Sri Lankan president dissolves parliament amid political uncertainty

K. Ratnayake
29 June 2015

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena dissolved the country's parliament on Friday amid intensifying political and economic instability. A general election will be held on August 17, with nominations to open on July 6, and close on July 13.

During the campaign for the January 8 presidential election, Sirsena promised to dissolve parliament within 100 days of taking office, which fell on April 23. He postponed the move to try to consolidate power within his own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which he only nominally leads.

In both the SLFP and the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) that the party leads, Sirisena faces a challenge by a rival faction based on former President Mahinda Rajapakse and his allies and supporters.

The immediate reason cited for the dissolution was the government's inability to muster majority support in the parliament for Sirisena's proposals for electoral reforms or a twentieth amendment to the constitution. The United National Party (UNP), which leads Sirisena's minority government, opposed the changes, saying they would further delay the promised early election. The UNP feared that the delay would intensify rising popular discontent, threatening its chances of winning the election.

The badly-divided SLFP, which held a majority in the now-dissolved parliament, wanted to postpone the election in order to gain from the public disillusionment with the UNP, whose leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, was installed as prime minister by Sirisena.

Other parties, such as the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, a partner in the government, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which backed the ruling coalition, opposed electoral reforms on the ground that the proposals would disadvantage smaller parties.

However, the acrimonious fights between these parties have nothing to do with any concern for democratic rights. Rather, they reflect the privileges of different sections of the capitalist class and the underlying turmoil embracing the entire political establishment.

Since taking office after the January 8 presidential election, Sirisena and the minority government that he appointed have faced one crisis after another. He was installed as president in a regimechange operation instigated by the Obama administration, aided by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who has close connections with Washington via the Clinton Foundation, and Wickremesinghe, who heads the pro-US UNP.

The US intervened to end Rajapakse's foreign policy tilt toward Beijing and firmly place Sri Lanka in line with Washington's aggressive war preparations against China. Its local allies exploited the deep anger among workers, youth and poor against Rajapakse's increasingly authoritarian rule. Rajapakse used police-state methods to suppress resistance as he implemented the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

Sirisena resigned as Rajapakse's health minister, according to a well-advanced plan to challenge him for the presidency. The trade unions, pseudo-left groups such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party, and various other middle-class organisations helped to cover up the regime-change operation. They channeled the opposition of workers and the poor into Sirisena's camp under the bogus banner of fighting Rajapakse's dictatorship and ending nepotism. The JVP and the Tamil National Alliance backed Sirisena's campaign.

Initially, there were euphoric hopes in these quarters that Sirisena could exploit the breakup of the former ruling coalition, the SLFP-led UPFA, and consolidate the minority government.

The timing of the August 17 election is significant. During an early May visit by US Secretary of State John Kerry, Sirisena indicated that he would hold the election in August. Washington wanted Sirisena to hold the election before the UN Human Rights Commission meets in September. That meeting is due to discuss a report on the war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan government and military in 2009 during the final months of the offensive against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), when UN experts estimated about 40,000 civilians were killed.

At the request of Sirisena's government, the US gave a green light for a six-month postponement of discussion on the report last March. The Obama administration cynically calculated that if the report were released before an election it would help Rajapakse gain support on a nationalist and chauvinist basis by

© World Socialist Web Site

denouncing the UN report as Western interference in Sri Lanka, thus jeopardising the opportunity to consolidate a pro-US regime.

Foreign Policy columnist Taylor Dibbert wrote on June 5: “It would be unfortunate if elections are not held before that report is released,” adding “such a scenario could open the door to a resurgence of more hardline elements within the country” and “further weaken Sirisena’s grip on his own party.” Dibbert warned “it would be a notable setback for Colombo’s rapprochement with Washington and other members of the international community.”

However, the political situation is rapidly shifting. The working-class discontent toward Sirisena and the UNP-led government is growing as their promises to reverse the attacks on living conditions and democratic rights are exposed as empty rhetoric. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration has used the same repressive measures as Rajapakse’s government to suppress struggles of workers, students and poor. Police repeatedly attacked university students to crush protests against education cuts and soldiers were deployed at hospitals last month to break a health workers’ strike.

The economy is teetering on the brink. Last Friday, Central Bank Governor Arjun Mahendran told *Bloomberg* that the government was looking to borrow “tens of billions of dollars” from lenders, including the US, EU and Japan, to refinance costlier debt.

Sirisena’s government accused the Rajapakse regime of increasingly relying on borrowing. However, during its six months in office, the current government has borrowed 378 billion rupees ($US2.8 billion) via treasury bills and bonds, surpassing the figure of 260 billion rupees for the whole of last year. Early this month, the government raised another $US1 billion by issuing 10-year government bonds.

Compounding the problems for Sirisena and the government, Rajapakse’s supporters in the UPFA have intensified a campaign to install him as its candidate for prime minister in the general election. The campaign has been spearheaded by chauvinist parties, including the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna and National Freedom Front, and a section of the SLFP.

Rajapakse has mainly organised political activities in Buddhist temples, seeking to mobilise the most reactionary layers of the population on the slogan of defending “the motherland.” He and his cronies accuse the government of permitting the defeated LTTE to “rise again,” betraying the 2009 victory in the communal war. This agitation is backed by big Sinhala businessmen who benefitted from Rajapakse’s policies.

As part of this campaign, no-confidence resolutions have been moved against Wickremesinghe, Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake and Law and Order Minister John Amaratunga. As a result of this vociferous push to regain lost power and privileges, Sirisena has virtually lost control of the SLFP and the UPFA. By dissolving the parliament, Sirisena is effectively bailing out his political allies.

Sirisena has publicly declared he will not allow nominations from within the SLFP, which he still formally heads, for Rajapakse in the election. However, he sought a compromise with Rajapakse, offering him an honorary post, which Rajapakse refused. The *Sunday Times* reported that Sirisena held a secret discussion with Rajapakse on Thursday. No details are available.

Whatever these developments, as shown in the January presidential election, Washington will insist on having a government in Colombo that serves its war agenda against China. The US ambassador-designate to Sri Lanka, Atul Keshap, told his US Senate Foreign Relations Committee nomination hearing: “As we look to advance our interests across the Indo-Pacific, Sri Lanka will be a critical partner.” Washington is retaining the threat of UN war crimes charges in order to whip any opposition into line.

Though the divisions within the established parties have sharpened, their common fear is the eruption of social struggles. This month, around 47,000 health sector employees took strike action. Last week, contract workers in almost all government departments held protests demanding better conditions. University students are holding continuous campaigns.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have repeatedly called for a “national government” after the election, while Rajapakse is bidding to return to power via a chauvinist campaign. Whatever their differences, these parties are preparing for ruthless attacks on the jobs and conditions of the working class.

Nevertheless, the pseudo-left and middle-class groups are seeking a new line up of parties of the political establishment, saying that Rajapakse should be halted. The Socialist Equality Party will intervene in the election as the only party to advance the perspective of international socialism against imperialist war and social counter-revolution.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site