

Sri Lankan government postpones constitutional amendment

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The minority United National Party (UNP)-led government in Sri Lanka has been thrown into crisis after being forced to put off the parliamentary debate over its proposed 19th amendment to the constitution. Debate was due to take place on Thursday and Friday.

The postponement was a result of infighting between ruling and opposition parties and compounded by the Supreme Court's determination that some clauses should be referred to a referendum. The amendment has already been changed several times in a bid to get the backing of parliamentary opposition parties.

The main proposal was to abolish the executive presidency and transfer most powers to a prime minister and cabinet responsible to the parliament. The president would remain as head of the state, but acting under the advice of the prime minister, and would retain the post of commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

Abolition of the executive presidency was one of the chief planks of the program of Maithripala Sirisena who, with the backing of the UNP, ousted Mahinda Rajapakse in the January presidential election. Sirisena, who had been part of Rajapakse's cabinet until the election was called, hypocritically denounced the former president's corruption and dictatorial rule.

The election took on the character of a regime-change operation backed by the US, which was hostile to Rajapakse's close ties with China. Sirisena capitalised on the widespread public opposition to the previous government's anti-democratic methods and attacks on social rights. The proposed constitutional amendment, however, is not aimed at restoring democracy, but at fashioning new forms of autocratic rule to impose its austerity agenda on workers and the poor.

Altogether 19 petitions were presented to the Supreme Court by different political parties, civil

groups and individuals—most of them opposed to granting more powers to the prime minister.

Parliamentary speaker Chamal Rajapakse read the Supreme Court's opinion to parliament on Thursday. It stated that the clauses delegating the executive powers of the president to the prime minister required a two-thirds majority in parliament and a referendum thus effectively blocking the move. Similar approval was also needed to appoint a competent authority to monitor state and private television to prevent violations of the election commissioner's rules during an election.

The Supreme Court determination was hailed in the media as proof that it was now impartial under the new government. In fact, the court's opinion simply reflects the fact that sections of the political establishment want to retain a strong presidency amid a worsening economic and social crisis.

In a bid to broaden parliamentary support for the amendment, Sirisena included members of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the UNP-led government. However, most SLFP parliamentarians are still sitting in the opposition and are accusing the UNP of seeking to put autocratic powers in the hands of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The SLFP is in turmoil after the election—sections of the party continue to support Rajapakse while others back Sirisena, who retained his membership even though he defected to the opposition. On Tuesday, SLFP members voted down a proposal to issue treasury bills amounting to 400 billion rupees (\$US3 billion) creating a new crisis for the government.

There is sharp opposition to the constitutional amendment even among those parties backing the government. The Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is part of the ruling coalition, filed a petition in the Supreme Court against the

constitutional changes and accused Wickremesinghe of seeking to usurp presidential powers.

On Thursday, Wickremesinghe told the parliament that the government would change some clauses of the amendment and put it for the vote later this month. In a bid to head off criticism, he also said the amendment would not take effect until the next presidential term—some six years away. In other words, the executive presidency would not end immediately as promised.

Posturing as a champion of democracy, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has vocally backed the proposed amendment. JVP leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake declared: “We think the new amendment is the right choice for democracy. It gives public servants the necessary legal frame to work independently.”

Likewise, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil bourgeois party, has declared that it views the proposal as a step towards democracy. The TNA is backing the government hoping for a compromise with the Colombo ruling elites that would strengthen its position through the devolution of powers at the provincial level.

Rajapakse, however, is seeking to exploit the government’s growing political crisis to make a comeback. He has told the media that some presidential powers, but not all, should be reduced. He is being promoted by sections of the SLFP and former coalition partners, including the Sinhala chauvinist parties—the National Freedom Front and Mahajana Eksath Peramuna as well as the opportunist Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Stalinist Communist Party.

Rajapakse is operating from a leading Buddhist temple in Colombo and organising meetings at temples. The *Sunday Times* reported he was planning a march of 5,000 monks that will mobilise reactionary Sinhala-Buddhist forces to back his bid to return to power.

None of the parties—those backing or not backing the executive presidential system—has the slightest concern for democratic rights of working people. Sirisena’s SLFP and the UNP are notorious for attacks on democratic rights including the waging of a brutal communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In 1978, the UNP government of former President J. R. Jayawardene rewrote the constitution, crowning it

with the executive presidential system with broad autocratic powers. Jayawardene boasted that the “only thing the president cannot do is to change a man into a woman and vice versa.”

The 1978 constitution was the preparation for implementing pro-market policies that savagely attacked the living standards of the working class in order to turn the island into a cheap labour platform. Jayawardene sacked 100,000 public sector employees to crush a general strike in order to impose his attacks on jobs and conditions. The UNP government was responsible for the 1983 island-wide anti-Tamil pogrom that precipitated the plunge into civil war.

In opposition, every party—the SLFP and UNP alike—has postured as an opponent of the executive presidency only to abandon their promises when in office and further strengthen the presidency. Rajapakse pushed through the 18th amendment that removed the two-term limit on the presidency and strengthened his powers to directly appoint top judges and state officials.

Rajapakse’s autocratic methods of rule were not simply a personal weakness or a product of his regime’s corruption and nepotism. Rather his resort to police state methods was above all directed at suppressing any resistance by workers and the poor to his government’s attacks on living standards.

The new UNP-led government is preparing to do the same.



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