

Sri Lankan president makes anxious calls for political unity

K. Ratnayake**9 May 2018**

President Maithripala Sirisena opened a new session of the previously suspended Sri Lankan parliament yesterday with a desperate appeal for unity within the ruling coalition and among all other parliamentary parties.

The speech was a response to ongoing government infighting, mounting economic problems and growing opposition from working people across the island.

Voicing the fears of a section of the ruling elite, Sirisena declared: "This is not a time for parties to engage in a power struggle. It needs to deflect the power struggle between the parties in the national unity government and between the government and opposition." Sri Lanka, he said, faced "a colossal debt burden." It was, he declared, "the last chance [for the government]...to steer this nation forward."

Last month, Sirisena suspended parliament until May 8 in response to sharp divisions within the ruling coalition—an alliance between the United National Party (UNP), led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Divisions within the SLFP widened to breaking point last month after the resignation of sixteen of the party's government ministers who endorsed an opposition no-confidence motion against the prime minister. The resolution was moved by the SLFP faction headed by former president Mahinda Rajapakse. The resigned ministers yesterday sat on the opposition benches in the parliament.

On May 1, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe were forced to make a fourth reshuffle of ministerial positions since the fragile coalition government was formed after the August 2015 general election. It was the second change since February this year. Ministerial positions are being used in an attempt to glue together the coalition and the internally divided parties that comprise it. The UNP has made several changes to its party leaders and has promised a new look for the government.

The government crisis came into the open after the humiliating defeat of the SLFP and UNP in February's local government elections. Rajapakse's newly formed front, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), won control of a majority of local government institutions. Sirisena hypocritically blamed UNP policies for the election defeat.

Rajapakse was ousted in the January 2015 presidential elections as millions of Sri Lankans rejected his anti-democratic regime and its attacks on living conditions and social rights. Local election support for his SLPP was not an indication of popular backing for Rajapakse, but was a protest vote against the ruling coalition government's brutal austerity program.

In his speech to the parliament yesterday, Sirisena claimed that the government had made important changes, including "restoring the rule of law, making the judiciary independent, reconciliation and winning back the good will of the international community."

He claimed that the government has "raised income levels while fighting to tackle the debt" and had made "progress" in education, health services and agriculture.

But instead of "progress," Sri Lankan working people are facing an onslaught on their living standards, which has produced a wave of strikes and protests by workers demanding higher wages, improved conditions and pension rights. Last week, tens of thousands of workers defied the government's ban on May Day events, participating in meetings and demonstrations.

Farmers across the country have held protests demanding subsidies for essential items, such as fertilisers and water, and for guaranteed prices for their crops. University students have held a series of protests against the privatisation of education and for improved facilities.

Sirisena's claim that the government is achieving reconciliation—the ruling class term for doing away with ethnic discrimination—is bogus.

Protests by Tamils in the north of the island, whose social conditions were devastated by the ruling elite's 26-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, continue almost every week. Tamil demonstrators are demanding the return of all lands seized by the military, information about disappeared relatives, and an end to anti-democratic military rule.

At the same time, recent anti-Muslim violence and riots were provoked by extreme-right Sinhala-Buddhist groups that have been nurtured by the ruling coalition parties and by Rajapakse's opposition.

Sirisena came to power as part of a US-orchestrated regime change operation to oust Rajapakse and bring the country into line with Washington's military and diplomatic offensive against China. The campaign was backed by Wickremesinghe, former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and a host of pseudo-left groups, including the Nava Sama Samaja Party, the Frontline Socialist Party and the United Socialist Party, along with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance.

On taking power, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe changed the government's foreign policy in favour of the US and its ally India, developing close military relations with both countries.

The ruling coalition introduced some cosmetic measures to increase wages and subsidies and then turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout. The loan was tied to austerity demands for the halving of the country's fiscal deficit to 3.5 percent of GDP by 2020. This is to be achieved by increasing taxes, cutting subsidies, and privatising education, health and other government-owned ventures.

Government claims to have restored democratic rights are false. The coalition, in fact, has invoked essential service orders and emergency laws to deploy the military and police to violently suppress protests by workers, farmers and students. Yesterday, for the second time in a week, the government mobilised police who used water cannons, tear gas and barricades to suppress protests by unemployed graduates in Colombo.

Sirisena also claimed in parliament that changes had been made to the hated and autocratic executive presidency, through the introduction of a 19th amendment to the constitution. While the amendment reduces some the president's powers, Sirisena previously claimed that he would completely abolish the executive presidency.

Sirisena's unity calls echo fears being voiced by other sections of the ruling elite. A comment in last weekend's

Sunday Times said the government faced a "dilemma." It warned: "The biggest problems for the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition are not the grandiose plans for development. Instead, it is the reality that a larger mass of the people will see their stomachs hurt more as living costs keep soaring."

A recent press release from the Central Bank said there should not be any "financial slippage" by the government. It was crucial, the release stated, that "policymaking remains rational with a long term focus on greater public good, while minimising policy swings motivated by short term political gains."

The *Economist Intelligence Unit*, a mouthpiece of international finance, also warned: "As the tensions within the coalition government remain high, there will be heightened instability in the political system" in the next period. It called for "stable" rule. The World Bank and rating agencies, such as Fitch, have also raised concerns that political instability in Sri Lanka will impact on Colombo's austerity measures and its ability to attract foreign investment.

All factions of Sri Lanka's ruling elite are calculating how to take on a developing movement of the working class against the government's austerity measures. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are attempting to patch up tensions in the coalition in order to unleash even greater attacks on the social and democratic rights of working people.

At the same time, Rajapakse and his group are building a right-wing movement, provoking anti-Tamil communalism and appealing to the Buddhist establishment and the military. The former president has demanded a snap election in order to establish a "stable government," code for dictatorial measures directed against the working class.

The main political props of the ruling elite, including the trade unions and the pseudo-left, are desperately working to contain and dissipate every struggle by Sri Lankan workers and youth.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact