

Sri Lankan crisis: Washington intervenes to maintain its political influence

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3 November 2018

The Trump administration has responded to Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena's October 26 political coup and the subsequent political crisis by seeking to ensure that the turmoil not impact US geo-strategic operations against China.

Sirisena unconstitutionally removed Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replaced him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse. The US ruling elite was hostile to Rajapakse because of his pro-Chinese stand and backed Sirisena to oust him in the 2015 presidential election.

Washington is concerned that if Rajapakse were to consolidate his hold on power in the bitter infighting against Wickremesinghe, it would seriously affect its carefully cultivated military and political relations with Colombo.

After dismissing Wickremesinghe, Sirisena prorogued the parliament until November 16 to allow Rajapakse, via various horse-trading deals, to garner support from additional MPs and challenge Wickremesinghe's claims to have majority parliamentary support.

At a media briefing on Wednesday, US journalists repeatedly questioned US State Department deputy spokesperson Robert Palladino about the Trump administration's attitude to the political situation in Sri Lanka.

One correspondent asked whether the US still considered Wickremesinghe "the legitimate prime minister" of Sri Lanka. Was his ouster "unconstitutional" and a "coup" and did it require US action, the reporter asked.

Palladino provided no direct answers to these questions. He said, however: "The United States believes the determination should be made in accordance with Sri Lankan law and due process. So

again, we call on the president in consultation with the speaker, to reconvene parliament immediately and to allow the democratically elected representatives of the Sri Lankan people to fulfill their responsibility to affirm who will lead their government. And we urge all sides to uphold the law and to respect due process."

This has been the US State Department's refrain since the beginning of the crisis and is similar to Wickremesinghe's stance. The sacked prime minister has called for parliament to be recalled so he can show he has a majority and continue in office.

Another correspondent asked about China's role and noted that "at least one member of parliament in Sri Lanka has accused Beijing of contributing to the ouster of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe."

One journalist referred to previous remarks made by Palladino about Washington's concern about "creeping Chinese influence" in Latin America. "This [Sri Lanka] is a case where you have a similar situation, or at least allegations of a similar situation," the reporter asserted. "What is the [US] embassy in Colombo doing?"

An Associated Press (AP) article about the media briefing, published in the *New York Times* on October 31, said: "The political upheaval and challenges to the democratic process could endanger improvements in US-Sri Lanka relations since Rajapakse lost power in elections in 2015..."

"For the past three years, as Sri Lanka has had a fragile unity government, the US has expanded relations that were curtailed during the later years of Rajapakse's rule, including renewed military cooperation."

Since 2015, the US Asia-Pacific Command has developed close relations with the Sri Lankan military, trained Sri Lankan soldiers, established a marine unit, invited the military for joint exercises and sent

warships to the Indian Ocean island.

Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, the top-ranking Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, told AP that if Rajapakse's appointment as prime minister were allowed to stand, it would "pose a grave challenge to US engagement with that government."

Leahy said Rajapakse ran "the government as a criminal enterprise, making sweetheart deals with China, persecuting the Tamil minority and wrongly imprisoning political opponents and journalists."

Washington's concerns have nothing to do with defending democracy, due process or the Sri Lankan constitution. The US is concerned that the political gains it made in ousting Rajapakse and installing Sirisena as president will be weakened and its geo-strategic operations against China undermined.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe now blame each other for violating "good governance" and "democratic principles." But in 2015, Sirisena joined hands with Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga in a conspiracy orchestrated in Washington to remove Rajapakse.

Successive Washington administrations backed Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from mid-2006 until 2009, in which tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed. The US turned a blind eye to the Rajapakse government's anti-democratic methods and abuses of human rights. Both Sirisena, as a senior minister in Rajapakse's cabinet, and Wickremesinghe, in the opposition, were enthusiastic supporters of the brutal war.

Washington began criticising Rajapakse only after he developed close relations with Beijing and China emerged as the main supplier of weapons and funds to his government during the final months of the war. India, determined to advance its interests in the region, backed Washington's moves against China.

The US then presented a series of resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council calling for an investigation of the Rajapakse regime's abuse of human rights during the war against the LTTE. These resolutions sought to pressure Colombo into distancing itself from Beijing. When Rajapakse maintained his relations with China, Washington moved to oust him.

Deep-seated hostility among working people, the rural poor and the Tamil masses against Rajapakse's

anti-democratic rule was exploited by Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and others, with the backing of pseudo-left organisations such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party, the trade unions and academics, who provided the political operation with a democratic garb.

Claims by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, who now stand in hostile camps, to be defending democracy are a complete fraud and are exposed by their role in the 2015 regime-change operation. Rajapakse, who once vehemently denounced Sirisena, is now allied with him.

While these sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite furiously denounce each other, they all defend the interests of big business and international finance capital, and will, as in the past, brutally suppress the struggles of the working class and the poor for social equality and genuine democratic rights.



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