

US and India intervene to avert Sri Lankan government collapse

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The US ambassador to Sri Lanka and his Indian counterpart this week publicly stepped in to halt a planned breakup of the National Unity Government headed by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe after its heavy losses at local council elections held on February 10.

The Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna (SLPJP), the largest party in the parliamentary opposition, led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse, won 249 councils out of the total of 341 island-wide. Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) secured only 41 councils, while Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) gained only 10.

After the election debacle, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe began blaming each other for the defeat. At their instigation, followers of the two parties publicly announced the termination of the unity agreement.

The US ambassador to Sri Lanka, Atul Keshap, hurriedly met Sirisena and Wickremesinghe separately on February 13 reportedly to advise them to defuse the turmoil in the government and continue with it.

On the same day, in a move clearly coordinated with Washington, the Indian High Commissioner for Sri Lanka, Saranjit Singh Sandhu, met with Sirisena and Wickremesinghe to deliver a similar message.

The immediate response of both the government parties was one of servile adherence to the "advice" coming from their masters. The next day, the *Daily Mirror* reported that the United National Front (UNF) parliamentary group, led by Wickremesinghe, had decided to "continue the unity government with some changes of portfolios and strategies."

In 2014, both the US and India were instrumental in bringing forward Sirisena as the "common opposition

candidate" to oppose Rajapakse at the 2015 presidential election. Sirisena exploited the widespread popular discontent and anger with the Rajapakse regime to win the poll, then appointed Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

Washington and New Delhi intervened to oust Rajapakse's regime because it tilted its foreign policy toward China. Over the past three years, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have aligned Sri Lanka behind US efforts to confront and encircle China throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Amid rising geopolitical tensions in the region, Washington fears that its strategic gains in Sri Lanka could be reversed by the increasing political instability in Colombo.

Rajapakse, who was jubilant about his local council victory, initially called on Sirisena to dissolve parliament and hold a general election immediately to "end the current political instability in the country." He quickly shelved that call after the US and Indian diplomatic interventions.

M.A. Sumanthiran of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) lost no time in announcing that although his party would not join the government, it would cooperate on "progressive measures" adopted by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government "as far as the issues of Tamil people were concerned."

Representing the Tamil capitalist elite, the TNA, which won 34 local councils in the north and east of the island, has repeatedly appealed to the US and India to pressure the Colombo government to grant its power-sharing demands.

Central to the political crisis is the growing social unrest over the government's austerity measures and anti-democratic methods. The dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the strategic

needs of the US and India have left no room for manoeuvre by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

In the midst of the local council elections, non-academic workers in all the universities and Water Supply and Drainage Board workers took strike action over higher wages, defying a ban imposed by the Election Commission for the election period.

Recent protests over wages and conditions have included workers in the petroleum sector, ports, rail, postal and plantations. The rural poor have demonstrated against cuts in social services and subsidies, and university students have boycotted classes for months over the privatisation of education.

Tamils in the north and east have repeatedly protested against the continuing military occupation and demanded information about family members who were “disappeared” by military-linked death squads during the island’s protracted civil war.

Despite this widespread opposition, the IMF has insisted the government implement its demands, particularly on slashing the budget deficit through increased taxes, such as the Value Added Tax (VAT) on essential commodities, and cuts in social benefits. As a result, tensions between the two coalition parties, the SLFP and UNP, and the two leaders, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, over how to impose these policies have escalated.

While the media has generally ignored these acute social tensions, an editorial entitled “To make or break of Unity Govt?” on Thursday in the *Daily News*, the main government mouthpiece, touched on the issue.

The editorial concluded that the UNP and SLFP had been “acting at cross purposes” due to the government’s “sluggishness” in implementing its policies. While the “UNP’s hands were tied in most instances [by the IMF]”, the SLFP was always trying “to project the image that... it was against placing burdens on the public due to the UNP’s economic policies.”

In other words, Sirisena has cynically attempted to distance himself and the SLFP from the government’s austerity offensive dictated by the IMF. As a result, Rajapakse was able to exploit the popular anger and, at the same time, promote poisonous Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism to divide working people on communal lines.

While doing the bidding of the IMF as well as the US and India, the entire political establishment in Sri Lanka—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—is desperate to suppress rising social unrest fueled by the austerity agenda that it is pledged to implement. The main bourgeois parties rely above all on the various pseudo-left parties such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party, United Socialist Party and Front Line Socialist Party, as well as the trade unions and NGOs, to confine political opposition to safe parliamentary channels.

What is necessary is the building of a politically independent movement of the working class to mobilise the rural poor in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to socialist policies. Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fights for this program as part of the unified struggle for socialism by workers throughout South Asia and internationally.



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