

Sri Lanka's National Unity Government alliance extended

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The two-year alliance agreed in 2015 between the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to establish a National Unity Government (NUG) has been extended until 2020. The two secretaries of the relevant parties made the announcement at a joint press conference on July 20.

The NUG was the brainchild of UNP leader, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, during parliamentary elections last August. Its purpose was to establish a strong government committed to the US geo-political strategy in the region and the imposition of austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

After Maithripala Sirisena was elected Sri Lankan president in January 2015, he automatically became SLFP chairman. Sirisena previously had defected from the SLFP and contested the election as the “common” presidential candidate of the opposition parties, including the right-wing UNP, as part of a US-led operation to remove former President Mahinda Rajapakse, due to his close relations with China.

Sirisena, however, failed to win unanimous backing within the SLFP. As a result, Rajapakse secured factional support and rallied about 50 members of parliament around himself as an unofficial “joint opposition.”

The decision to extend the NUG alliance for the entire duration of the current parliament is a desperate attempt to maintain a joint front against a developing movement of working people and youth, who are engaged in protests against the government's attacks on living standards, social conditions and basic democratic rights.

The unity government also fears the political challenge posed by Rajapakse's SLFP faction, which is exploiting popular grievances by whipping up Sinhala

chauvinism. Rajapakse is also gaining support from sections of the business elite frustrated over the loss of money-making opportunities they enjoyed under his government.

Rajapakse's faction has organised a five-day public march from Kandy to Colombo, about 100 kilometres, to end in a rally on August 1. Its slogans include, “Against the constitution to divide the country and “Oppose punishing war heroes.”

Rajapakse is posing as a defender of the military and opposing any, even limited, attempt to punish those responsible for the military's war crimes during the Colombo elite's protracted civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At the same time, he is appealing to layers of the Sinhala ruling elite who are opposed to any concessions to Tamil leaders.

Voicing the government's concerns, a *Daily Mirror* editorial on July 26 declared: “We hope the five-year agreement between the two major parties will help stabilise the economy and the rule of law with tough legal action being taken against any and all who have committed the crime of plundering the wealth of Sri Lanka's people.”

This call for corruption charges is directed against Rajapakse and his supporters, not against Sirisena, who was a prominent minister in the previous Rajapakse government, or the UNP, which has a long history of corrupt practices. It is the means for weakening the Rajapakse faction as the national unity government prepares to deepen the assault on working people.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime's political nervousness is being heightened by a growing protest movement. Not a day passes without a public demonstration over social issues somewhere in Sri Lanka. To the utter dismay of the government, working

people and youth of all communities are participating in these agitations.

In the recent months, postal and health workers have walked out on strike for several days. Non-academic university employees held a one-day strike on July 6, demanding the government grant long outstanding demands for a wage rise. On July 27, they struck indefinitely. The University Grants Commission responded by closing down universities. University students throughout the country are involved in class boycotts and protest marches in defiance of police orders and repression.

The struggles of Sri Lankan workers and youth are part of a resurgence of the working class internationally.

The political dilemma facing Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is exacerbated by its deepening balance of payments crisis and the increasing demands of the IMF for austerity. A recent “Sri Lanka Country Risk Report,” issued by Business Monitor International, bluntly declared that the government “will face difficulty in making short-term adjustments to its budget due to political gridlock and high interest costs.”

The IMF recently agreed to grant a \$US1.5 billion loan as a short-term cover for Sri Lanka’s severe balance of payments crisis. The country’s foreign exchange reserves have fallen by a third from their peak in late 2014 to just \$6.2 billion at the end of March this year. Foreign debt increased from \$21.5 billion, or 36.1 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP), in 2010 to around \$57 billion, or 69.4 percent of GDP, at the end of 2014. Total foreign debt is currently believed to be over \$70 billion.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is fully aware that the challenges it confronts cannot be overcome democratically or peacefully. The extension of the NUG alliance deal will be followed by even more draconian measures against working people. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe indicated this in an address to the journalists on July 22 in Kandy.

Accusing the country’s print media of backing Rajapakse with a view to his return to power, Wickremesinghe warned: “If they [Rajapakse’s supporters] are trying to topple this government and bring him back, we are ready for it.”

Neither faction of the ruling elite—that led by

Wickremesinghe and Sirisena or its rivals led by Rajapakse—defend the democratic rights and basic needs of the vast majority of the population. They are committed to imposing the burden of the economic crisis on working people and will use police-state measures to suppress any opposition.



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