

Sri Lankan minister quits ruling party to contest presidential election

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Sri Lankan Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena announced on Friday that he was resigning to stand as the “opposition common candidate” against President Mahinda Rajapakse in the election called for January 8. Sirisena’s decision is a calculated blow against the president and his government.

Sirisena was the long-standing general secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main partner in the ruling coalition, until he was sacked by Rajapakse on Saturday. Three other ministers and two members of parliament have also quit the SLFP. Sirisena claimed that dozens of ministers and MPs would resign from the government to join him in the coming days.

Sirisena’s announcement, which came just one day after Rajapakse called the election, was a carefully hatched conspiracy aimed at splitting the SLFP ahead of the poll. Those involved included former president and senior SLFP figure, Chandrika Kumaratunga, and the leader of the opposition United National Party (UNP), Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Seeking a third term as president, Rajapakse announced the presidential election nearly two years early, fearing a delay would only further erode his support as his government imposes the International Monetary Fund’s austerity demands on the working class and poor. He previously used his overwhelming parliamentary majority to ram through the 18th constitutional amendment that ended the two-term limit on the presidency.

At a press conference on Friday, Sirisena declared: “In the past few years the country has been heading towards a veiled dictatorship.” He continued: “Corruption, fraud and injustice are rampant. The supremacy of the judiciary is crumbling... the country is under a veiled dictatorship with members of one family

running the economy and the administration.”

Sirisena promised to abolish the executive presidency within 100 days. He also said he would do away with the “corrupt election system” and the 18th amendment. He announced that he would appoint UNP leader Wickremesinghe as prime minister in a new government—demonstrating that a deal had been stitched up well in advance. At the same time, Sirisena touted his Sinhala communalist credentials by praising Rajapakse for defeating the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Until last Friday, Sirisena and other defectors fully supported Rajapakse’s anti-democratic acts and austerity measures. His resignation reflects deep discontent within the ruling coalition and the Colombo political establishment with Rajapakse’s cronyism and autocratic methods of rule.

Rajapakse, using his extensive powers as executive president, operates through a tiny cabal that includes his brothers—Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse and Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse—and a handful of top bureaucrats. Together they control about 45 percent of the national budget and have privileged access to big business and investors. The parliamentary speaker, Chamal Rajapakse, is another of the president’s brothers.

At the very least, the move against Rajapakse was undertaken with Washington’s knowledge and approval. The Obama administration has mounted an increasingly aggressive “human rights” campaign against Rajapakse’s government over the gross human rights abuses carried out by the Sri Lankan military during the war against the LTTE. The US fully backed the war and turned a blind eye to the military’s war crimes. After the LTTE’s defeat, however, Washington exploited the issue to try to force Rajapakse to distance

his government from China, which provides aid and investment.

In March, the US sponsored a UN Human Rights Council resolution calling for an independent war crimes probe. Accordingly, an investigation has commenced that could isolate Sri Lanka internationally and result in sanctions. As part of its aggressive “pivot to Asia” against China, the Obama administration has pressured governments throughout the region to line up with the US, rather than to balance, as Rajapakse has attempted, between Washington and Beijing.

Former President Kumaratunga’s involvement in Sirisena’s resignation points to Washington’s hand. After her two terms as president, Kumaratunga joined the US-based Clinton Foundation and has close relationships with American and European diplomats. For the past several weeks, she has shuttled between government ministers and UNP leader Wickremesinghe, abroad and in Sri Lanka, to prepare a “common front” with the defectors. She convened Sirisena’s press conference last Friday and accused Rajapakse of undermining the SLFP and treating her and other party leaders shabbily.

The *Daily Mirror* wrote on November 6 that UNP leaders, including Mangala Samaraweera, Karu Jayasuriya and Ravi Karunanayake, “met with some influential foreign diplomats accredited to Colombo on Tuesday [November 4], and discussed matters related to the party’s strategy to win the presidential election.” While not naming the diplomats involved, the obvious candidates are those from the US, Britain and India.

The UNP and the breakaway SLFP faction represent powerful sections of the corporate elite who fear the economic and strategic consequences of alienating the US and its allies. Big business is worried about the impact on its main markets in the US and Europe, which together account for 45 percent of the country’s exports.

Former Fisheries Minister, Rajitha Senarathne, who defected with Sirisena, warned that Rajapakse’s populist demagoguery about being the victim of an “international conspiracy” would ruin the country’s image. “Shouting crudely against the international community or using strong epithets is not patriotism,” he said.

Other parties are considering whether to back the opposition. The Sinhala-Buddhist extremist Jathika

Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is part of Rajapakse’s ruling coalition, expressed support for a common front around Sirisena. The JHU recently criticised the government for rejecting its demands to limit presidential powers, and its two ministers resigned in protest.

The Democratic Party of former army chief, Sarath Fonseka, who stood as the common opposition candidate against Rajapakse in the 2010 election, declared that it would consider supporting Sirisena. The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna is doing likewise.

Rajapakse is desperate to prevent any further defections from his party and to stem the unfolding crisis. At a public meeting over the weekend, he made a back-handed threat to the defectors and anyone else planning to defect. Rajapakse told the meeting he had individual “files” detailing their involvement in corruption, but he “would not open” them. No doubt, ways could be found to leak any damaging material.

Government ministers hurriedly called a press conference and blamed the defections on UNP leader Wickremesinghe. Minister Dullas Alahapperuma told the media: “Maithripala Sirisena has been misled by both the opposition and a Western conspiracy to destabilise the country.”

Working people should not place any faith either in the government or the opposition “common front,” which is seeking to exploit widespread alienation over rising prices, deteriorating living standards and the abuse of democratic rights. If Sirisena comes to power, he will be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in imposing the austerity agenda of the ruling elites.



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