

Sri Lankan President Sirisena sacks prime minister

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In what amounts to a political coup, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister on Friday evening and appointed former president Mahinda Rajapakse to replace him.

In doing so, Sirisena ended the “unity government” between his faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP), which has ruled the country since 2015.

The 19th Amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution, enacted in April 2015, prunes back the considerable powers of the executive president, including his right to unilaterally decide to remove a prime minister.

Sirisena and Rajapakse kept their unconstitutional move strictly secret from all but their closest associates right up until the last minute. The coup is an expression of the huge political crisis confronting the Sri Lankan ruling class amid a profound economic crisis, rising geo-political tensions and a resurgence of class struggle by workers and the poor.

The new regime is tightening its grip on power. Pro-Rajapakse thugs drove out staff believed to be sympathetic to Wickremesinghe from state-owned television. Sirisena immediately took control of these TV channels and the state-owned newspaper house, Lake House.

Wickremesinghe branded Sirisena’s move as “unconstitutional,” declared that he was still prime minister and called for the convening of parliament to “prove his majority.”

Sirisena responded by issuing two gazettes, firstly to validate his decision to remove Wickremesinghe, and secondly, to prorogue or suspend parliament for three weeks until November 16. He plans to swear in Rajapakse’s new cabinet tomorrow.

The UNP-led coalition has 106 members in the 225-seat parliament, while Sirisena and Rajapakse combined have 95 MPs. Wickremesinghe is counting on the support of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which has 16 MPs. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has announced it will support neither grouping.

Addressing a joint group of MPs from the SLFP and its

allies yesterday, Sirisena declared he was unable to continue to work with Wickremesinghe because the government was mired in financial corruption. He has also cited unsubstantiated claims of a “plot to kill him.”

In September, Namal Kumara, an ex-soldier and police informant said he knew of a plot to kill Sirisena and also former defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse by Deputy Inspector General of Police, Nalaka de Silva.

Sirisena’s allegations are nothing more than threadbare pretexts to justify his anti-democratic actions. None of the factions of the Sri Lankan political establishment, whether headed by Sirisena, Rajapakse or Wickremesinghe has anything but contempt for basic democratic rights and constitutional norms.

The National Unity government was installed after the 2015 presidential election in Sri Lanka that ousted Rajapakse. Sirisena, a senior minister of Rajapakse’s government, defected in November 2014 in a conspiracy orchestrated by Wickremesinghe and former president Chandrika Kumaratunga, in collusion with Washington and New Delhi.

Sirisena exploited the widespread opposition among workers and the poor to the Rajapakse government’s attacks on democratic rights and living conditions, as well as the military’s atrocities in the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The US was not concerned about the human rights abuses and war crimes of the Rajapakse government. Rather it was hostile to the administration’s close relations with China. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government immediately shifted its foreign policy towards Washington, deepening its ties with the US and Indian militaries.

Now, however, facing a rapidly worsening financial crisis, the government has been compelled to turn to China for aid and assistance, provoking heavy criticism from Washington. At the same time, it has been forced to take an IMF bailout loan and to implement its austerity demands, including for the slashing of social spending and price subsidies.

These attacks have fuelled opposition among workers,

students and youth. In recent months, workers in the railways, public transport, health and the water board, as well as non-academic university employees, teachers and pensioners have engaged in strikes and protests. These have temporarily been suppressed by the trade unions, backed by the pseudo-left organisations.

Over the past few weeks, hundreds of thousands of plantation workers have started protests demanding a 100 percent wage hike. Last Wednesday, 5,000 young workers united across ethnic lines, to hold a major rally in Colombo in support of the plantation workers.

Unrest in the north is deepening among Tamil working people against the continued military occupation and deteriorating living conditions.

The extent of the opposition to the government was shown in the local council elections last February. The SLFP faction led by Rajapakse contested the election as the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and won control of a majority of councils. The Sirisena faction came a distant third after the UNP, intensifying the crisis of the “unity” government.

Sirisena has hypocritically tried to distance himself from the government’s austerity measures by blaming the UNP’s alleged corruption for the country’s economic crisis.

Sirisena has also sought to appease the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist constituency and the military. He has opposed any “hunt” of military officers for war crimes and has ordered the police not to provide information to the courts in such cases.

The president has recently opposed government plans to transform the eastern terminal of Colombo harbour into a joint venture with India. This is in line with the anti-Indian xenophobia being promoted by Sinhala chauvinist groups.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite is increasingly alarmed at the rising tide of strikes and protests. The installation of Rajapakse has nothing to do with concerns about corruption, but is aimed at dividing and suppressing the working class.

Rajapakse is notorious for prosecuting the ruthless war on Tamils and for using police state methods to suppress any opposition. He told the *Sunday Times* after being sworn in that he has “taken over a new challenge to help the people of Sri Lanka who are suffering from untold hardships due to the worsening economic situation. The rupee is depreciating against the US dollar and the cost of living is rising leaps and bounds.”

This is Orwellian double-speak. Speaking to the *Hindu* last month, Rajapakse declared that the lack of a “stable government” was turning away investors. “A government must be strong and speak in one voice,” he said.

His son Namal Rajapakse, speaking to the *New York Times* yesterday, bluntly declared: “But now you will have stability

with the new government. People can oppose us, but at the end of the day, we will achieve a solution for the economic and social instability.”

Sirisena’s coup will only heighten geo-political rivalries, along with political intrigues in Colombo. The US State Department declared that it was following events in Sri Lanka closely and appealed for all parties to “act in accordance with the Constitution, refrain from violence and follow due process.”

The US will not tolerate a new Sri Lankan government leaning towards China. Vice President Mike Pence earlier this month criticised China’s “debt trap diplomacy” and cited Sri Lanka as an example. He claimed that by leasing Hambantota Port to Beijing it would “soon become a forward military base for China’s growing blue-water navy.”

While the Indian government has not issued any statement the media is warning that India’s rival China will benefit. *Times of India* columnist Indrani Bagchi wrote: “India has strong security interests in Sri Lanka and the Modi government would be loath to see a greater Chinese presence in the island nation, particularly given the difficulties posed by the Maldives and its own China-leaning outgoing president.”

The diplomatic line-up was evident yesterday. Wickremesinghe met with foreign diplomats in Colombo from the US, the UK, the EU, Japan and India, while the Chinese ambassador to Colombo, Cheng Xueyuan, met Rajapakse to convey the best wishes of President Xi Jinping.

The working class cannot have any illusions in either faction of the ruling elite, both of which have a long history of attacks on the democratic and social rights of workers and the rural masses. Whoever finally forms the next government will seek to impose the burden of the economic crisis on workers and use police state measures to suppress opposition.



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