

Sri Lankan parliament adjourned amid ongoing political crisis

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Sri Lankan parliament convened for less than ten minutes yesterday before being adjourned amid ongoing conflicts between warring factions of the ruling elite. President Maithripala Sirisena issued a note after the gathering thanking “party leaders and parliamentarians for adopting a peaceful and consensual course of action.”

Sirisena’s note was a thinly-veiled reference to the fact that, unlike last week, yesterday’s brief session did not break out in violent clashes between rival members of parliament. Leaders of the competing factions of the political establishment are fearful that such public displays of thuggery will further undermine their bogus claims to be champions of “democracy.”

Parliament’s public gallery was closed yesterday amid expectations of further clashes. Large contingents of police commandos were deployed around the building.

Despite Sirisena’s hosannas to “peaceful” and “consensual” conduct, the factional warfare within the political establishment is deepening.

A meeting of all parliamentary parties on Sunday ended without any agreement.

At the gathering, Sirisena and Mahinda Rajapakse, who he appointed as prime minister in an unconstitutional political coup on October 26, sought to block no confidence motions brought by their opponents.

Supporters of ousted Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe from the United National Party (UNP) successfully pushed a no confidence motion through parliament last Friday. The UNP is claiming that it holds a parliamentary majority and is demanding that Wickremesinghe be reinstated as prime minister.

Sirisena, however, insisted that Friday’s vote was invalid and that such a motion could only be passed through an electronic ballot or by a roll call.

UNP leaders had flagged that they would introduce another no confidence motion yesterday, which their rivals threatened to block.

Rajapakse loyalists stymied the move by preventing it from being included on the agenda of the parliamentary meeting. Both factions eventually agreed to appoint a select committee to make further decisions on parliamentary affairs.

During the brief parliamentary session, the Rajapakse faction demanded a majority in the committee on the grounds that it represents the government.

Anura Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), countered, with the support of the UNP, that there is no government.

Dissanayake said select committee representation must be based on the number of seats each party holds. The JVP is effectively supporting the UNP’s bid to return to power and establish a “stable” government of the ruling elite.

After these exchanges, the deputy speaker adjourned parliament until Friday.

Yesterday, several UNP MPs with the backing of the JVP and the Tamil National Alliance presented a motion to the secretary of the parliament calling for funds to be restricted to the prime minister and his office.

The four days until the next meeting of parliament will be used by the rival factions for horse-trading aimed at establishing a majority. Wickremesinghe will seek to retain and increase his majority, while Rajapakse will attempt to bribe and bully MPs into his camp.

After Rajapakse was appointed as prime minister, Sirisena prorogued parliament to try and give him time to secure a majority. After this failed, Sirisena dissolved parliament but was blocked by an interim decision of the Supreme Court.

Sirisena is on record stating that throughout the sordid jockeying, MPs have been bought and sold for prices of up to 500 million rupees. There are allegations that the president himself has engaged in such activities.

The Sirisena and Rajapakse-led faction on one hand and

Wickremesinghe's supporters have continued to claim that they are seeking to "defend democracy."

Rajapakse supporters declared at a press conference yesterday that the "only way out to the crisis" was a general election. Rajapakse has been making such calls since his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna party won a majority of councils in February's local government elections.

In its media briefing, leaders of the Wickremesinghe faction said they were opposed to an election being held while "an illegal government" was in power.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) statement "Fight for a socialist solution to the political crisis in Sri Lanka" explained:

"Neither faction of the ruling class defends the basic democratic rights of working people. Parliament has always been a smokescreen behind which the bourgeoisie ruthlessly advances its class interests at the expense of workers and the poor. Now this facade is being dropped even as the rival parties declare their fealty to 'democracy.'"

The bitter infighting is about how best to defend the interests of Sri Lanka's capitalist class amid mounting social and geopolitical tensions.

Sirisena came to power in the 2015 presidential election by exploiting widespread hostility to Rajapakse's autocratic regime, including its war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights during its communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

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Sirisena's 2015 bid was backed by the US. Washington was not opposed to Rajapakse's anti-democratic measures, but was hostile to his close ties to Beijing, under conditions of a US confrontation with China throughout the region.

In the present crisis, Washington has indicated that it is deeply concerned that a new Sirisena-Rajapakse government could orient towards Beijing, undermining US influence on the geo-strategically critical island.

The US, along with its close ally India, have signalled their support for Wickremesinghe, who has in turn issued appeals to the "international community" to back his phony campaign for "democracy."

Behind their posturing, all factions of the ruling elite are committed to suppressing the emerging struggles of the working class.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe "unity government,"

established in 2015, imposed sweeping attacks on the living conditions of working people as part of an International Monetary Fund dictated austerity program.

These measures sparked a series of struggles among key sections of workers, and students. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government repeatedly responded by deploying the military and the police against protests and pickets.

Sections of the ruling elite are fearful that the violent infighting within the ruling elite is exacerbating widespread social opposition, and destabilising Sri Lanka's relations with the major powers.

Last weekend's *Sunday Island* editorial stated: "Making Sri Lanka's name mud both at home and abroad, as they have been doing in parliament for three days between Wednesday and Friday last week, is something that affects all the people."

The *Sunday Times* editorial declared: "While these politicians battle it out—as their lives depend on its outcome, in a power grab that has gone awfully wrong, the rest of the country remains baffled, disgusted and in a state of animated suspense." It bluntly warned: "If the standoff continues as the world watches, this country will soon slide from the brink of anarchy Lanka into a pariah state."

The breakdown of the old forms of parliamentary rule, which were always aimed at defending the interests of the ruling elite, is a warning to the working class. It presages an ever-more direct turn to dictatorial and authoritarian forms of rule.

The working class can only defend its democratic and social rights by breaking with all factions of the ruling elite, and rallying behind it the poor and oppressed. What is needed is a fight for a workers' and peasants' government that would begin reorganising society in the interests of ordinary people, as part of the fight for international socialism.

We urge workers and youth to take up this fight by joining the SEP.



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