

Desperate manoeuvres give Sri Lankan government a thin majority

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Two dozen opposition MPs joined the Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse last weekend. Superficially, the move has strengthened the government's hand giving it a bare parliamentary majority for the first time. In reality, the unwieldy coalition and huge cabinet are signs of deep political crisis as Rajapakse escalates the unpopular civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The “cross-overs”—18 from the United National Party (UNP) and 6 from the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)—followed weeks of behind-the-scenes haggling. All 18 of the UNP members have been given a post in the government—10 as cabinet ministers and the remainder as non-cabinet and deputy ministers. SLMC leader Rauf Hakim was given a cabinet post and other SLMC members were appointed as deputy ministers.

The coalition government now has 113 members in the country's 225-seat parliament—a majority of just one. The essential glue holding this alliance together is the perks and privileges of office. After his reshuffle on Sunday, Rajapakse presides over the largest cabinet in Asia—104 government members have posts. Of those, 52 are cabinet ministers, 33 are non-cabinet ministers and 19 are deputy ministers.

When Rajapakse narrowly won the presidential election in November 2005, his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) had just 58 seats. The SLFP's “Peoples Alliance” with five other parties had a total of only 88 MPs, well short of a majority. To avoid defeat in parliament, Rajapakse was dependent on the support of two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—with which he had signed electoral pacts.

Rajapakse's deals with the JVP and JHU committed the government to an aggressive stance against the LTTE. For months, the military in collaboration with allied paramilitary groups waged a dirty secretive war of assassination aimed at terrorising the Tamil population and provoking the LTTE. In July, Rajapakse ordered the army onto the offensive in open

breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement. The military has seized the eastern areas of Mavilaru, Sampur and, most recently, Vaharai.

At the same time, Rajapakse has been desperate to bolster the government's parliamentary position in the face of growing popular opposition against the war and also declining living standards. Last August Rajapakse enticed the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Up-country Peoples Front (UPF) into the government. The CWC and UPF are trade unions that also function as political parties, with support from Tamil-speaking plantation workers.

The latest “cross-overs” have given the government a slim majority, but also effectively scuttled an agreement signed between the SLFP and UNP on October 23—just three months ago. While not a formal political alliance, the country's two major bourgeois parties—and long-time rivals—agreed for the first time to collaborate on a range of issues, including the war. The UNP pledged to support the government for two years, while Rajapakse promised to consult UNP leaders on major questions.

The UNP-SLFP pact was hailed in the media, by business leaders and foreign powers, including the US, EU, Japan and India, as a major breakthrough that would pave the way for renewed peace talks. By presenting a common front, so the argument went, the government would be able to marginalise the JVP, which was demanding all-out war, and reach a deal with the LTTE to end the country's protracted civil war. The deal between the two parties was itself a recognition that the country faced a grave economic and political crisis generated by the war.

In fact, the war has continued to intensify. Rajapakse has responded to deepening social discontent over rising prices and widespread poverty by stirring up communal divisions and generating an atmosphere of war hysteria. His government has imposed a series of anti-democratic measures, including a strengthened version of the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act that allows for lengthy detention without trial. Far from opposing the government, the UNP, which is just as mired in anti-Tamil chauvinism as

the SLFP, has tacitly supported its policies.

Having “stabilised” his government with the “cross-overs,” Rajapakse will further intensify the war. Defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is also the president’s brother, told Reuters last Friday: “We definitely want to destroy their [LTTE] assets, wherever those are—whether it is in the north, east, south... We want to destroy their assets everywhere, because as long as they have Sea Tiger bases, as long as they have artillery pieces... terrorists are always thinking wherever possible they want to do damage.”

President Rajapakse delivered a similar message to the Sri Lanka Donors Conference on Monday, saying: “Our aim in defeating terrorism is to liberate the people who have become victims of terrorism.” The repeated denunciation of the LTTE as “terrorists” is to obscure the real causes of the war, which lie in the systematic discrimination of the country’s Tamil minority by successive governments. While everyone urged peace, no one at the conference challenged Rajapakse or his government’s obvious breaches of the 2002 ceasefire agreement.

In fact, the US indicated its support the Sri Lankan government’s aggression. While paying lip service to the need for “peace”, American ambassador Robert Blake declared: “We are a strong supporter in assisting Sri Lanka combat terror by helping to stop the financing and flow of arms to the LTTE, by providing law enforcement assistance, and by providing training and equipment to help the Sri Lankan military to defend itself.”

The “cross-overs” have thrown the UNP into crisis. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe previously warned the SLFP against poaching UNP members, saying it would endanger the agreement between the two parties. Party chairman Rukman Senanayake tore up a copy of the agreement at a press conference on Sunday. Party general secretary Tissa Attanayake lamented that Rajapakse had lost an opportunity to resolve the country’s problems and indicated that the UNP would launch a campaign against the government, possibly in league with the JVP.

The JVP has also criticised Rajapakse’s acceptance of UNP members into the cabinet’s ranks, indicating that its own support for the government may be at risk. The JVP is bitterly opposed to the UNP, which it has repeatedly accused of betraying the country for signing the 2002 ceasefire with the LTTE. JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayaka specifically denounced three of the “cross-overs” who backed peace talks with the LTTE—G.L. Peiris, Milinda Moragoda and Rajitha Senarathne—as having acted “against the interests of the country”.

Before signing the agreement with the UNP, Rajapakse held talks on a formal alliance with the JVP. No deal was reached, however, after the JVP presented a 20-point

program that amounted to a declaration of war against the LTTE. Rajapakse preferred to maintain room to manoeuvre—to posture as a man of peace and paint the LTTE as the aggressor so as to retain public and international support. In a political committee statement on Monday, the JVP foreshadowed a chauvinist campaign to “defeat attempts to dilute the mandate”—that is, the program of war implied in Rajapakse’s 2005 election manifesto.

The government’s latest manoeuvres to cling to power underscore the degenerate character of the major parties. Utterly incapable of addressing the deepening social crisis of the masses, all of them resort to whipping up chauvinism to divide working people along communal lines and thus have no solution to the country’s barbaric civil war. So widespread is the alienation from the entire political establishment that neither the SLFP nor the UNP command any significant active base of support. Both parties are riven with factional infighting and preoccupied with obtaining and hanging onto power using any available means.

Unable to win popular support for his reactionary policies, Rajapakse has now managed to coax and bribe sufficient MPs to establish a parliamentary majority—of one seat. This whole political edifice, which is wracked by competing and contradictory interests, is inherently unstable and will inevitably crumble—sooner rather than later. The issue for working people, however, is the construction of a progressive alternative. What is needed is a complete break from all the parties of the ruling elite and the building of an independent political movement based on socialist internationalism to end war and social inequality.



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