

Pro-US UNP leader sworn in as new Sri Lankan prime minister

K. Ratnayake
22 August 2015

United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as Sri Lanka's new prime minister yesterday by President Maithripala Sirisena. A staunch US supporter, Wickremesinghe's appointment signals a deepening of the Sri Lankan foreign policy shift toward Washington and its regional ally India, as well as drastic austerity measures.

The UNP-led United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) won just 106 seats in Monday's parliamentary election, falling short of an absolute majority in the 225-member parliament. Wickremesinghe's swearing-in was delayed until Sirisena directed his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) on Thursday to enter into a coalition with the UNFGG. Accordingly, just after Wickremesinghe was sworn in, Duminda Dissanayake, acting SLFP general secretary, signed a memorandum of understanding with the UNP general secretary Kabir Hasim to establish a "national government."

Wickremesinghe was a key player, together with former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, in the US-orchestrated regime-change operation in January's presidential election to oust former President Mahinda Rajapakse and install Sirisena. As it ramped up its "pivot to Asia" against China, which is a preparation for war, the Obama administration was increasingly hostile to Rajapakse's close ties with Beijing.

Rajapakse's removal was undoubtedly high on the agenda when Wickremesinghe met US State Department officials as early as March last year and subsequently held talks with American diplomats in Colombo. Kumaratunga used her connections within the SLFP to pick out Sirisena, the SLFP secretary and health minister, to run against Rajapakse. Wickremesinghe, in turn, agreed to accept Sirisena as the common opposition candidate. After winning in

January, Sirisena appointed the UNP leader as prime minister.

The machinations against Rajapakse were driven by fears in significant sections of the Sri Lankan ruling class that his ties with China could provoke retaliation from Washington. While it backed Rajapakse's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the US, following the LTTE's defeat in 2009, cynically exploited the war crimes carried out by the Sri Lankan military to put pressure on Rajapakse to distance himself from Beijing.

A UN Human Rights Council report was delayed at Washington's request after Sirisena's election and is due to be handed down next month. Findings of human rights atrocities could have been used as the pretext for economic sanctions, and could still be exploited to bring charges against Rajapakse. Sri Lanka is heavily dependent on US and European export markets.

Although Wickremesinghe has been sworn in, haggling over ministerial positions will delay the formation of a cabinet until next week. Bitter differences exist within the SLFP between supporters of Rajapakse and Sirisena. Rajapakse skipped the meeting of SLFP parliamentarians called by Sirisena to discuss the establishment of a national unity government. His supporters remain opposed to any coalition involving the UNP.

The memorandum of understanding between the two parties has a long list of promises, none of which will be kept. These include: to create one million jobs, price regulation to protect consumers, higher incomes to reduce the social divide, new legislation to protect democratic rights, new laws and institutions to eliminate corruption, raising the expenditure on education and health to 6 and 3 percent of gross domestic product and measures to prevent the abuse of

children and women.

A key point for the party leaderships was an agreement not to accept the cross-over of parliamentarians from one party to another—a longstanding practice in sordid Colombo politics. The agreement will last for two years, after which an extension will be considered.

The promises to improve living conditions and defend democratic rights are a complete sham. Both the UNP and SLFP are parties of big business that have ruled Sri Lanka in turn since formal independence in 1948 and have a long record of ruthless attacks on the working class and poor.

The real purpose behind these two longstanding rivals coming together for the first time is to present a united front against the working class as the Wickremesinghe government implements the savage austerity measures being demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The economy is burdened by substantial debt and has been hit by falling commodity prices and exports. Underscoring the danger of a balance of payments crisis, the Central Bank yesterday reported that the “trade deficit widened in June 2015 as exports fell, dragged down by lower earnings from tea and textiles, while imports rose.”

Underlining the real purpose of the coalition, SLFP secretary Dissanayake said: “The President [Sirisena] emphasised that a national unity government was necessary at this juncture to overcome international and economic challenges facing the country.” Austerity will be the watchword of the government, not measures to improve the lot of workers and the poor.

Those who promoted the UNP and Wickremesinghe as defenders of democracy against the “fascist Rajapakse regime”—above all, the pseudo-left organisations, the Nava Sama Samaja Party and United Socialist Party—bear political responsibility for the onslaught on working people that the new government will unleash.

Like Rajapakse, Wickremesinghe is a longstanding capitalist politician who is responsible for savage attacks against working people. He began his political career as the youth affairs and employment minister of the UNP government of President J. R. Jayawardene, which took office in 1977 and launched a sweeping program of open market restructuring. In 1980, it

sacked 100,000 public sector workers to smash a general strike over wages and conditions.

As education minister, Wickremesinghe introduced the White Paper on Education in 1981 that was the blue print for slashing education spending.

Amid rising social tensions, the Jayawardene government whipped up divisive anti-Tamil communalism, culminating in the 1983 island-wide pogroms against Tamils that triggered the country’s protracted civil war and the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. In the late 1980s, the UNP government unleashed military-backed death squads against the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and more broadly against its social base among Sinhala rural youth, slaughtering an estimated 60,000 people.

Wickremesinghe was a minister in all these UNP governments and is directly responsible for these crimes.

As prime minister in 2002, Wickremesinghe launched the World Bank-approved *Regaining Sri Lanka* program that proposed axing hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, cutting price subsidies, including for rural peasants, and offering generous concessions to foreign and local investors. His government’s plans for transforming Colombo into a modern “megapolis” were picked up by the Rajapakse government, which carried out the mass eviction of shanty dwellers to make way for this vision.

Under conditions of a worsening global economic crisis, the new UNP government will take up where Rajapakse left off in imposing new burdens on working people.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained during its election campaign, the working class can only defend its rights by breaking from every faction of the bourgeoisie and mobilising independently in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.



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