

Infighting deepens between rival factions of Sri Lankan elite

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Mahinda Rajapakse, who was installed as prime minister by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena in a political coup last Friday, assumed his duties yesterday morning. In the evening, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was ousted in an unconstitutional manoeuvre, delivered a statement to the press declaring he was still prime minister of the country.

The Colombo political establishment has been in turmoil since Friday's coup. Sirisena's faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—which participated in the previous unity government with Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP)—has now united with its erstwhile opponents of the SLFP faction led by Rajapakse, the island's president prior to 2015.

The bitter infighting that has erupted within Sri Lanka's ruling elite has nothing to do with the democratic and social rights of working people, as is being claimed by the competing factions. Rather it is over how best to respond, in the interests of the corporate elite, to the explosive economic problems of the country, intensified by the deepening global crisis, and mounting opposition from the working class and the poor to the attacks on their living and social conditions.

As part of an attempt to consolidate the new regime, Sirisena yesterday appointed 10 cabinet and state ministers. Rajapakse was assigned the key post of minister for finance and economic affairs. There was no indication of other ministerial appointments.

Sirisena informed all ministry secretaries on Saturday that the terms of all cabinet ministers from the previous government had ended. It increasingly appears that Sirisena, Rajapakse and a tiny cabal will run the new regime.

At the same time, the government has drastically reduced Wickremesinghe's security detail from around 1,000 personnel to just 10. His supporters have brought generators to Temple Trees, the official prime ministerial

residence where Wickremesinghe is staying, after Sirisena cut off its electricity. A large number of UNP parliamentarians and supporters have camped inside building.

Under conditions of a government ultimatum for Wickremesinghe to vacate Temple Trees, and warnings that it will take "action" if he fails to do so, violent clashes could develop. The UNP has called on its members and supporters to take to the streets today in opposition to Wickremesinghe's sacking and Sirisena's proroguing of parliament. Wickremesinghe is demanding that the parliament sit so he can demonstrate he has a majority.

Wickremesinghe told the media on Monday that a speech to the nation by Sirisena the previous day, attempting to justify the coup, was full of lies (see: "Sri Lanka president's cynical justification for his political coup"). For his part, Wickremesinghe sought to paint a rosy picture of the ousted government, with his own falsehoods.

Wickremesinghe claimed the government had "created democratic freedom never enjoyed before in the country," and had protected human rights, media freedom and improved living standards and social conditions.

All these claims were aimed at covering up the real record of the government.

Sirisena came to power in the 2015 presidential elections by exploiting widespread hostility to the former Rajapakse government and its ruthless attacks on democratic rights, including atrocities during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

However, facing a mounting economic crisis, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe implemented the austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. The government increased the prices of essentials, unleashed police violence against protesting workers, students and farmers and continued the military occupation in the north

and east of the country.

At the end of his statement, Wickremesinghe declared: “We are standing firm to re-establish democracy,” and “will never allow anti-constitutional dictatorship to rule this country.”

These declarations are worthless. Wickremesinghe’s UNP and the SLFP have ruled Sri Lanka for the past 70 years by suppressing democratic rights, including through racist discrimination against the country’s Tamil and Muslim communities aimed at defending capitalist rule by dividing and weakening the working class.

Wickremesinghe hinted that he has the backing of the US, other Western powers and India, which are displeased with the change of government, stating: “Not only the people of this small island, but also the rest of the world are with us at this moment.” The previous evening, he met at Temple Trees with diplomats from the US, the major European countries, Japan and India.

Thoroughly discredited among ordinary people, Wickremesinghe is seeking to return to government with the support of the major powers, including the US and India.

Significantly, yesterday morning US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert urged “all sides to refrain from intimidation and violence.” Then she stated: “We call on the President, in consultation with the Speaker, to immediately reconvene parliament and allow the democratically elected representatives of the Sri Lankan people to fulfill their responsibility to affirm who will lead their government.”

This statement is a clear sign that Washington backs Wickremesinghe and his call for parliament to be reconvened.

Washington’s concerns have nothing to do with democratic rights. Successive American governments supported Rajapakse’s previous government, between 2005 and 2015, as it carried out its brutal anti-Tamil war and turned to increasingly autocratic rule. However, after the LTTE’s defeat in 2009, the US grew increasingly hostile to the Rajapakse government’s close economic and military relations with Beijing.

In order to scuttle these ties and bring the strategically-located island back into its fold, Washington, with the support of New Delhi, orchestrated a regime-change operation to bring Sirisena to power in Sri Lanka’s 2015 presidential election. Its principal allies in this operation were Wickremesinghe and former president Chandrika Kumaratunga.

After coming to power, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe

government shifted Colombo’s foreign policy orientation towards the US and India, and away from China.

The Trump administration’s statements since Friday show it is not ready to allow a regime to emerge that leans towards China. Yesterday, Washington issued a travel warning to its citizens in Sri Lanka, saying protests there may turn violent. Similar travel warnings have also been issued by the UK and the EU.

India, taking a more cautious line, has also indicated its preference for a return to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, while keeping open the option of working with Rajapakse if he manages to consolidate his rule.

In an attempt to assure the US, the Western powers and India that the change of government would not undermine their strategic interests, Sirisena convened a meeting of foreign diplomats at the Presidential Secretariat yesterday evening.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), an opposition party, has made a bogus attempt to distance itself from the rival factions, calling a protest tomorrow against Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse. The JVP says it will rally all progressive elements in the competing factions to build “people’s power.”

The JVP played a central role in bringing Rajapakse to power in the 2005 presidential election and was an enthusiastic supporter of his renewal of the racist war against the LTTE and brutal attacks on the basic rights of the working class and oppressed masses. In 2010, the JVP allied with the UNP, backing the presidential campaign of former army chief Sarath Fonseka.

The JVP again lined-up with the UNP to bring Sirisena to power in January 2015. Their protest tomorrow is aimed at covering-up the real issues underlying the present crisis of the ruling elites and their preparations to suppress the emerging social and political struggles of the working class.

The working class must reject these traps and build a socialist movement, independent of all factions of the ruling class, to lead the rural poor and oppressed masses in the fight for a genuine alternative: a workers’ and peasants’ government based on a socialist program.



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