

Sri Lanka: Second no-confidence motion passed as violent clashes erupt in parliament

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Physical clashes, threats and counter-threats continued in the Sri Lankan parliament yesterday as rival factions fought to secure government control following the November 14 no confidence motion against President Sirisena's October 26 appointment of Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister.

Sirisena ousted Rajapakse through a US-backed regime-change operation in the 2015 presidential election then formed a government of national unity between his faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the opposition United National Party whose leader Ranil Wickremesinghe became prime minister. Washington was hostile to the Rajapakse government's close ties with Beijing.

This coalition of "national unity" has now collapsed under the impact of growing opposition by workers and the poor.

Parliament reconvened on Thursday, one day after the no confidence vote, to hear a statement by Rajapakse. He accused the previous Sirisena-Wickremesinghe of leading the country into a catastrophe and placing economic "burdens" on the population.

Rajapakse desperately attempted to exploit the genuine anger of workers and youth against the previous government's ruthless implementation of the International Monetary Fund's austerity demands. He claimed that Sirisena "invited me to take over the government" in order to overcome the catastrophic situation created by the former administration.

Rajapakse's speech, which included a vague reference to the Western powers backing Wickremesinghe, became the occasion for bitter disruptions when the UNP leader Lakshman Kiriella proposed a vote on the statement. The Rajapakse faction vehemently protested and denounced the speaker, Karu Jayasuriya. Amid loud shouting of slogans and commotion by all the rival factions, no vote was taken and the parliament adjourned until Friday.

Later that day, the United National Front (UNF), the political alliance backing Wickremesinghe's faction, held a public rally of several thousand people in central Colombo. The demonstration was aimed at forcing Sirisena to accede to the demands of the Wickremesinghe camp.

Addressing the rally, Wickremesinghe declared that the Sirisena-Rajapakse combine has "lost support of the parliament" and indicated that the UNF was not ready to go to an election until it recaptures state power.

Attempting to posture as a defender of democratic rights, Wickremesinghe continued, "We are not scared of holding an election but it has to be constitutionally called. An unconstitutional election would [only] raise the issues of legality when we win... When we are back in power, we can hold any election."

Those with the most rudimentary understanding of Sri Lankan history could not miss the bogus and cynical character of these claims. Wickremesinghe and his United National Party (UNP), the leading party in the UNF, has consistently torn up the basic rights of the working people.

The anti-democratic attacks of UNP governments go back to the first year of Sri Lanka's nominal independence in 1948 and include the abolition that year of the voting rights of more than one million plantation workers, the country's main foreign exchange earners. In 1982, UNP President J.R. Jayawardene used a referendum to postpone general elections for six years. Likewise, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government since 2015 has used various underhand methods to avoid holding provincial and local elections.

Sirisena responded to Wednesday's no-confidence vote by convening a meeting with Wickremesinghe's UNF and the Tamil National Alliance on Thursday. He proposed that the no confidence motion delete its description of Sirisena's appointment of Rajapakse as

prime minister as “unconstitutional.”

The new resolution, he suggested, could retain its “no confidence” in Rajapakse as prime minister, and his government, but had to be endorsed, not by a voice vote in the parliament but a vote by name.

Fearful of the further discrediting of parliament among the Sri Lankan masses, the UNP and TNA leaders, readily agreed to Sirisena’s proposal. This made clear that their concerns had nothing to do with the violation of the constitution or the population’s democratic rights but were driven by the political self-interest of the Wickremesinghe faction and the demands of the major imperialist powers.

As Sirisena met with the UNP leaders and its allies, the Rajapakse faction convened an emergency meeting of its parliamentarians in preparation for Friday’s proceedings.

While Rajapakse does not hold a parliamentary majority, large numbers of MPs from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which Sirisena heads, have joined Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka People’s Party (SLPP). This includes some ministerial office holders in the former Rajapakse government who have been accused and charged with corruption. Although previously hostile towards Sirisena they are now staunch Sirisena backers and ready to go to any length to defend the illegal transfer of power to Rajapakse.

On Friday, Rajapakse supporters arrived early at parliament, provocatively occupying the Speaker’s seat and nearby positions to prevent the resumption of parliament.

After more than half hour, Speaker Jayasuriya, entered parliament surrounded by a phalanx of police officers. Chairs, books and bottles of water laced with chilli paste were hurled at the police, UNP and allied MPs.

Unable to reach his chair, the Speaker stopped halfway and conducted the meeting standing up and surrounded by police. He announced the revised no confidence motion but could not take a “names vote,” so called a voice vote and declared it passed by a majority.

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The US, EU and other imperialist powers, have made clear their opposition to any return to power by Rajapakse and openly backed Wickremesinghe and the UNP. Washington, in particular, is determined to prevent Rajapakse or any other Sri Lankan political leader from shifting the country towards any alignment with Beijing and disrupting US preparations for war against China.

Adding his voice to the bogus “democratic” chorus,

German Ambassador Jorn Rohde told the media it was “a bad day for democracy in Sri Lanka” and that “throwing objects at the Speaker and preventing votes is unbecoming of a democracy.”

Powerful sections of the Sri Lankan capitalist class have expressed their concerns. A joint statement issued this week by the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, International Chamber of Commerce Sri Lanka, Joint Apparel Association Forum and the Women’s Chamber of Industry and Commerce called for “an urgent and sensible action in national interests.”

We are deeply concerned about the current political situation in the country, it declared. “The events of the last few weeks have resulted in absolute instability which is a situation that Sri Lanka simply cannot afford. This will no doubt hinder development and have a significantly adverse impact on the social and economic trajectory of our country.”

Sri Lanka currently faces an extreme and mounting economic crisis with declining foreign income, declining growth rates, a rising debt burden and a falling rupee.

A recent report by FocusEconomics predicted growth rates to drop to 4.2 percent in 2019 and noted: “The ongoing political crisis could jeopardise Sri Lanka’s economic prospects, especially as its current account and fiscal deficits already make it vulnerable to shocks.”

The parliament is due to reconvene on Monday, but nothing is resolved.

Irrespective of whichever faction of the ruling class secures the reins of state power, the Sri Lankan capitalist class and the imperialist powers all agree that unprecedented social attacks must be unleashed against the population.

The working class must mobilise independently of all the parliamentary parties, rallying the rural poor and other oppressed masses in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on a socialist and internationalist program. This perspective, which provides the only way forward for workers and youth, will be discussed at forthcoming public meetings convened by the Socialist Equality Party.



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