

Sri Lankan prime minister appoints huge cabinet

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After nearly two weeks of behind-the-scenes haggling between the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main constituents of the new “national unity government” in Sri Lanka, President Maithripala Sirisena yesterday announced no less than 48 cabinet ministers.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe presented the huge list and indicated that yet another set of 45 state and deputy ministers would be appointed in the coming days.

These announcements underscore the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration’s desperation to glue together a “strong coalition” by distributing cabinet posts in great numbers through what amount to political bribes.

The new government is seeking to cement the US-backed regime-change operation through which Sirisena was elected as president in January, ousting former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who had close ties to China. Under conditions of deepening slump globally and across Asia, it is also preparing to ram through International Monetary Fund (IMF)-ordered austerity measures and suppress the resistance of workers and the poor.

Sirisena, who heads the SLFP, and Wickremesinghe, who leads the UNP, previously denounced Rajapakse for “squandering public money” by maintaining a 52-member cabinet and a similar number of deputy and state ministers. Those hypocritical utterances were cast aside yesterday.

Out of 48 cabinet posts, 43 were sworn in on Thursday. Of those, 32 went to the UNP-led coalition and 11 to the SLFP. The delay in appointing state and deputy ministers is also part of the wretched bargain between the UNP and SLFP, the two main parties of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

President Sirisena will be defence minister, directly in charge of the military. Wickremesinghe kept for himself the key national policy and economic development posts. The UNP also controls the finance and foreign ministries. The significant ministries allocated to the SLFP include transport and petroleum and gas.

Smaller parties were awarded several cabinet posts and will receive non-cabinet ministerial portfolios as well.

Among these parties are the communalist Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, representing the island’s Muslim elites, and the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). The government gave the estate infrastructure ministry to National Union of Workers leader P. Digambaram and the national dialogue ministry to Democratic People’s Front leader Mano Ganesan—two trade union/political parties responsible for repeatedly betraying plantation workers.

The 19th amendment to the constitution, passed by the parliament after Sirisena took office in January, restricted the number of cabinet ministers to 30, but cynically allowed parliament to consent to a bigger number if a “national government” is formed. Wickremesinghe presented a resolution to parliament on Thursday to increase the number of ministerial posts, and it was passed by 143 votes.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Disanayake opposed the resolution, but only on the ground that not all parties agreed to enter the government, so it was not a national government. The JVP’s posturing belies the fact that it backed the UNP-led government from January, and entered its top advisory body, the National Executive Committee (NEC).

Wickremesinghe responded that he headed the UNP and Sirisena led the SLFP’s United People’s Freedom Alliance. “If this is not a national government, what is this government?” he declared. Wickremesinghe recalled that such a government was formed in Britain during World War II, without smaller parties. This wartime reference must be taken as a warning that the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is preparing for a confrontation with the working class.

In a further bid to strengthen the government’s hand, deputy UNP leader Karu Jayasuriya was appointed parliamentary speaker. One of his first acts was to approve Wickremesinghe’s declaration that the UNP-SLFP coalition constituted a national government.

Speaker Jayasuriya appointed Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader R. Sambandan as leader of the parliamentary opposition. Sirisena initially indicated that the TNA would

not be permitted to hold the post. He abandoned that stance, however, thus making a careful accommodation to the TNA, which represents the Tamil elite, in order to secure its assistance in maintaining the government.

It is 32 years since a Tamil party held the opposition leader's post. In 1983, after provoking anti-Tamil terror in which hundreds of Tamils were killed in the south of the country, particularly in Colombo, President Jayawardene's UNP government pushed through a constitutional amendment to force MPs to swear their allegiance to the unitary state. That compelled MPs from the Tamil United Liberation Front, which led the official opposition, to quit the parliament.

Wickremesinghe was a cabinet minister in Jayawardene's government. To this day, the draconian sixth amendment remains part of the constitution.

Sambandan thanked the government for his appointment and declared that the TNA would support its "good" measures, while opposing others. The TNA, which is seeking a deal to enhance the privileges of the Tamil elite, had already declared that it would support the pro-US government. US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Nisha Desai Biswal recently declared in Colombo that she talked to the TNA about reaching a settlement with the new government.

In an indication of the government's fragility, 62 MPs abstained from voting for the cabinet expansion while 16 opposed it. About 40 SLFP MPs are sitting in the opposition, even though the party is officially part of the unity government. They are supporters of Rajapakse, who contested last month's election leading the UPFA campaign and won a parliamentary seat. Rajapakse criticised Sambandan's appointment as opposition leader.

Rajapakse's faction will take every opportunity to get the upper hand in the SLFP, while Sirisena is anxious to isolate him. Sirisena, a senior minister in Rajapakse's government, defected to run against him in January's presidential election, backed by Washington in a political operation assisted by Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Before last month's parliamentary election, Sirisena declared that he would bar Rajapakse from becoming prime minister.

After yesterday's swearing-in ceremony, Wickremesinghe declared that the country's "international and national challenges" could be faced only via a national government. These "challenges" mean, first of all, pursuing a pro-US and pro-India foreign policy, distancing Sri Lanka from China. Like Sirisena, who made India his first overseas stop after becoming president, Wickremesinghe is preparing to visit India, Washington's main regional partner, as his first trip abroad as prime minister.

Secondly, the "challenges" mean imposing the dictates of international finance capital. Economic advisers and columnists are already clamouring for harsh "economic reforms." Hailing the formation of a "national government" that may command a two-thirds majority in parliament, *Sunday Times* economic columnist Nimal Sandaratne reminded the government that Jayawardene used a huge parliamentary majority in 1977 to launch the country's "open economic policies."

Sandaratne added: "The strong coalition government provides the opportunity to undertake reforms that are unpopular in the short run but benefits accrue in the fullness of time. Will the coalition government have a longer view and political courage to implement radical reforms?"

According to the *Sunday Times*, a senior government official outlined a proposal to borrow \$US4 billion from the IMF "for balance of payments support," even though the IMF refused an earlier such request by Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake.

Treasury sources also told the newspaper: "The new government will also have to impose austerity measures, increasing taxes, reducing welfare programs and cutting subsidies to state owned enterprises."

Indicating a looming crisis, the balance of payments recorded a negative \$791.7 million for the first six months of 2015, compared to a \$1,954 million surplus in the corresponding period last year.

Behind the mask of protecting democracy and economic development, this "unity government" will unleash harsh attacks on living conditions and social rights as the global economic crisis intensifies.



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