

Sri Lankan president warns against “toppling” the government

W. A. Sunil
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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena last week warned against any attempt to scuttle the newly-formed “national unity” government, declaring: “Do not think that this government can be toppled or weakened. Up to 2020, this government will be stable and strong.” The next general election is due in 2020.

Sirisena did not specifically identify who might be seeking to “topple” the government. His immediate message was directed against political rivals within his own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), particularly former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Sirisena stood against and defeated Rajapakse in the January presidential election by collaborating with the opposition United National Party (UNP). Following last month’s parliamentary election, the UNP formed a “national government” with the SLFP faction loyal to Sirisena, plus various smaller parties.

The president’s warning underscores the fragility of this “national unity” government. Above all, Sirisena is fearful of the working class and the rural poor as the government imposes the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) austerity agenda and resorts to police-state methods against opposition and resistance.

Sirisena made his remarks on September 9 at a swearing-in ceremony for 41 new state and deputy ministers. Another three full ministers were also appointed on the same day, increasing the size of the cabinet to 46, so far. The remaining cabinet and non-cabinet ministers could be appointed later this week. Prime minister and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe obtained parliamentary approval to expand the cabinet to 48 and appoint 45 non-cabinet ministers.

The large number of ministers is a desperate attempt to buy favours and secure allies to shore up the government’s parliamentary numbers and base of support. Sirisena declared that he and Wickremesinghe

“spent several sleepless nights” picking the ministers and deputy ministers.

Behind the scenes, talks are going on with the leaders of the Eelam People’s Democratic Party (EPDP) and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Douglas Devananda and Arumugam Thondaman, respectively, to incorporate them into the government. Both parties were partners in Rajapakse’s previous SLFP-led United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government. The CWC, a plantation-based trade union, is also a political party with a long record of betrayals of estate workers. The EPDP is a communal Tamil party that is notorious for violence against political opponents and for supporting the long-running civil war by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in 2009.

Sirisena is facing opposition within the ranks of his own SLFP and its UPFA allies. Out of 95 UPFA parliamentarians, about 52 support Rajapakse, who won a seat in last month’s election. During the campaign, most SLFP MPs rallied behind Rajapakse in his bid to become prime minister.

After UPFA came second to the UNP-led front, Rajapakse had to abandon his prime ministerial ambitions, at least for now. However, many UPFA MPs are opposed to Sirisena’s alliance with the UNP and plan to sit with Rajapakse on the opposition benches. The next parliamentary session is due to open tomorrow.

Sirisena is anxious to boost the government’s parliamentary numbers. He used the post-election national list appointments to install four defeated party candidates as MPs, declaring that they lost because Rajapakse ignored them during the campaign. Among those appointed as ministers are a number of SLFP MPs who were denounced for corruption under the

Rajapakse government.

At a meeting of parliamentary leaders, SLFP figures loyal to Sirisena decided not to recognise the National Freedom Front (NFF), Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) and Democratic Left Front (DPF) as independent. Previously these UPFA partners enjoyed parliamentary privileges associated with independent parties, such as an allocation of time to speak in parliamentary debates. By formally declaring them UPFA allies, Sirisena hopes to muzzle his critics.

In last week's speech, Sirisena rejected the accusations of his opponents that the "patriotic [Rajapakse] government" was "replaced in a conspiracy hatched by the Western and Imperial powers" and the new government was "dancing to the tune of the West." He declared that "this government would never bow down to any foreign power or succumb to any pressure."

The US and its allies helped engineer Rajapakse's removal in the January presidential election because Washington regarded his government as too closely tied to China. Rajapakse's very muted criticisms of "the West" have nothing to do with waging a campaign against US imperialism, but rather are a continuation of his manoeuvring between various powers while in office.

The UNP-led government has already moved Sri Lanka into the US orbit. Following last month's election, US Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Desai Biswal visited Colombo and announced that Washington would no longer push for an international investigation of war crimes during the war against the LTTE, but would allow a domestic investigation instead.

The US had only pressed for an international inquiry as a means of pressuring the Rajapakse government. Biswal's announcement is a concession to the Sri Lankan government, for which the US will undoubtedly be seeking closer cooperation on other issues, including military collaboration.

In seeking to rebut allegations of being a flunkey of the West, Sirisena's real fear is that the US-led intervention in the January election and its attempts to incorporate Sri Lanka into its war plans against China will provoke opposition from workers and young people.

Sirisena also outlined the new government's

program. He said the country "can't go forward any more without unity and mutual understanding between each other. The National Unity government has set the goal of making Sri Lanka the Centre of Excellence in Asia in the next five years through a common and uninterrupted program."

The "Centre of Excellence in Asia" slogan is nothing other than a recipe for a far-reaching pro-market restructuring that will have devastating consequences for the working class. At the same time, the government is integrating the island into the US military build-up against China in the Indo-Pacific region.

An IMF team visited Sri Lanka last week for discussions with Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake over the next budget. The IMF is insisting on deep cutbacks to public spending as the price for a new \$US4 billion loan that the government is reportedly seeking to stave off a looming balance of payment crisis.

These measures will undoubtedly fuel opposition and resistance by working people. Sirisena's remarks about not toppling the government should be taken by workers and youth as a warning that the government will stop at nothing as it tries to implement its anti-working class agenda.



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