

Sri Lankan president sacks justice minister

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President Maithripala Sirisena on Wednesday sacked Wijedasa Rajapakse as justice and Buddhist affairs minister, following demands from the United National Party (UNP), the main partner in the “unity government.” Wijedasa, a leading UNP member, was originally selected for the ministerial position by his party.

Last week, a UNP working committee headed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe passed a resolution calling for Wijedasa’s removal. He was accused of failing to introduce new anti-bribery and corruption laws and delaying action and criminal cases against people engaged in such activity.

Although not mentioned in the resolution, Wijedasa had been denounced publicly by leading government members for delaying action against the former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse and key members of his regime.

Wijedasa Rajapakse’s dismissal is a calculated move by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government to posture as opponents of corruption and undermine supporters of Mahinda Rajapakse and other opponents. Under the bogus banner of “fighting corruption,” the government is attempting to strengthen its hand, while imposing harsher social austerity measures against workers and the poor.

Wijedasa Rajapakse was previously a Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) MP but joined the UNP and backed Sirisena’s presidential election campaign in January 2015, which formed part of a US-led regime-change operation. He was appointed minister of justice and Buddhist affairs after parliamentary elections later that year. Wijedasa has close connections with the reactionary Buddhist hierarchy and sympathises with fascist groups, such as Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Brigade) and Ravana Balakaya (King Ravana’s Brigade).

The UNP’s political hierarchy was also angry over

Wijedasa’s public criticism of the government’s decision to lease the Hambantota Harbour project to a Chinese company. After originally supporting the deal, Wijedasa changed his mind, declaring that the government was selling public assets to foreign countries and that he would campaign for the abrogation of the agreement.

The recent forced resignation of Foreign Minister Karunanayake, over financial dealings with a man accused of a massive bond scam, has deepened the crisis of the politically-discredited government. Leading UNP members, including Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne, claim that the attorney-general’s department, with Wijedasa’s help, is delaying corruption cases against Mahinda Rajapakse and his associates. Wijedasa was also accused of having dealings with the Rajapakse-led opposition group.

Amid this deepening crisis, an August 15 cabinet meeting presided over by Sirisena discussed how it could “speed up” corruption cases against former government officials. The cabinet meeting discussed the possibility of establishing “High Courts” expressly devoted to corruption and criminal cases.

Law and Order Minister Sagala Ratnayake said there had been 87 corruption investigations, but only 12 resulted in legal action. Senaratne also claimed it was not necessary to amend the constitution to increase the number of High Courts. “If the attorney-general and the chief justice can agree to this, it can be done,” he declared. “This will clear up the doubts people have as to when the thieves will be caught.”

Senaratne’s claims on the constitutionality of these actions are false—the judiciary and the attorney-general have never had this power. The cabinet’s anti-democratic moves are seeking to take closer control of the judiciary, for the government’s political needs.

The government, which is attempting to mount an anti-corruption propaganda campaign, appears to be

moving toward legal action against former President Rajapakse and his cabal, including former defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and other family members.

Rajapakse is directly challenging the government and has threatened to topple the regime. Seeking to cash in on the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration's anti-democratic actions, Rajapakse and a group of SLFP parliamentarians are posing as defenders of democratic and social rights. The former president has called on SLFP parliamentarians backing Sirisena to withdraw their support from the UNP-SLFP "unity government."

Sirisena came to power in 2015 with the assistance of various pseudo-left groups, NGOs, academics and intellectuals. Exploiting the mass opposition against the Rajapakse government's anti-Tamil war and attacks on living conditions and democratic rights, this layer claimed Sirisena would establish "good-governance" and improve living conditions.

Nearly three years on, the government is ruthlessly implementing International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures and unleashing the police and military on protesting workers and the rural poor. Moreover, it has decisively shifted foreign policy to favour US imperialism. The Washington-orchestrated regime change that brought Sirisena to office sought to end Colombo's close relations with Beijing and bring Sri Lanka fully into line with Washington's political and military operations against China.

The media is highlighting the government's "anti-corruption drive." Last weekend's *Sunday Times* ran a lengthy piece entitled, "Major corruption cases: Wheels of justice begin to grind following President's outburst." The article was a reference to Sirisena's earlier remarks about corruption case delays. Other sections of the press are sensationalising Wijedasa's removal, while covering up the repressive measures being prepared by the government.

The main target of the government's measures is the working class and the poor, who are increasingly coming into struggles. Last week, thousands of rural poor protested at an area administrative office against reductions in the Samurdhi program. Cuts in this limited welfare allowance were demanded by the IMF. Facing this mass opposition, Social Empowerment Minister S.B. Dissanayake was forced to announce that the welfare cuts would be withdrawn.

Today the government will table a new Inland Revenue Bill, imposing taxes on broad sections of the population, including workers, pensioners, professionals and small entrepreneurs, while reducing taxes for big business. There is growing opposition to this bill among workers.

In implementing these attacks the government is being supported by the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and other groups, including the National Movement for Social Justice and Purawesi Balaya (Citizen's Power), and the trade unions. Before the recent cabinet meeting, these formations held a recent public meeting in Colombo calling for the establishment of special anti-corruption courts.

Addressing the meeting, Dambara Amila, a Buddhist monk who supports the government, declared: "Set up special courts, hear cases against Rajapakse's day and night and put them in the jail." NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne boasted to the media later that five government ministers attended the meeting to voice their enthusiasm about the campaign.

Last month, the same groups backed the government's attacks on students who protested against the privatisation of education and the deployment of military troops to suppress an oil workers' strike.

Confronted with a deepening financial crisis, the government is using the fake left, the trade unions and the NGOs to help impose social austerity and prepare the political and legal framework for dictatorial forms of rule. This is the content of the government's so-called anti-corruption campaign.



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