

Sri Lankan president announces “national unity government”

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Opening the first session of the new Sri Lankan parliament, President Maithripala Sirisena yesterday declared that the two main parliamentary parties—the United National Party (UNP) and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—will form a “national unity government” for two years.

Dressed up in “democratic” garb, this is the clear preparation by the ruling parties to unleash the full burden of the worsening economic situation onto workers and poor in the name of achieving economic development.

Parliament met for the first time since the August 17 general election, in order to swear in the 225 elected members and hear Sirisena present the government’s policy statement. In the election, a UNP-led alliance won 106 seats, while the SLFP’s United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) gained 93.

Since winning January’s presidential election with the backing of the US, Sirisena and the UNP leader he installed as prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, have floated the idea of a national government to include all parties in the parliament.

In his address, Sirisena condemned his predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse—although not naming him—for failing to form a “reconciliatory unity government” in 2009 after the end of the war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sirisena said the new national unity government aimed to achieve “reconciliation among all communities” and “socio-economic development to face the new world.” He claimed that while Sri Lanka was entangled in a three-decade long civil war, other Asian countries achieved rapid economic development. “I saw the necessity of having a unity government, even belatedly, as a prime strategy to overcome this development gap.”

Sirisena was a senior minister in Rajapakse’s regime and the secretary of the SLFP until he suddenly defected in November to contest the presidential election.

Successive governments, both UNP and SLFP, conducted the 30-year war not just to suppress the Tamil minority but to divide and suppress the working class along ethnic lines. Sirisena is completely responsible for the military’s crimes and the devastating consequences of the war.

Sirisena did not specify what measures the government would pursue for “economic development.” However, both the UNP and SLFP are big business parties and have alternately governed the country, implementing the economic agenda and austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Speaking about last week’s stock market turmoil that reverberated around the globe from China to the US, UNP leader Harsha de Silva said: “So this is a challenging time to form a new government. When the cabinet is sworn in, we will have so many questions to be answered, and the answers are not going to be easy.”

In office, both parties have relied on foreign loans, which have led to high levels of debt. Earlier this year, the IMF refused a further \$4 billion loan request by UNP-led government to alleviate financial problems and a looming balance of payment crisis. Instead, the IMF insisted on deeper spending cuts, which must be inflicted on workers and the poor. The ruling class parties have now decided to close ranks to impose this austerity agenda.

Sirisena’s repeated utterances about “reconciliation” have only one meaning. That is, a compact with the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil capitalist party, amid the deepening economic and social crisis. The TNA, which holds 16 seats, has already expressed its readiness to work closely with the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration.

However, several dozen MPs from the SLFP and its allies are going to sit in the opposition, underscoring the fragility of the ruling coalition. They are all supporters of Rajapakse, who won a parliamentary seat in the August 17 election and has opted to sit in the opposition.

Before January's presidential election, Sirisena posed as a champion of democracy, pledging to abolish the much-hated executive presidential system. Using his previous parliamentary majority, Rajapakse had extended presidency's autocratic powers, including the appointment of the election commissioner, judicial officers and all top bureaucrats, and scrapped the two-term limit for presidents. Sirisena backed these measures, and only criticised them as "dictatorial" after he defected from Rajapakse's government.

Yesterday, Sirisena effectively dropped his pretence of opposing the executive presidency, telling the MPs: "It is your responsibility to take the final decision whether to maintain the executive presidency further and if so, what should be the nature of it."

The president claimed that he fulfilled his election promise to deliver "democracy" via the passage of the 19th Amendment to the constitution. That amendment mainly reestablished the presidential two-term limit, removed presidential powers to appoint top state bureaucrats and shared the power to appoint cabinet ministers with the prime minister. But the president remains the defence minister, commander-in-chief of the armed forces and head of the state, thereby exercising enormous power and influence over the state apparatus.

By asking parliament to decide the fate of the executive presidency, Sirisena indicated his desire to cling to it. The SLFP, headed by him, initially tried to block even 19th Amendment, until Sirisena compelled the party to accept it as a face-saving measure.

Just as revealing was Sirisena's emphasis on the fact that "international attitudes" changed "very positively" after he was sworn in as president on January 8. "To face a complex situation like this successfully it is important to win the confidence, agreement and support of international community," he declared.

Sirisena did not explain what the change was, or how it was achieved. Yet the events of the past week further highlighted the fact that Washington orchestrated a regime-change operation via the January presidential election to oust Rajapakse, because he had developed close ties to Beijing.

In Colombo last week, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Nisha Biswal announced that the US had dropped its call for an international probe into the war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan government and military during the final phase of the war against the LTTE.

After backing the war against the LTTE, the US

cynically used the war crimes issue to pressure Rajapakse to distance himself from China. Finally, it orchestrated his removal and replacement by Sirisena, who is just as responsible as Rajapakse for these crimes.

Once in office, the Sirisena and Wickremesinghe government rapidly shifted foreign policy toward the US and Washington's regional partner, India. Sirisena's support from the so-called international community has been bought at a high price: Sri Lanka will now be drawn ever more closely into the militarist drive by the US against China.

The anti-democratic character of Sirisena's rule was further exposed when he asserted the sole power to appoint ministers from his party, the SLFP, to the unity government. At the same time, he moved to control the official opposition by ruling that the SLFP-led UPFA should decide who would occupy the post of opposition leader.

TNA leader R. Sambandan had declared that because the two main parties formed a coalition his party should take the opposition leader's post. Whatever the rationale behind TNA's petty political manoeuvring, it was a legitimate request under parliamentary rules. By blocking the TNA's move, Sirisena again demonstrated the chauvinist attitude of his party and the Sinhala ruling elite.

Just as the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration changed the country's foreign policy in line with Washington's war drive, the new "unity government" will move, under the impact of the worsening global economic crisis, to intensify the assault on the living conditions and social and democratic rights of workers and the poor.



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