

Sri Lankan president to block Rajapakse as prime minister

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Just four days before August 17 general election in Sri Lanka, President Maithripala Sirisena sent a long letter to his predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse, again stating that he will not appoint the former president as prime minister, even if Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and allies win a majority of parliamentary seats.

Sirisena's letter is aimed at bolstering the electoral prospects of the rival United National Party (UNP) and underscores the deep political crisis surrounding the whole election. The bitter factional infighting within the Colombo political establishment is being compounded by rising geo-political tensions. As part of its "pivot to Asia" against China, the US is engaged in intrigues and diplomatic machinations throughout the region aimed at undermining Chinese influence.

Sirisena defeated Rajapakse in the January 8 presidential election in what amounted to a regime-change operation sponsored by the US and supported by India, which were both hostile to Rajapakse's close ties with China. Sirisena, who was health minister, resigned to stand for the presidency against Rajapakse with the backing of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, each with close ties with Washington.

Having engineered the removal of Rajapakse in January, the US does not want his return as prime minister in August. Sirisena's declaration that he will not appoint Rajapakse is an indication of the lengths to which the pro-US faction in Colombo will go to ensure its grip over the levers of power. To carry out his threat, Sirisena would have to be prepared to use the state apparatus, and potentially the security forces, against Rajapakse and his supporters.

Sirisena's willingness to use his presidential powers to anti-democratically block a rival underlines the

fraudulent character of his campaign in January. His supporters denounced Rajapakse's "fascist dictatorship." They hailed Sirisena as a democrat and called for the abolition of the executive presidency. Sirisena is now threatening to use his presidential powers just as autocratically as Rajapakse.

Both factions of the ruling elite are equally ruthless not only against rivals, but especially against the working class and oppressed masses. Neither defends basic democratic rights. While Sirisena represents sections of the elite that seek close relations with US, Rajapakse speaks for sections that want economic connections with China.

The fractured character of Sri Lankan politics is demonstrated by the fact that both Sirisena and Rajapakse still belong to the SLFP. Although Sirisena nominally holds SLFP's leadership, as the country's president, he has lost its control to Rajapakse. Throughout his letter to Rajapakse, Sirisena indirectly renders support for the pro-US UNP, while claiming to be a messiah for SLFP members.

While acknowledging that Rajapakse won the 2005 and 2010 presidential elections thanks to SLFP voters, Sirisena claims that he, as "the common candidate of the opposition," won the January 8 election because he "was able to organise the people's mandate," due to the opposition building against Rajapakse.

While he was able to exploit mounting anger over Rajapakse's attacks on democratic rights and living conditions, Sirisena's win was part of a carefully orchestrated operation to split the SLFP vote and swing the UNP and other allies behind the former health minister. Various upper middle class NGOs, professional and academic groups, trade unions and pseudo-left organisations hailed Sirisena as the defender of democracy.

Seven months later, discontent has grown as Sirisena and the UNP government that he appointed have broken their promises. Realising that he has been increasingly marginalised within the SLFP by Rajapakse's supporters, Sirisena is trying to gain control of the party by proclaiming his loyalty to the SLFP.

Sirisena claims that following his election as president in the January 8 election he barred post-election violence and thus protected SLFP supporters from being harmed. He writes: "I would suggest you imagine what would have happened to you and the SLFP members, if somebody else had come as common candidate against you [Rajapakse] and won the election."

Throughout the letter, Sirisena tries to depict Rajapakse as responsible for a possible defeat of the SLFP in August 17 elections. Sirisena's letter reveals his frustration over his failure to prevent Rajapakse contesting the election. Recalling that he asked Rajapakse several times not to stand, Sirisena writes: "If you did not contest this election, I would be able to take the initiative to win the confidence of most sections [of voters] ... back to the SLFP."

Having joined hands with the pro-US UNP and Sinhala chauvinist parties like Jathika Hela Urumaya, Sirisena desperately tries to posture as a true national leader. He falsely paints the SLFP as a party representing the "whole Sri Lankan nation," which only later, under Rajapakse, became a party representing just "Sinhala-Buddhists."

This is a blatant lie because the SLFP was founded on the basis of Sinhala chauvinism and was responsible for the notorious 1972 constitution, which declared Sinhala as the "state language" and Buddhism as the "state religion." The SLFP enthusiastically supported the communal war initiated by the UNP and ruthlessly continued it while in office, not only under Rajapakse but also Kumaratunga.

While Rajapakse is basing his election campaign on reactionary Sinhala extremism, nobody should be deceived by Sirisena's rhetoric. As a minister in Rajapakse's government, he is directly responsible for all its crimes, including the killing of tens of thousands of civilians during the final stages of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, as well hundreds of abductions and murders. Sirisena was one

of Rajapakse's trusted lieutenants and functioned as acting defence minister in mid-2009.

Sirisena's opposition to Rajapakse's current communal campaign is pitched at securing the Tamil and Muslim votes for the UNP. The UNP government, however, has maintained discriminatory measures against Tamils, as well as the military occupation of the island's predominantly Tamil and Muslim North and East.

Sirisena's letter is aimed at opening up rifts within the Rajapakse faction, suggesting that Rajapakse should give other SLFP leaders the opportunity to become prime minister if the party wins the election. He concludes by calling on Rajapakse to stop making "statements that can provoke racism." Sirisena urges him to heal divisions in the party and campaign to ensure the SLFP and its allies win the election. In reality, the letter is a last-minute attempt to boost the UNP vote and Sirisena's own influence within the SLFP.

Rajapakse sent a short reply rejecting Sirisena's "baseless criticisms" and calling on the president to "respect the people's verdict in the 2015 general election, in the same way I respected the people's verdict on January 9, 2015." The exchange of letters sets the stage for deepening factional conflict within the Sri Lankan ruling elite, whichever party wins on Monday.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the election and calling on workers and youth to reject both factions of the ruling class, each of which is committed to imposing the burdens of the country's economic crisis on working people. We call on workers to vote for our party to show support for a socialist alternative to war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights. (See: "Vote for the Socialist Equality Party!")



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