

# Sri Lankan political crisis deepens: Prime minister splits from president

W.A. Sunil

13 November 2018

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena's unconstitutional decision last Friday to dissolve parliament and call a general election has only deepened the political crisis in Colombo following his dismissal of Ranil Wickremesinghe and installation of former president Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister on October 26.

Less than 36 hours after the dissolution of the parliament, Rajapakse abruptly quit the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), of which Sirisena is the president, to join the relatively new Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP) led by his brother Basil Rajapakse, and to launch his election campaign.

Under pressure of a deepening economic crisis, rising social discontent and intensifying geo-political tensions, the political establishment in Colombo is fracturing. In the 2015 presidential election, Sirisena broke from Rajapakse and ran against him with the support of the opposition United National Party (UNP) and the backing of the US and India.

The resultant "national unity" government of Sirisena and UNP leader Wickremesinghe collapsed on October 26. Now the opportunist reunion of Sirisena with Rajapakse is falling apart, leaving the president isolated and the SLFP, one of Sri Lanka's two longstanding bourgeois parties, facing a potential collapse.

The Rajapakses formed the SLPP, based on their faction of the SLFP, to contest local elections earlier this year. Exploiting mass hostility to the "unity" government, they won a convincing victory over both the UNP and Sirisena's faction of the SLFP. This widespread opposition, which is also expressed in strikes and protests by workers, students and peasants, is a key factor in the political crisis.

While Sirisena has been politically weakened by Rajapakse's decision, he has over the past two weeks

concentrated significant state power in his own hands as president. He controls the military and police as well as the state media and other ministries. Having already acted in flagrant disregard of the constitution on two occasions, Sirisena could use the autocratic powers of the executive presidency again in a desperate bid to stay in power.

Workers, youth and the rural poor must be warned: none of the factions of the ruling class will defend the basic rights of working people. They will ruthlessly impose the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and big business. The sham claims of all these politicians of big business that they defend democracy must be rejected.

In a Tweet on Saturday, Mahinda Rajapakse declared that "a general election will truly establish the will of the people and make way for a stable country." His younger brother and former defense secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, told a public meeting on the same day that "there is no stronger step than this to strengthen democracy in the country."

However, both Mahinda Rajapakse and his brother were notorious while in power for their ruthless prosecution of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Tens of thousands of civilians were slaughtered in the final government offensive in 2009. The Rajapakse government presided over a police-state regime responsible for assassinating or "disappearing" political opponents, journalists and many Tamil youth.

Moreover, Rajapakse backed the unconstitutional actions of Sirisena in sacking Wickremesinghe, proroguing parliament, and, when a parliamentary majority could not be achieved through bullying and bribery, calling a new general election. The election is scheduled for January 5 and the new parliament will

meet on January 17, allowing enough time for backroom horse-trading in case no single party wins a majority.

The UNP, with the support of two opposition parties, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), has vowed to go to the Supreme Court to challenge the dissolution of parliament. However, the chief justice and supreme court judges are appointees of the president and are likely to rule in his favour, despite his obvious breaches of the constitution.

A UNP leader and former finance minister Mangala Samaraweera declared to the media on Saturday, that his party would fight against the “tyrant” President Sirisena’s “shock sacking of the legislature.” Grandstanding as a “democrat,” he proclaimed: “We will fight in the courts, we will fight in parliament and we will fight at the polls.”

Like Rajapakse and Sirisena, the UNP uses the constitution when it suits and dispenses with democratic and legal forms when it does not. The UNP has a long history of anti-democratic measures, including the abolition of the citizenship rights of Tamil plantation workers in 1948, the imposition of the draconian Public Security Act and the establishment of the executive presidency in 1978.

UNP leader Wickremesinghe was central to the regime-change operation orchestrated in Washington to oust Rajapakse as president and install Sirisena via the 2015 elections. The US, which had backed Rajapakse’s war against the LTTE and turned a blind eye to the military’s atrocities, was hostile to his government’s close ties with China.

Not surprisingly, the US and its allies—the UK, EU and now Australia—have lined up with the UNP and Wickremesinghe. The latest US statement on Saturday warned that the dissolution of the parliament “jeopardizes Sri Lanka’s economic progress and international reputation” and called on the president to “respect his country’s democratic tradition and the rule of law” and fulfil “the commitments to good governance and democracy upon which he and his government were elected.”

What utter hypocrisy! With the assistance of the pseudo-left organisations, the trade unions and various NGOs, Washington dressed up its 2015 behind-the-scenes machinations to oust Rajapakse as the defence

of “good governance and democracy.” If it does not get its way, US imperialism will not hesitate to carry out another regime-change operation to ensure Colombo toes its line.

The intervention of the major powers will only compound the intense political crisis in Colombo that left the ruling class divided, perplexed and fearful. The editorial in this weekend’s *Sunday Island* declared: “The president of this so-called Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka has thrown the country from the frying pan into the fire... The country is now in untested waters and a return to stability must be a priority.” But it stopped short of stating how.

As in 2015, the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) has lined up with UNP and Wickremesinghe, while others such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP) have again begun to campaign for a “broader front of left parties, civil organizations and mass organizations.” Either directly or indirectly, they all function to keep workers and youth tied to one or the other bourgeois party and to block a struggle to overthrow the crisis-ridden capitalist system.

The working class must break from all these political charlatans. It cannot postpone the necessary practical and political preparations for the defence of democratic and social rights. It is vital that workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—unite and start to take matters into their own hands. A political struggle against all the bourgeois factions is needed so as to rally the urban poor and rural masses in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist policies. That is the perspective for which the Socialist Equality Party fights.



To contact the WSWP and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wswp.org/contact](http://wswp.org/contact)**