

In another anti-democratic act, Sri Lankan president dissolves parliament

K. Ratnayake**10 November 2018**

Yesterday Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena blatantly violated the country's constitution and dissolved parliament almost two years before its term officially ends. According to the gazette notification issued last night, new elections will be held on January 5 and the new parliament convened on January 17.

Sirisena's anti-democratic actions came just two weeks after he sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and appointed former President Mahinda Rajapakse to replace him. Sirisena then prorogued the parliament for three weeks until November 16, later changing the date to November 14 following domestic and international criticism. The prorogation was a crude manoeuvre to give Rajapakse time to secure a governing majority in the 225-member parliament.

Sirisena's dissolution of the parliament yesterday was announced a few hours after Rajapakse declared that he was still eight MPs short of a majority.

Only a handful of people, including Rajapakse, appeared to have known about Sirisena's decision. Just prior to the announcement, Rohana Lakshman Piyadasa, secretary of Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), told the media that there would be no dissolution of the parliament.

Sirisena appointed at least seven more ministers to the cabinet yesterday and said the Sirisena-Rajapakse led regime would function as a so-called "care-taker government" until after the January elections. Sri Lankan governments are notorious for using the state machinery and its resources to subvert elections.

Significantly, Sirisena has taken a series of measures to strengthen his political power over the past three weeks. Yesterday he took control of the government printing department using his position as Sri Lankan defence minister, having recently taken over the law-

and-order and media ministries. He currently holds 18 ministerial positions.

In April 2015, four months after he became president, Sirisena introduced a 19th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution. It was hailed by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, along with academics and the pseudo-left, as a move towards the abolition of the autocratic executive presidential system and a victory for democracy.

The 19th amendment not only took away the president's power to sack a prime minister if he commanded a parliamentary majority, but also barred any dissolution of the parliament for at least four and half years.

Sirisena has now violated both these clauses and, using vague legal interpretations, is attempting to re-establish the president's autocratic powers. These hated executive powers will not just be unleashed against his political opponents, but directed, above all, against working people fighting to defend their democratic and social rights.

Sirisena's dissolution of parliament is part of the intensifying conflict between the Wickremesinghe-led UNP, on the one hand, and the president's new alliance with Rajapakse in the now "united" Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), on the other.

Wickremesinghe has refused to vacate Temple Trees, the prime minister's official residence, and is directing the UNP's campaign to regain government. Claiming to have the backing of a majority of MPs, the party is demanding the immediate reconvening of the parliament.

Following yesterday's announcement, UNP leaders said the president had no power to dissolve the parliament and that they would seek "legal redress." This means the UNP will call on the Supreme Court to

annul Sirisena's gazette notification.

Former Minister for Health and Indigenous Medicine Rajitha Senaratne told media at Temple Trees yesterday that the UNP will intensify its campaign against the president's "illegal action" and continue the fight for democracy. He did not elaborate. The UNP had previously announced a major rally in Colombo on Monday.

The "democratic" posturing of the Wickremesinghe and Sirisena-Rajapakse camps is completely bogus. Successive UNP and SLFP governments, which have ruled Sri Lanka in the seven decades since formal independence in 1948, have systematically suppressed the democratic and social rights of all working people, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike.

In November 2014, Sirisena defected from the then Rajapakse government to contest the presidential election and in 2015 conspired to form government with Wickremesinghe. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe promised "good governance" blaming Rajapakse for nepotism, violating democratic rights and attacking the living conditions of working people. These demagogic utterances were to exploit the mass opposition of workers and the poor to Rajapakse's decade-long autocratic rule from 2005 to 2015.

The ousting of Rajapakse, in which Sirisena and Wickremesinghe were directly involved, was a conspiracy orchestrated by the US. Washington had supported Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. But it wanted Rajapakse's relations with Beijing scuttled and Sri Lanka brought into line with the US confrontational moves against China.

The conflict between the Sirisena-led SLFP faction and Wickremesinghe's UNP did not come out of the blue. After four years the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime is deeply discredited among workers and the poor.

This year has been marked by increasing struggles of workers, the rural poor and students against the government's IMF-dictated austerity measures and attacks on democratic and social rights.

The US and other major powers are siding with Wickremesinghe and the UNP's demands for the reconvening of parliament. Washington is particularly concerned that the political and military relations it has cultivated over the past four years with Colombo will

be affected, and has repeatedly issued statements in this regard.

Addressing an SLFP rally last Monday, Rajapakse, in a clear signal to the US, declared that any government under his control would be willing to "work with the west and east, north and south."

Sirisena's dissolution of parliament is yet another indication of the degenerated state of parliamentary democracy in Sri Lanka, which is mired in deep economic crisis and moving towards dictatorial forms of rule.

Under the pretext of defending parliamentary democracy, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) have sided with the UNP. Academics and pseudo-left formations, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), are also supporting Wickremesinghe. These parties previously backed the US-orchestrated operation that established the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime in 2015.

The working class must reject all factions of the Sri Lankan capitalist class and their opportunist backers. It must organise independently of all these political formations and rally the poor and oppressed to fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist and internationalist program.

The SEP and its youth wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, fights for this perspective.



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