

Sri Lankan president warns of autocratic measures

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena issued a warning to the United National Party (UNP)-led government functioning under him that he will take action against the Bribery Commission and the police, which he alleges are working on a “political agenda.”

Speaking at a military event in Colombo last Wednesday, Sirisena declared he opposed the Bribery Commission’s decision to take three retired navy commanders and former defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse to court. On September 30, they appeared in a Colombo magistrate court on charges of making losses of around 11 billion rupees (\$US74.9 million) for the state through the activities of a private company, Avant Garde. This company was established, while the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse was in office, to provide security for ships.

Sirisena also condemned the Financial Crime Investigation Division (FCID), which is investigating financial misappropriations by former government leaders. Sirisena criticised the police’s Criminal Investigation Division (CID) for keeping four military intelligence officials in remand for 16 months as suspects in the disappearance of journalist, Pradeep Eknaligoda.

The president proclaimed: “I will not do anything to weaken the military. I will not allow the military to be weakened.” He said he had been silent in the past but now felt “forced to talk regarding them in public. I will have to initiate action as well openly.”

The UNP led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is the main party in the Colombo unity government of which Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) is also a partner. A faction of the SLFP, led by Mahinda Rajapakse, opposes the ruling alliance and has organised what is known as the joint opposition.

The Bribery Commission and the police function under independent commissions set up by a Constitutional Council established under the 19th constitutional amendment enacted by the parliament after Sirisena came to power in the presidential election in January last year.

It was no ordinary election but involved a concerted regime change operation orchestrated by the Obama administration and backed by Wickremesinghe and former president Chandrika Kumaratunga to remove Mahinda Rajapakse. The US hostility to Rajapakse was not because of his autocratic rule and gross abuses of democratic rights but because he had developed close relations with China.

During the election campaign, Sirisena presented himself as champion of good governance, democratic rights and peace and reconciliation after the protracted communal war by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sirisena was only able to perpetrate this political fraud with the assistance not only of Wickremesinghe, Kumaratunga and various Tamil parties but also a host of pseudo-left organisations and middle class groups such as Citizens Power who painted him in bright colours as a democrat.

In reality, Sirisena had been a prominent member of Rajapakse’s cabinet until the election was announced and was thus politically responsible for all of its crimes and abuses. As for Wickremesinghe, he had been a minister in previous UNP-led governments that were responsible for starting the war and were just as autocratic as that of Rajapakse.

Both Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have been using the Bribery Commission as well as the FCID and CID to mount a witch-hunt against political opponents, particularly Rajapakse’s joint opposition, and as a means of diverting attention from growing popular discontent with the government.

However, after nearly two years of rule, Sirisena’s remarks last week seeking to distance himself from the institutions he helped set up as examples of good governance and his commitment to fight corruption, reveal acute tensions within the so-called unity government.

The government faces an explosive political situation, which is underscored by ongoing protests and sporadic strikes in the plantations involving 200,000 workers. It was

forced to postpone the IMF's austerity measures in June as mass opposition among workers and the poor was developing. However, it now has to implement the IMF's demands or face the withholding of a promised IMF loan that would create major financial problems.

Rajapakse and his joint opposition have been seeking to capitalise on mounting hostility to the government by presenting themselves as defenders of living standards and democratic rights. The former president has also vehemently denied that he or his government were responsible for war crimes that involved the deaths of thousands of civilians. In doing so, he presents himself as a defender of the military and its "war heroes."

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has also sought to prevent any serious investigation of war crimes and with the assistance of Washington stymied an attempt to establish an independent international inquiry. Despite the fact that the government's own investigation will be a whitewash, Rajapakse is continuing to denounce the government for seeking to punish the military.

In this context, Sirisena is now seeking to present himself as the champion of the military and is threatening to use the autocratic powers of the executive presidency, which he campaigned against in last January's election.

Sirisena declared in his speech that although the Bribery Commission and the police function under Independent Commissions he must be kept informed of their decisions. He insisted that as he was "the Executive of the country, it is the duty of the heads of the Commissions to inform the President who is the Defence Minister."

Sirisena justified his use of those powers "as special consideration needs to be given in the management of the state taking into consideration the special situation." In reality, he is seeking to convert the independent commissions into an appendage of the executive president.

The *Sunday Times* reported that prior to his speech, Sirisena expressed his views to some ministers and the prime minister and insisted that he would "stick" to his criticism of the Bribery Commission. Sirisena concluded his speech by saying that the government was strong and that no one could topple it. The media is speculating that the president could assume control of the police, which is currently overseen by a UNP minister.

Former president Rajapakse declared that he was "surprised" by Sirisena's speech but that even a late change of mind was good. He will undoubtedly seek to exploit the government's crisis. A few days earlier Rajapakse had openly declared his readiness to challenge the government to establish a new administration.

Sirisena's statements have thoroughly exposed the claim by the pseudo-lefts and various middle class civil society

groups that Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are champions of democracy, good governance and corruption free rule.

Purawesi Balaya or Citizens Power, which was in the forefront of campaigning for Sirisena last year, has hypocritically condemned him. Sarath Wijesuriya, a professor at Colombo University and convener of the National Movement for Social Justice, claimed that the president had been misled by the army intelligence chief and the defence secretary and demanded their immediate removal. This is a crude attempt to paint Sirisena as the innocent victim of evil individuals and to hide the real political reasons for his threats.

A Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) statement declared: "The president seems to have challenged the wishes of 6.2 million people who voted for good governance and democracy on January 8, against the fraud, corruption and criminal acts during the Rajapakse regime." It added that Sirisena's remarks "discourage investigations into fraud, corruption and crimes, and ... [go] against the spirit of the mandate of the people."

The JVP is another party that campaigned for Sirisena as the alternative to the "Rajapakse dictatorship." In the first four months of Sirisena's rule, JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake participated in the National Executive Council set up by Sirisena to oversee the government's actions. Having helped promote Sirisena as a democrat, the JVP is now seeking to exploit the growing opposition to the government.

It appears, at least for the time being, that Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have been able to patch up relations. After speaking to Sirisena last Thursday, UNP chairman Kabir Hashim told the media that the president and Wickremesinghe were on the "same page" and that both agreed on the need for "strong government."

Under the impact of the worsening global economic crisis, the ruling elites in every country are turning towards more autocratic methods of rule. Whatever the immediate reason, Sirisena's remarks are a warning that the Sri Lankan ruling class will, as in the past, use police state measures against the developing opposition of workers and the poor.



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