

Sri Lankan president's cynical justifications for his political coup

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In a televised speech yesterday, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena attempted to justify his political coup last Friday, in which he unconstitutionally sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and installed former president Mahinda Rajapakse to replace him. The removal of Wickremesinghe signals a deepening of the country's political crisis, which is being fuelled by a deteriorating economy and growing resistance to the IMF's austerity demands.

The upheaval ends the unstable national unity government formed in 2015 when Sirisena defected from the Rajapakse government and, with the backing of Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), won the presidential election. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which has effectively been split into pro-Sirisena and pro-Rajapakse factions, has now reunified to back Sirisena's actions.

The battle lines have now been drawn. Wickremesinghe has refused to accept his dismissal and has remained in Temple Trees, the prime ministerial residence. In response to his call for a sitting of parliament to prove his government still commands a majority, Sirisena has prorogued parliament until November 16.

Rajapakse ally Wimal Weerawansa, who is notorious for his demagoguery, yesterday issued an ultimatum to Wickremesinghe to leave Temple Trees and threatened to take action to oust him. Already one man is dead and two others were injured in a violent clash between pro-Rajapakse thugs and a former minister and his body guards.

Sirisena's self-serving and cynical speech was to justify his anti-democratic actions, cover up the underlying reasons, and appeal to layers of the population who increasingly opposed the Wickremesinghe's government's attacks on living

standards.

Sirisena accused Wickremesinghe of "conduct that was unbecoming of civilised politics," saying he "destroyed the concept and the noble expectations of good governance by his actions during the last few years". This, however, is the same pretext that he and Wickremesinghe used in 2015 to justify turning against Rajapakse whose government was responsible for the systematic abuse of democratic rights and war crimes in its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Sirisena accused Wickremesinghe of corruption over a bond scam in which a finance company, Perpetual Treasuries, owned by the son-in-law of the newly-appointed Central Bank Governor, Arjuna Mahendran, a close confidante of Wickremesinghe, amassed a profit of at least 10 billion rupees (\$US65 million) after receiving inside information. No charges have been laid against Wickremesinghe over the allegations.

The president also again raised unsubstantiated claims of a "strong plot to assassinate" him, which involved an unnamed cabinet minister. Sirisena said that this supposed coup was the "most proximate and powerful reason" that made him appoint Rajapakse as prime minister, but provided no evidence. He denounced the Inspector General of Police, a close associate of Wickremesinghe, over the investigation into the supposed assassination plan.

Sirisena cynically tried to pose as a "man of the people," contrasting himself with Wickremesinghe who "belonged to a privileged class and did not understand the pulse of the people and conducted themselves as if shaping the future of the country was a fun game they played."

In reality, Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse are the political representatives of Sri Lanka's venal

ruling class that have trampled on the democratic and social rights of working people since formal independence in 1948. Successive UNP and SLFP-led governments have imposed the IMF's austerity agenda by slashing social spending and jobs, used police state measures to suppress opposition and whipped up Sinhala chauvinism to divide the working class. Both parties are directly responsible for the brutal communal war that devastated the island from 1983 to 2009.

Sirisena claimed that his actions were "totally in accordance with the constitution and on the advice of legal experts," but made no attempt to argue why that should be so. In coming to power in 2015, he promised to abolish the country's executive presidency which has far reaching autocratic powers. In reality, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government only amended these powers, but it did end the president's ability to unilaterally sack a prime minister. Sirisena has now breached the constitution to remove Wickremesinghe.

Sirisena's actions in arbitrarily suspending parliament are aimed at preventing Wickremesinghe demonstrating that he still has a majority, and buying time to bribe or bully MPs to switch sides. Colombo politicians are well-known for their opportunistic "cross-overs". Rajapakse yesterday promised to hold fresh elections as soon as possible, but there is no guarantee that the regime will hold elections anytime soon, or at all.

The president ended his speech by posturing as a patriot—demagogy that is aimed at appealing to extreme right-wing, Sinhala chauvinist groups that have been condemning the Wickremesinghe government for selling off the country. "In the last few years," he declared, "the economic policy relied on foreign investments, and that weakened our local industries."

Sirisena declared: "Many valuable assets were given to foreigners without tenders. Construction awards were also given without tenders," and continued: "If the last week's Land Ordinance Special Act was passed by the Cabinet and then by the parliament, all the lands of our Motherland could be bought outright by foreigners without any difficulty."

These condemnations carry distinct chauvinist overtones. Much of the criticisms of Rajapakse and his allies against the government has been directed at India and thus indirectly at the island's Tamil minority, who are often branded by extreme nationalists as agents of

Indian expansionism. Colombo politicians have long used anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide working people and it is no accident that such a campaign is being whipped up now amid a sharp increase in strikes and protests over deteriorating living standards.

The anti-Indian rhetoric also plays into intensifying geo-political rivalries in South Asia between China on the one hand, and the US and India on the other. The US orchestrated the 2015 regime change operation that enabled Sirisena to oust Rajapakse, who was regarded as too close to China. The Trump administration as it ratchets up its trade war measures and confrontation with China is unlikely to passively accept the establishment of what it regards as a pro-Beijing government in strategically placed Sri Lanka. The behind-the-scenes manoeuvring will only intensify, further compounding the political crisis in Colombo.

Sirisena is due to swear in Rajapakse's new cabinet today. On Saturday, the presidential secretariat notified all department heads, chairmen of the state corporations, statutory boards and state banks that the tenure of the ministers of the previous government had ended. Senior UNP leaders have called for people to "take to the streets" to oppose the ousting of the government in protests that could lead to further clashes with pro-Rajapakse forces.

None of the establishment parties defends the interests of the working class and the poor. The new regime, like the previous government, will seek to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working people and ruthlessly suppress any opposition. The working class must chart its own independent path in this political crisis by rejecting both wings of the ruling class and their divisive chauvinist politics, and mobilising the urban and rural poor in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to carry out socialist policies.



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