Sri Lankan parliament rejects Rajapakse as prime minister

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15 November 2018

Bitter factional in-fighting continues in Sri Lanka's ruling elite after the parliament yesterday passed a no-confidence motion against Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister. He was unconstitutionally appointed to the position on October 26 by President Maithripala Sirisena.

Former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has claimed that 122 members of the 225-seat legislature endorsed the no-confidence motion. It was the first time the parliament had met since Sirisena prorogued it on October 28. Sirisena had shut down the legislature to give Rajapakse time to garner the backing of various MPs via deals, including their elevation into lucrative ministerial posts.

When it became clear, however, that Rajapakse could not secure majority support when the parliament reconvened on November 14, Sirisena dissolved it completely and announced a general election to be held on January 5.

The constitutionality of the president's unilateral and anti-democratic action was challenged in the Supreme Court on November 13. The court handed down an interim order blocking the president's dissolution order and opening the way for the parliamentary session.

Yesterday, parliament Speaker Karu Jayasuriya suspended standing orders to allow the no-confidence vote. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayaka and another JVP MP moved the resolution. Under the bogus claims of "defending democracy" the JVP is colluding with Wickremesinghe and his right-wing United National Party (UNP).

The motion, endorsed by UNP and JVP members and supported by the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and Tamil National Alliance (TNA), also declared no-confidence in Rajapakse's cabinet and government.

The craven character of the parliamentary horse-trading was indicated by the manoeuvres of five ministers. Several had deserted Wickremesinghe to join Rajapakse's camp and then moved back to Wickremesinghe yesterday to endorse the no-confidence vote.

Certain of defeat, Rajapakse left parliament before the vote. His supporters, however, tried every trick to disrupt proceedings and prevent a vote. The Speaker eventually used procedural means to allow a voice vote and hurriedly announced that the no-confidence motion had been carried. The parliamentary sitting was then abruptly ended.

From the outset, Rajapakse's supporters denounced the reconvening of parliament. Former minister and National Freedom Front leader Wimal Weerawansa, a close Rajapakse ally, told a press conference there was "no legal recognition" for parliament to sit. He made no attempt to elaborate on his claim.

Speaker Jayasuriya praised the Supreme Court's ruling, declaring: "After several days of political uncertainty, the public can take pride in our judiciary, which has risen to the occasion and treated this matter of grave national importance with due urgency and deliberation." Considered against the judiciary's long and sordid record, Jayasuriya's claim is transparently false.

Following yesterday's no-confidence vote, Jayasuriya announced that parliament would again meet today and that a copy of the motion and the vote result would be given to President Sirisena to take action in line with the country's constitution.

While Sirisena is yet to make any comment about yesterday's events, Rajapakse's loyalist and minister Dinesh Gunawardane declared that the faction would not accept the vote because the motion was "not taken to a proper debate."

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Given Sirisena's unconstitutional moves over the past two and a half weeks, it is unclear what he will do. Irrespective of what he decides, or the Supreme Court's final ruling, all factions of the ruling elite stand squarely for more authoritarian forms of rule.

Wickremesinghe proclaimed yesterday's vote to be "a historic day" and added that any attempt to challenge the Speaker's decision would be defeated in another parliamentary vote. Wickremesinghe's comments are based on his trust that the JVP and other opposition parties will continue backing him in parliament.

Joining the demagogic "defence of democracy" posturing, TNA leader R. Sampanthan said: "The sovereignty of the legislature prevailed today. Now is the time for the country to return to normalcy and for good governance to prevail."

Sampanthan's "democratic" claims are a contemptible fraud. The parliament has a notorious record of passing numerous draconian laws against the working people, and in particular the Tamil minority.

The "normalcy" promised by every bourgeois faction—the UNP, SLFP, JVP and TNA and all their hangers-on in the pseudo-left groups and the trade unions—is a mirage. Such claims are being used to politically disarm workers and youth as Colombo prepares even harsher austerity measures and anti-democratic laws in line with Washington's dictates and its geo-political operations against China.

All the major powers are monitoring the developing political and constitutional crisis, and firing off warning signals.

US imperialism and the Indian government were directly involved in the 2015 regime-change operation that ousted Rajapakse as president and installed the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government because of Rajapakse's close ties with China. Hostile to the democratic rights of the masses, Washington and its allies are determined to prevent any government aligning itself with China.

The October 31 Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) statement explained the underlying tensions: "The US has transformed the Indo-Pacific region into a diplomatic, economic and military battleground, coercing countries to line up against China in preparation for war. For its part, China has no progressive solution and is seeking to use its economic influence to counter the US, while engaging in its own arms build-up. In Sri Lanka and throughout the region, the ruling classes are placing their peoples on the front line of a war between two nuclear-armed powers that can only end in a catastrophe for humanity."

US ambassador to Sri Lanka Aliana B. Teplitz, who was present at yesterday's parliamentary session, said she was, "honored to attend the reconvening of Sri Lanka parliament to see democracy in action." The session, she declared, was "very lively but [I am] glad this institution is once again fulfilling constitutional role."

European Parliament MPs likewise called on "all relevant parties in Sri Lanka to find a peaceful and democratic solution to the current impasse and to respect the democratic institutions."

These developments underscore, once again, the urgent need for the working class to be mobilised on the internationalist and socialist program of the Socialist Equality Party, in political struggle against all factions of the bourgeoisie and their pseudo-left and trade union satellites.

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