

New Sri Lankan president appoints his cabinet

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Maithripala Sirisena, Sri Lanka's newly-elected president, has formed his government following his January 8 election victory over incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse. Sirisena, who was sworn in the day after the ballot, appointed a new prime minister and inducted a new cabinet on Monday.

The main figures in the new regime underscore that its agenda is to shift Sri Lankan foreign policy away from China and toward the United States and impose deeper austerity policies against the working class and oppressed in the interests of transnational investors.

Sirisena, a leading minister in Rajapakse's administration, defected the day after the election was called on November 20 and was embraced as the "common opposition candidate" by the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and a range of other parties and organisations. His challenge for the presidency was orchestrated by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who has close ties with the Obama administration. Its aim was to oust Rajapakse over his government's relations with Beijing and to realign Sri Lanka behind Washington's confrontational diplomatic, economic and military "pivot" against China in Asia.

UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed prime minister on Friday—the third time since 1993 he has held the post. Throughout his political career Wickremesinghe has been associated with right-wing free market economic policies and the pursuit of close ties with Washington.

Announced on Monday, Sirisena's cabinet consists of 27 ministers, 10 state ministers and 8 deputy ministers with the key defence ministry held by Sirisena himself. Sirisena has vowed to strengthen Sri Lankan relations with the US and India in particular.

Wickremesinghe was appointed policy implementation and economic development minister as well as prime minister, giving him direct oversight of economic

policies. He stated last December that a UNP-dominated government would "reconsider" the \$1.4 billion Chinese-financed construction of Colombo Port City, Sri Lanka's largest foreign direct investment project. The development is in line with Chinese ambitions to gain naval access to Indian Ocean ports adjacent the key shipping lanes between the Middle East and Asia.

Foreign minister Mangala Samaraweera is a staunch advocate of a pro-US and pro-Indian foreign policy. He held the same ministry position under Rajapakse from 2005 but was removed in 2007. He later accused Rajapakse of sacking him because of clashes over the close ties the president sought with China.

The new finance minister, Ravi Karunananaya, was a fervent advocate of "free market" reforms during his role as the commerce and consumer affairs minister from 2001 to 2004 in Wickremesinghe's previous UNP government. On Tuesday, Karunananaya declared his priorities were "reducing the expenses and increasing the income" of the government.

Karunananaya's statement signals that Sirisena's regime will impose International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands that Sri Lanka's budget deficit be reduced to 5.2 percent of gross domestic product this year and to 3.8 percent by 2016. This will require slashing social spending at the expense of workers and the rural poor.

The overwhelming majority of the cabinet is drawn from the UNP but it includes two former members of Rajapakse's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) who deserted with Sirisena. Sirisena has also given a ministry to Champika Ranawaka, a leader of the Sinhala nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and vocal exponent of its anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism. Palani Digambaran, the head of the anti-working class National Union of Workers (NUW), who deserted Rajapakse in December, has been installed as estate development infrastructure minister.

Sirisena described his cabinet as an “interim government” and declared that he will hold parliamentary elections after 100 days in office. The United States and its allies, however, wasted no time in signaling that they expect the rapid implementation of a foreign and economic policy shift.

US Secretary of State John Kerry talked to Sirisena over the phone on Sunday to express US “hopes” for the strengthening of Washington’s ties with Colombo. Kerry, who was on a visit to India, told reporters: “The election hopefully will become a demarcation point for a new moment, a new chapter, a new set of opportunities, for the people of Sri Lanka.”

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi immediately congratulated Sirisena and invited him to visit India. Likewise, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj telephoned her counterpart Samaraweera to invite him to make his first international visit to India on January 18.

The Indian media is full of articles welcoming the change of government in Colombo as a blow to Chinese geo-political ambitions and a boost for India and its growing strategic ties with the US.

Indian political analyst Shastri Ramachandran, for example, commented in *DNA India* on January 13: “President Sirisena and the powerful figures backing him are pro-US... the West may shed its hostility to Sri Lanka—but in return for results, such as Colombo diluting its relations with Beijing and providing more infrastructure and investment opportunities to the West instead of China.”

Nevertheless, Sirisena’s regime is mired in crisis from the outset. Amid already sharp geopolitical tensions and deepening global economic slump, its attempts to align with the US “pivot” and intensify IMF-dictated austerity measures will inevitably provoke a confrontation with the working class and rural poor. At the same time, the ruling class and state apparatus are bitterly divided between the Sirisena and Rajapakse camps.

Sirisena and the UNP are working desperately to consolidate their hold on power. Sirisena has made repeated calls for a “national unity government” and is seeking to engineer more desertions from Rajapakse within the SLFP, of which he was the secretary general until his defection. Rival moves by Sirisena and Rajapakse to assert their power in the SLFP have led to an open conflict, with each faction claiming leadership of the party.

Efforts are being made by the UNP to bring over the

smaller parties that remained part of the SLFP-led United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) during the election. By the time of the election, 25 UPFA parliamentarians had crossed over to support Sirisena’s presidential campaign. Since his victory about 20 more parliamentarians have switched allegiances, but not enough to strip the UPFA of its parliamentary majority.

In a pointed warning that extra-parliamentary measures are being considered against Rajapakse’s supporters, Sirisena’s spokesmen announced an investigation into allegations that Rajapakse, Supreme Court Chief Justice Mohan Pieris and others plotted a “coup” on election night.

Senior figures in Sirisena’s government, such as Foreign Minister Samaraweera and Health Minister Rajitha Senarathna, have publicly accused Rajapakse of attempting to enlist military and police officials in a conspiracy to impose emergency rule and stop the counting of votes. They claimed that Rajapakse was rebuffed by the security forces and only then agreed to concede defeat. Sirisena refused to take his oath of office from Pieris, denouncing him as “illegal,” and insisted on being sworn in by another justice.

Rajapakse has rejected the coup allegations. Whether they are true or false, such charges, along with the claims of massive corruption involving Rajapakse, his family and associates, could be used by Sirisena and the UNP government to conduct a purge within the political establishment.

Within days of the election, Sirisena’s election campaign demagogic that he would bring “democracy and prosperity” has fallen away. His government will use autocratic and ruthless measures to suppress opposition, impose austerity and aggressively align Sri Lanka with the US war preparations against China. This will have grave consequences for the working class and oppressed masses in Sri Lanka, the region and internationally.



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