

Factional conflict in Sri Lankan elite underscores dangers facing working class

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The political crisis triggered by Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena's dismissal of Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and his replacement with former President Mahinda Rajapakse continues. The infighting between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by Sirisena and Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) points to the dangers facing the working class.

Both sections of the political elite, which have consistently suppressed the basic rights of the working people and the poor, are falsely posturing as defenders of democracy in order to secure government control and deepen the drive to place the burden of the country's economic crisis on the masses.

In their bid to form a government, Sirisena and Rajapakse have appointed ministers on a virtual daily basis and plan to have 30 cabinet ministers. Mahinda Samarasinghe, the newly-appointed government spokesman and ports minister, yesterday said the appointments would be completed by November 14.

Sirisena initially suspended parliament until November 16 but, in response to international pressure, brought the date forward by two days. The suspension sought to give Rajapakse time to secure a parliamentary majority via new ministerial appointments and other horse-trading deals.

Parliamentary party leaders met with Speaker Karu Jayasuriya yesterday to discuss the November 14 agenda. Jayasuriya said he would give priority to a no-confidence motion submitted by 116 MPs against Rajapakse. The vote would determine which faction had a majority.

SLFP members of parliament insisted that President Sirisena's address should come first, followed by a "vote on account" to provide temporary budget allocations to the ministries, and, if necessary, a no-confidence motion.

Sirisena, who is desperately attempting to garner parliamentary support for a Rajapakse-led government,

met with Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leaders, including R. Sambandan. The TNA has 16 MPs so its support is decisive for a parliament majority. Thus far, Rajapakse has won the support of just one TNA MP, who was rewarded with a ministerial post.

The TNA leaders told Sirisena they opposed Rajapakse's appointment and called for the reconvening of the parliament at an early date to determine who had a majority. The TNA, a bourgeois nationalist formation, usually responds to the political signals from Washington and New Delhi, so as to secure the interests and privileges of the Tamil elites.

Sirisena is using the crisis to strengthen the autocratic and repressive powers of the presidency. Apart from his position as defence minister, which he holds under the constitution, Sirisena has the law and order ministry, which controls the police, and the media ministry.

Many advisers to Rajapakse and Sirisena claim the president's appointment of a new prime minister is constitutional and openly declare he has the authority to dissolve the parliament if he deems it necessary. These claims are a travesty of the 19th constitutional amendment, previously introduced by Sirisena himself, which pruned some of these powers.

These self-serving interpretations are aimed at using the president's executive powers for further anti-democratic actions, not just to consolidate the Sirisena-Rajapakse faction but to suppress the basic rights of working people.

Wickremesinghe's UNP will hold another rally in Colombo on Monday to call for the immediate reconvening of the parliament and a no-confidence vote.

Yesterday Wickremesinghe briefly spoke to his supporters, declaring that they were fighting to defend democracy and the freedom of the nation. This is a canard. Wickremesinghe heads the oldest bourgeois party in Sri Lanka. It has always served the interests of big business and trampled on the democratic rights of the

masses.

The UNP is relying on the support of the so-called international community, in particular the US. Its constant appeals for major power backing were again revealed in a letter sent by Speaker Jayasuriya on Monday to foreign diplomats in Colombo.

According to the constitution, the parliamentary speaker is supposed to be impartial. Jayasuriya, however, is a senior member of the UNP. Sections of his letter were published in a Reuters report on Wednesday.

“The entire series of events [Sirisena’s actions] can only be described as a coup, albeit one without the use of tanks and guns,” Jayasuriya’s letter said. The “entire matter was pre-planned,” it continued, accusing Sirisena of acting “contrary to all norms of transparency, decency, democracy and good governance, and contrary to the Constitution which he has sworn to uphold and defend.”

The letter amounts to a direct appeal to the major powers to intervene. While Sirisena and Rajapakse denounce the UNP for turning to foreign powers, their government would be just as subservient to the dictates of major powers and their financial institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank.

From the outset, the US has been hostile to Rajapakse’s appointment. During the January 2015 presidential election, Washington orchestrated a regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse as president and install Sirisena.

While the US supported Rajapakse’s brutal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and turned a blind eye to his anti-democratic rule, it bitterly opposed his close relations with Beijing, regarding it as an impediment to US strategic interests.

The newly-appointed US envoy, Alaina B. Teplitz, met with Jayasuriya on November 6. In a twitter message she said they discussed “the importance of parliament reconvening to put an end to this political crisis.” She also met with TNA leader R. Sambandan at his residence on Tuesday.

Washington has stepped up its intervention during the past week. In a tweet on Wednesday, US State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert declared: “We urge Sri Lanka’s President to reconvene parliament immediately to resolve the political crisis.” She warned that any delay “compounds uncertainty in Sri Lanka, and undermines its international reputation.”

The Trump administration has no regard for democracy in Sri Lanka or anywhere else, including in the US. Its only concern is to advance Washington’s geopolitical

interests against China.

Earlier this week, a delegation headed by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake met with the TNA leadership, including Sambandan, to discuss its stance. Both parties said they reached an agreement to defeat Sirisena’s unconstitutional acts in the parliament.

At press conference yesterday, Disسانayake thanked Speaker Jayasuriya for his opposition to Sirisena’s actions, saying his letter was “very strong.” The media reported that the JVP said it would support a parliamentary vote against “violations of the constitution” and support a UNP no-confidence motion.

The JVP, which is part of the political establishment, has consistently maneuvered with one or another faction of the bourgeoisie, and is now stepping up its efforts to sow illusions in the crumbling façade of parliamentary democracy. It plans to hold another protest rally in Colombo to promote its stance.

In the face of a resurgence of the class struggle and the deepening economic crisis and geopolitical tensions, all factions of the ruling elite have moved further to the right and are preparing a major onslaught against the social and democratic rights of the workers and poor.

In its statement on the political crisis, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) wrote: “We urge the working class to take stock of the political situation and to chart its own independent course based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution.

“Workers must take the initiative in forming independent action committees in workplaces, neighbourhoods and the estates, mobilising the support of the rural poor and youth to fight for their democratic rights and class interests. The struggle for democracy is bound up with the question of state power and the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.”

We urge workers and youth to rally to the SEP and fight for this perspective.



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