

Sri Lankan crisis: UNP rally demands reconvening of parliament

Our correspondents
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The right-wing United National Party (UNP) led by Ranil Wickremesinghe held a protest in Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, on Tuesday to press President Maithripala Sirisena to immediately reconvene the parliament.

The demonstration was part of an intensifying UNP campaign to regain power after Sirisena sacked Wickremesinghe as prime minister on October 26 in what amounted to a political coup. Sirisena appointed former President Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister.

After his unconstitutional action, Sirisena prorogued the parliament until November 16, rejecting Wickremesinghe's call for it to be convened to prove that he retains the majority required to continue as prime minister.

The protesters gathered at Kollupitiya in central Colombo, near Temple Trees, the prime minister's official residence, which Wickremesinghe has refused to leave. The UNP mobilised a considerable crowd—some 25,000 people, according to police reports. More than 2,000 police officers were deployed but did not attempt to disperse the crowd.

The UNP portrayed the protest as “defending democracy.” Depicting himself as a crusader, Wickremesinghe told the gathering: “The president has usurped the powers of the legislature. We will fight for democracy. We have made Temple Trees the symbol of democracy in Sri Lanka.”

Wickremesinghe declared that the “coup” was “an attack on the very foundations of our nation—law, order, democracy, the Constitution—and therefore a threat to every Sri Lankan.”

For Wickremesinghe to pose as a protector of democracy is a fraud. While denouncing Sirisena's unconstitutional move, the UNP, which itself has a long history of anti-democratic actions, is seeking to

hoodwink and rally people to its campaign to grab state power.

Since the formation of their “national unity” government in 2015, Wickremesinghe and Sirisena jointly presided over a frontal assault on living and social conditions, imposing International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures, and mobilising the police and the military against workers, farmers and students who resisted those attacks.

Addressing the rally, Wickremesinghe outlined how he gathered support to field Sirisena as a common candidate in the January 2015 presidential election to oust Rajapakse. However, Wickremesinghe did not explain how he, together with former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, conspired with Washington to back Sirisena as their candidate. To do so would expose his demagoguery about democracy.

In that 2015 regime-change operation, Wickremesinghe, who had backed Rajapakse's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), catered to Washington's strategic moves against China. The US, which had also backed Rajapakse's renewed war against the LTTE, was hostile to his growing ties with Beijing.

Wickremabahu Karunaratne, leader of the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), was among the first speakers at Tuesday's right-wing rally. Karunaratne shamelessly declared: “I came here because the democracy is here. To stop the crime against Ranil Wickremesinghe, he must be reinstalled [as prime minister] by chasing away the thieves who usurped power.”

The NSSP leader has been a consistent associate of the UNP and Wickremesinghe, painting him as a progressive and a democrat. In 2015, Karunaratne was a prominent campaigner for Sirisena, along with

Wickremesinghe, and has acted as a spokesman for the government for almost four years, opposing workers' struggles against it.

Far from being a protector of democracy, Wickremesinghe is a defender of the interests of big business and investors. In power, his party has been responsible for the assault on the democratic rights of the working people, including by sacking 100,000 workers in the 1980 general strike, launching the protracted communal war against the Tamil minority in 1983, and brutally suppressing rural youth in 1989-90 resulting in at least 60,000 deaths.

As part of the UNP's efforts to pressure Sirisena to reconvene parliament immediately, the parliamentary speaker, Karu Jayasuriya, met with the president yesterday. He reportedly presented a request by 126 MPs—a clear majority in the 225-seat parliament—for a resumption. The UNP and Muslim league were backed by MPs from the opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Sirisena flatly rejected the request, saying he would call parliament when the situation was “conducive.” He prorogued parliament in order to buy time to cajole, bully and bribe MPs to support Rajapakse as prime minister.

The president yesterday met with organisers from his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to discuss plans for a counter-demonstration in Colombo on November 5. In line with the chauvinist tone of his campaign, Sirisena declared that no federal constitution would be permitted while he was the president.

Rajapakse and his supporters have previously sought to whip up anti-Tamil sentiment by accusing Sirisena and Wickremesinghe of planning a federal constitution that would hand over the island's north and east to TNA-led provincial governments.

As the political crisis continues, Colombo is becoming a diplomatic battleground. The US and its allies, including the UK, EU, Canada and Australia, along with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, are siding with Wickremesinghe, supporting his demand for the immediate reconvening of parliament.

Yesterday, the UN resident coordinator Hanaa Singer, EU ambassador Tung-Lai Margue, British high commissioner James Dauris, Canadian ambassador David McKinnon and German ambassador Jorn Rohde all met with the parliamentary speaker Jayasuriya and

urged “a convening of parliament in view of the prevailing political situation in Sri Lanka.”

According to the *Daily Mirror*, a statement issued by the speaker's office noted that “these diplomats had expressed their concern over the sudden political turn of events” and reportedly warned of “negative consequences” for the country—in other words, the threat of sanctions. The speaker reportedly told the diplomats “not to be hasty to take diplomatic measures on the current political situation.”

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang told reporters that China was “closely following the changes in the situation in Sri Lanka.” By contrast to the US-allied powers, Lu said “the changes in Sri Lanka are internal affairs” and China followed a “non-interference policy.” Chinese President Xi Jinping, however, has already indicated which side China is on by welcoming the installation of Rajapakse as prime minister.

These geo-political rivalries will only compound the political crisis in Colombo as competing factions of the ruling class struggle to seize the levers of power. Both sides, however, fear the growing movement of workers against the austerity agenda imposed by successive governments, and, in office, will not hesitate to use police state measures to try to suppress this popular resistance.

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