

# Sri Lankan president forms a “national government”

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena announced on Sunday the formation of a “national government,” incorporating his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) into the ruling United National Party (UNP)-led coalition.

The sudden decision to broaden the coalition was taken in secret talks on Thursday with former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who remains a senior SLFP figure, and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the UNP leader. Sirisena allocated 26 cabinet, deputy and state minister positions to SLFP parliamentarians in an attempt to stabilise his shaky government.

Sirisena, who was health minister under President Mahinda Rajapakse, defected from Rajapakse’s cabinet to contest the January 8 presidential election. It was a carefully engineered regime-change operation by Washington’s Obama administration with the help of Kumaratunga and the pro-US UNP. The US wanted to scuttle the Rajapakse government’s relations with China and line up Sri Lanka firmly behind the US “pivot” to Asia to encircle China diplomatically and militarily.

During the presidential election campaign, in order to garner votes, Sirisena and the UNP promised to deliver constitutional reforms, as well as economic relief for working people, within 100 days and then dissolve the parliament on April 23 to hold a general election in June.

However, discussions on constitutional reforms have dragged on for two months as a result of factional rivalry and differences within both the government and the parliamentary opposition.

The UNP initially formed a minority coalition government after Sirisena won the election. As the SLFP-led United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has around 130 seats in the 225-member parliament, the government depended on its support. The

government’s ruling partners included the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and Muslim communal parties.

To exploit the hostility among workers and the poor toward the anti-democratic executive presidency and Rajapakse’s authoritarian rule, Sirisena nominated constitutional reforms as a priority. He promised to abolish the executive presidency and return to a more parliamentary form of government.

The UNP proposed to curb the president’s powers and transfer them to the cabinet, headed by the prime minister. The JHU, however, accused the UNP of trying to place executive powers totally in the prime minister’s hands, and the SLFP made similar allegations.

A final proposal, said to be agreed by the ruling and opposition parties, was gazetted on March 16 as the 19th amendment to the constitution. However, the cabinet again changed the proposal this week, before presenting it to parliament.

Under the revised plan, executive powers will be transferred to a cabinet headed by the prime minister, and responsible to parliament. The president will be the head of the state, acting under the advice of the prime minister, but he will be commander-in-chief of the armed forces. His power to dissolve the parliament within one year after its election is to be weakened by extending to four years the period free from presidential intervention. Appointments to top state posts, including high judicial offices and the election commission, will be made by a constitutional council selected by the government and the opposition.

This façade has nothing to do with any concern for democratic rights. All these parties, including the UNP and SLFP, have thoroughly anti-democratic records. They have imposed International Monetary Fund

austerity programs, police-state measures and nearly three decades of war to suppress Tamils and split the working class. The JHU, a vociferous supporter of this agenda, has only tactical differences over the form of the continuing repression.

Factional clashes are continuing within the government and the SLFP. JHU cabinet minister Champika Ranawaka declared on Monday that the amendment was a “constitutional coup” by the UNP to seize power. The SLFP’s parliamentary opposition leader, Nimal Siripala de Silva, said he would not quit that post, posing the question as to whether the SLFP as a whole had joined the government. He said the SLFP would not back the amendment unless electoral reforms were included. In another speech, Silva underscored doubts about the holding of the June election, saying that the promise to dissolve parliament on April 23 and conduct an early election was not binding.

Rajapakse is exacerbating the political crisis by seeking to assert his influence within the SLFP. Sections of the SLFP and its Sinhala extremist partners in the UPFA—the National Freedom Front and Mahajana Eksath Peramuna—backed by the opportunist Lanka Sama Samaja Party and Stalinist Communist Party, are campaigning for Rajapakse to become a prime ministerial candidate in the scheduled election. Their chauvinist slogan is “Save the motherland,” denouncing Sirisena for seeking an accommodation with the Tamil elite.

Rajapakse is going round the country, attending religious ceremonies at prominent Buddhist temples to meet monks and his supporters. He opposes the SLFP joining the ruling coalition, calling it “a time bomb” for the party.

By forming a “national government,” Sirisena is trying to scuttle the moves by Rajapakse and other opposition parties. Above all, however, the main concern of Sirisena and the UNP-led government is the growing discontent among workers and the poor.

In order to win votes, the government promised measures to address the cost of living, but the wage increase pledged for public employees was reduced to an allowance. During the past two weeks, workers in free trade zones and contract employees have held several protests demanding pay rises. Peasants from rural districts have travelled to Colombo to demonstrate, demanding reasonable prices and

subsidies.

Trade unions backed by fake “lefts,” such as the United Socialist Party, have organised the protests to head-off the growing social unrest. Nevertheless, the protests are symptoms of a developing socially explosive situation.

The Sinhala communalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is seeking to exploit the developing opposition to the government, after providing crucial support to Sirisena as a member of his National Executive Council (NEC), an advisory body. JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake said a national government was not in Sirisena’s election manifesto, and the JVP would decide whether to continue in the NEC only after “consulting civil groups.”

Sirisena and sections of the ruling elite are clearly seeking to get all the parties of the political establishment together to consolidate the pro-US government and take on the working class and the poor. Speaking to media executives last Wednesday, Sirisena emphasised the importance of a national government and said he intended to work for such a government “at least for two years,” even after an election.

A *Daily Mirror* editorial on Monday glorified the declaration of a national government. It declared: “If a momentous chapter in Sri Lanka’s history began on January 8 this year, then a golden page was written yesterday when the two main political parties decided to rise beyond self-centred party politics.” Likewise, *Ceylon Today* quoted “market sources” saying a national government would “give stability, attract FDI [foreign direct investment] and relieve pressure on the rupee.”

Those statements indicate that alarmed sections of the ruling elite want a united effort to defend their interests, above all against the working class.



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