

Sri Lanka: Nothing has changed—but everything must change!

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Sri Lanka's huge protest movement has finally forced Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign. His departure is undoubtedly a victory for the protestors who, quite literally, forced him to leave by occupying his official residence.

After jubilant celebrations at the main protest site, Galle Face Green in Colombo, the crowds quickly began to disperse, in effect handing the initiative back to the constitutional authorities.

It immediately became clear that those authorities were determined to make sure they did not lose control again. Within hours, Ranil Wickremasinghe, Rajapaksa's prime minister, was sworn in as Acting President and a timetable for completing the election of a new President within a week was announced.

The procedure will underline the real limitations on what the protest movement has achieved; the new President will be chosen by MPs, the great majority of whom are members of Rajapaksa's party and backed him and his government until the bitter end. Revolutionaries will conclude, with some justice, that everything has changed - and nothing has changed.

In particular, the key institutions of the state; the army, police and administration, have withstood the popular onslaught, they have not changed. The underlying problems facing Sri Lankan society have also not changed. The country still has no financial reserves, there is virtually no diesel or petrol so goods cannot be transported, crops are left unharvested, medical

supplies have dwindled to almost nothing and cooking gas is unobtainable.

For millions of people across the island, the struggle, just to survive, will go on, despite any change of faces in government. The huge protest movement was driven forward by the harsh reality of poverty and hunger. It saw the Rajapaksa gang as the immediate problem and set itself the task of removing them. And it won. Such a movement and achievement will not just pass into history without trace.

What next?

But now the movement itself has to change, has to set itself new goals. Instead of demanding a new government of honest politicians to take charge and solve the people's problems, it has to organise to begin solving those problems itself.

Many Left groups have called for the building of local councils or committees. The Frontline Socialist Party, for example, calls for "People's Struggle Committees" to organise the protest movement and to take steps to ensure distribution of scarce resources. Local organisations are certainly necessary, but socialists need to be clear that what we propose are workers' organisations, based wherever possible on the main local workplaces.

Wherever they exist, trades unions can initiate such organisations but, even without them, workplaces are themselves an organisational framework to build on. Their guiding policy should be demands for workers' control and workers' inspection.

In the coming weeks and months, some kind of "caretaker" government is likely to be set up. To avoid complete social collapse, international agencies like the IMF and World Bank and "donor" countries such as India or Japan will organise "emergency relief supplies". Inevitably these will have strings attached, demands for economic policies that will safeguard repayment of loans, privatisation of what is left of the public sector.

All workers' organisations; unions, workplace committees, workers' action councils, will need to organise and mobilise not only to resist such policies but to gain control over distribution of whatever aid is delivered. That is what the mass movement must now focus on. In that struggle, the workers' organisations must take the lead, drawing in the organisations of the oppressed, the national minorities, women, youth by taking up their struggles as their own.

What is clear is that such an island-wide movement needs leadership and accountability, in short, the workers and oppressed of Sri Lanka need a new political party dedicated to their interests and the overthrow not just of particular corrupt politicians but the whole system that bred them.

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