

Divisions erupt within Sri Lankan government

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Media reports that Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena told his cabinet on Tuesday that “Indian intelligence” was plotting to assassinate him have created a political furore in Colombo and New Delhi.

Sirisena has denied making the remarks. The response to the alleged comments, however, has revealed deepening conflicts between the coalition government’s ruling partners—Sirisena’s faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP).

The controversy over Sirisena’s alleged remarks comes as the government is increasingly wracked by mounting economic problems and social opposition to its widely unpopular austerity measures. Above all, the government’s deepening crisis is bound up with the geopolitical rivalry between India and the US on the one hand and China on the other.

Wickremesinghe’s UNP holds the majority of MPs in the ruling coalition. Sirisena has the allegiance of only two dozen SLFP MPs. The majority of the SLFP’s parliamentary representatives have lined up with Sirisena’s arch rival, former president Mahinda Rajapakse. Two dozen SLFP MPs quit the government last month, expressing support for Rajapakse.

The *Hindu*, a prominent Indian newspaper, carried a report on Wednesday alleging that Sirisena told a cabinet meeting the previous day that “Indian intelligence” was “trying to kill him.” He reportedly said that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi “may not be aware of the plan.” The Sri Lankan media covered the claims.

Nervous that the reports would cause frictions with New Delhi, Sirisena telephoned Modi on Wednesday to deny that he had made the remarks. India, along with the US, is pushing for greater strategic ties with Sri Lanka, as part of a confrontation with China.

India’s ministry of external affairs issued a statement repeating that Sirisena “categorically rejected” the media claims. According to the statement, Sirisena told Modi that the allegations were “mischievous and malafide,” “intended to create misunderstanding” between him and the Indian prime minister and to damage the “cordial relations between the two friendly neighbours.”

The media outlets that reported the claims are sticking to their

story. Many of Sri Lanka’s largest news outlets are aligned with the competing political factions.

Claims of a plot to assassinate Sirisena were first made by a police informant named Namal Kumara at a media conference last month. Kumara claims he has a voice recording of a conversation involving Nalaka de Silva, Sri Lanka’s Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG), discussing a plan to kill Sirisena.

Kumara stated that an Indian citizen was also involved in the conspiracy. Police later arrested and detained M. Thomas, an Indian national. The Indian High Commission has described him as a “mentally unbalanced” person.

Kumara is a dubious individual, who is posing as the leader of an anti-corruption movement.

Silva was in charge of the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID). The government interdicted Silva on Wednesday. Both he and Kumara are being investigated by the Criminal Investigation Department.

On Thursday, Port and Shipping Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe, a Sirisena loyalist, accused ministers of giving false information to the *Hindu* to “damage” relations between the president and Modi. Samarasinghe did not name the ministers but implied they were from the UNP.

The President’s media advisors told a separate press conference on Thursday that the government, by which they meant the UNP, is not interested in investigating the assassination plot. These remarks would not have been made without the president’s approval.

Cabinet spokesman and health minister Rajitha Senaratne told a press conference the previous day that there was “not sufficient evidence” yet to prove Kumara’s claims of a conspiracy.

The differences between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have nothing to do with the democratic and social rights of working people. They are over how to best advance the interests of the corporate elite.

Sirisena came to power in the January 2015 elections, ousting former President Mahinda Rajapakse. He exploited widespread opposition among workers and the poor to the previous government’s attacks on democratic rights, austerity measures and atrocities carried out in the war against the separatist

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The US and India backed the regime-change in Colombo. Both were hostile to the Rajapakse government's ties to Beijing. Sirisena immediately signalled that his government would deepen Sri Lanka's alignment with Washington.

However, amid a deepening economic crisis, including mounting debt problems, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has been forced to turn to China for financial aid.

In a bellicose speech last month, marking an escalation of US plans for war with China, Vice President Mike Pence cited the Sri Lankan government's Hambantota port deal with China Merchants Port Holdings as an example of "Chinese debt trap diplomacy."

Pence declared that Sri Lanka took on massive debt to let Chinese state companies build a port. "Two years ago, that country could no longer afford its payments, delivering the new port directly into Chinese hands," he stated. Pence's comments underscored intense US hostility to China's influence on the island.

The government has also been compelled to obtain an International Monetary Fund bailout loan tied to a drastic austerity program aimed at slashing the fiscal deficit by increasing the price of essentials and gutting social spending on subsidies, health and education.

These attacks have provoked a spate of social struggles involving railway, postal and ports employees, along with teachers and other sections of the working class. Students have carried out continuous protests against the privatisation of education. Farmers and fishermen have taken action against cuts to subsidies. And some 200,000 plantation workers are protesting to demand a 100 percent wage increase.

The trade unions, backed by the pseudo-left groups, have played the key role in preventing these struggles from developing into a political confrontation with the government.

Last February's local elections underscored the deepening unpopularity of the government. Sirisena's SLFP came third and the UNP second, while the majority of seats were won by Rajapakse's faction.

The government is also being squeezed by a currency crisis, with the Sri Lankan rupee depreciating by 11 percent this year. This is part of a trend throughout the region wracking India, Pakistan and other so-called emerging markets.

Admitting that the economic crisis is "turning to the worse," Wickremesinghe last week stated that he hoped "all parties will shed their political differences and support the government to overcome this crisis."

Sirisena has hypocritically sought to distance himself from his own government's austerity measures. He has claimed that corruption is the main cause of mounting economic problems and has publicly criticised ministers and state officials. This week, he demanded the resignation of the boards of the Bank of Ceylon and the People's Bank over alleged corruption. UNP ministers have expressed opposition to the move.

Sirisena is also seeking to promote nationalism to divert mounting social anger in reactionary directions.

Shipping Minister Samarasinghe presented a paper to this week's cabinet meeting calling for the development of Colombo Port's eastern terminal by the national ports authority. Wickremesinghe countered the proposal, saying the government had already agreed to develop the terminal with Indian investment. Sirisena declared this was inimical to the country's sovereignty.

Stating that "he can't work with Wickremesinghe," Sirisena even tried to establish an agreement with Rajapakse on a proposal for a "caretaker government." The media reported that the two held a secret meeting last month. Neither Rajapakse nor Sirisena denied the claims. Rajapakse, however, appears to be aiming to exploit the government crisis to form an administration that he leads.

In an interview with the *Hindu* last month, Rajapakse said: "A government must be strong and speak in one voice." He warned that investors were turning away as there was no "stable government" in Colombo. Rajapakse is rallying Sinhala chauvinist groups and appealing to the military, accusing the government of victimising "war heroes."

The competing factions of the ruling elite have all signalled that they want to deepen Sri Lanka's ties to India and the US.

Wickremesinghe flew to New Delhi on Thursday for discussions with Modi on Indian investments in Sri Lanka.

In September, Rajapakse visited New Delhi to seek its blessing if he was to form a future government.

The infighting within the Sri Lankan political establishment expresses a deepening crisis of capitalist rule. Each of the competing factions are calculating how best to advance the interests of the capitalist class, by lining up with the major powers and deepening the offensive against working people.

These developments underscore that workers can only defend their rights by turning to an internationalist and socialist program aimed at establishing a workers' and peasants' government. The Socialist Equality Party alone advances this perspective.



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