

Sri Lankan president postpones parliamentary election

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Amid a deepening political and social crisis, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena has repeatedly postponed the calling of a general election. As part of his “100-day” program, announced during the campaign for the January 8 presidential election, Sirisena promised to dissolve parliament on April 23 and hold a parliamentary election.

Last week, at a meeting with media executives and owners, Sirisena declared that he expected to install the next government by September, but refused to say when he intended to end the parliamentary session and set the date for a poll.

Sirisena, who was health minister under former President Mahinda Rajapakse, defeated Rajapakse in the January 8 poll, with the support of the pro-US United National Party (UNP) and several other parties. Behind his election was a regime-change operation instigated by the Obama administration, which wanted to scuttle Rajapakse’s relations with Beijing as part of its aggressive “pivot to Asia” to confront China.

Sirisena announced the 100-day “work program” during the election to exploit the popular opposition to the Rajapakse government attacks on democratic rights and living conditions. Sirisena’s program included abolishing the “dictatorial” executive presidency and providing “relief measures,” including increased wages, pensions, welfare allowances and subsidies.

After his election victory, Sirisena installed a UNP-led minority government and appointed UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister. Sirisena declared that a national unity government would be needed for at least two years after a parliamentary election, in order to face “challenges.” It was a reactionary appeal, aimed at uniting the political establishment to confront the working class and shift foreign policy decisively in Washington’s direction.

Sirisena’s calculations have been shattered by acrimonious fighting between the ruling UNP and the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its partners in the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA). The UPFA includes the Sinhala chauvinist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) and National Freedom Front (NFF), as well as the thoroughly discredited Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Stalinist Communist Party.

Sirisena is the nominal leader of the SLFP and UPFA, but has virtually lost control of them. While Prime Minister Wickremesinghe is pressing for an early dissolution of parliament, the majority faction of the SLFP is demanding that elections be postponed until electoral changes are made, via a 20th Amendment to the constitution.

Wickremesinghe told the foreign correspondents’ association on May 14 that no new bills would be presented to parliament “as some elements are working to sabotage these bills.” He was referring to SLFP and UPFA parliamentarians who are attacking the government.

The UNP is pressing for early election not because of concern for democratic rights but because it fears that any delay would further discredit the government, ending the UNP’s hopes of securing a majority of seats. The government has already broken promises to increase wages, and failed to reduce the cost of living.

The SLFP is seeking to postpone the election toward the end of the year, hoping to exploit the growing popular opposition to the government. Its insistence on electoral changes is a delaying tactic. The electoral proposals include introducing first-past-the-post voting for 160 seats, proportional voting for 65 and a national system for 29. Far from being democratic, these plans are aimed at marginalising minority and small parties,

which oppose the amendment.

Rajapakse is seeking to make a comeback with the support of UPFA partners, such as the NFF and MEP, and a faction of the SLFP. This coalition has organised public meetings, financed by Rajapakse's big business allies. Backed by this alliance, Rajapakse has demanded that he be named as the prime ministerial candidate of the SLFP-led UPFA.

Rajapakse and his supporters are seeking to regain their lost power by diverting the increasing discontent among workers and poor in a Sinhala chauvinist direction. They criticise Sirisena and the UNP government of allowing the defeated Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to "raise its head."

In a bid to silence Rajapakse and his former officials, the government and Sirisena have launched a probe by the Financial Corruption Investigation Division (FCID) of the police. Rajapakse's youngest brother, former Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse, and two other ex-ministers have been jailed until the investigation concludes.

The spectacle of one corrupt set of politician hypocritically probing another, in order to suppress political opponents, has opened up a can of worms. Ordinary people, left to live on just one or two dollars a day, are gaining a glimpse of the staggering wealth that is being amassed by crooked means.

Washington is doing its best to shore up Sirisena and the UNP government. Following US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Colombo earlier this month to discuss strengthening relations, the US sent a team of officials to boost the corruption probe. Officially, they are assisting the government "to trace and recover billions of rupees worth of assets syphoned off from Sri Lanka and stashed in financial institutions in the United States."

According to the information on the department's web site, the team includes officers from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Justice, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Department of Homeland Security.

The infighting has alarmed sections of the ruling elite. Branding it a "dogfight," a recent *Sunday Times* editorial declared: "If the Sri Lankan situation looks ungovernable, with parties adopting antagonistic, adversarial positions, it has little sympathy from the people." The concern is that the "dogfight" is exposing

the bankrupt and reactionary nature of the entire establishment.

Deepening economic uncertainties and social discontent are compounding the political crisis. Sri Lanka's foreign debt rose by \$US4 billion last year, and debt servicing now consumes 95 percent of total government revenue. A recent World Bank report predicted that Sri Lanka's growth rate would decline to 6.9 percent this year, down from a five-year annual average of 7.4 percent. The ongoing slump in Europe, Sri Lanka's biggest market, is taking a toll.

The International Monetary Fund warned recently that achieving a fiscal deficit target of 4.4 percent was a major task, after the deficit blew out to 5.8 percent last year. Under this pressure, many in ruling circles want to end the infighting and install a new government in order to step up the attacks on the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class.

During the presidential election, the trade unions and the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party and United Socialist Party helped channel the discontent behind Sirisena. However, the votes of workers and youth for Sirisena was not a sign of positive support, but was to express their opposition to Rajapakse's regime.

There have been growing signs of social unrest during the past few weeks. About 40,000 health workers started a week-long strike on Monday. Sporadic strikes have taken place in plantations against threatened job losses and increased workloads. Last week, protests erupted across the island's north, involving thousands of people. The immediate issue was the rape and killing of a teenage student, but the demonstrations were a symptom of deep-seated discontent among workers, youth and the poor.



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