment in an attempt to divide and weaken the working class.

President Sirisena, backed by Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP), came to power in 2015 by capitalising on the mass hostility to the regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse. The bourgeois Tamil and Muslim parties, along with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, the trade unions and pseudo-left groups, worked to contain and derail the opposition by promoting illusions in Sirisena’s so-called “good governance” campaign.

The opposition of workers, youth and the poor, however, quickly re-emerged as soon as the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government began implementing the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund.

When the UNP and SLFP suffered a humiliating defeat in the February 2018 local council elections, Sirisena withdrew his support for the Wickremesinghe administration and lined up with his rival Mahinda Rajapakse. Last October, Sirisena removed Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replaced him with Rajapakse.

Sirisena’s political coup, however, back-fired because Washington opposed any return of Mahinda Rajapakse, considering him to be pro-Chinese. The Sri Lankan Supreme Court ruled that Sirisena’s dissolution of the parliament was unconstitutional.

Under conditions where the UNP and the SLFP are widely discredited, sections of the ruling elite have turned to the SLPP and its reactionary campaign of defending “national security” and offering “strong government.”

Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s promises about stopping “extremist terrorists” are code for cracking down on mass action by the working class and the poor, as well as political opponents.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who spent several years in the US, returned to Sri Lanka in late 2005, just after his brother assumed the presidency. He was appointed defence secretary just before Colombo resumed its war against the separatist LTTE in July 2006. The almost 30-year war, which was also used to suppress the democratic rights of the working class, ended with the LTTE’s defeat in 2009.

Under the Rajapakses, the military, according to UN estimates, killed 40,000 Tamil civilians during the final months of the war. Along with these war crimes and the repressive measures imposed in the North and the East, the military, along paramilitary formations and thugs, were unleashed against opponents of the Rajapakse government, particularly the working class.

In June 2011, a Katunayake Free Trade Zone employee was killed, and many others injured, by state forces when workers took action to defend their pension fund. In 2012, police commandoes opened fire on protesting fishermen, killing one. In 2013, three youth were killed by the military when it opened fire on demonstrators against water pollution in Weliveriya in the suburbs of Colombo.

Gotabhaya has also been accused of being implicated in the murder of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunga in January 2009 and having connections with a secret military-run death-squad that abducted and beat up other prominent journalists.

Former President Mahinda Rajapakse also put in his brother in charge of “beautifying” Colombo, which involved the forcible expulsion of hundreds of thousands of poor families from inner city shanties.

Over the past two years, the SLPP and its chauvinist allies have mounted an aggressive campaign to rally Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists and expand its support in the military.

Significantly, on August 11, the US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells, and US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Alaina Teplitz, met with

Mahinda Rajapakse at his home. While nothing has been revealed about their discussions, the visit signals Washington's possible readiness to deal with a Rajapakse-led government. Under Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, Sri Lankan foreign policy has been realigned with Washington and a new Status of Forces agreement will transform the island into a "military logistics hub" for the United States Indo-Pacific Command.

As prominent Indian analyst M. K. Bhadrakumar recently commented in the *Asia Times*, "Washington prefers to strike a Faustian deal only if Rajapakse's party...will not stand in the way of finalising the military agreements."

In 2015, the pseudo-left and the trade unions worked to divert mass opposition to the Rajapakse government into political support for Sirisena. Over the last four years these same formations have opposed any independent movement of the working class and diverted workers into futile appeals to the government. This has allowed the SLPP and other extreme-right elements to bolster their support.

The UNP is now wracked by internal divisions over selecting a presidential candidate that can win support from the Sinhala-Buddhist forces and the military. While the Tamil bourgeois parties, including the Tamil National Alliance, have denounced the selection of Gotabhaya Rajapakse, these formations are politically responsible for the current situation, having backed the current pro-US government.

The working class must break from every faction of the ruling elite and build its own independent movement to fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on an international socialist program. We urge workers, youth and progressive-minded intellectuals to study the political program of the Socialist Equality Party, join its ranks and take forward the fight for this perspective.

19 September 2019