

# Political turmoil in Sri Lanka intensifies as opposition takes control of parliament

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Sri Lanka's political crisis took another turn yesterday when all the MPs backing Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse walked out of parliament after the Speaker refused to allocate them a majority on a key committee that could trigger the cutting off of funds to his government.

Factions around Rajapakse and ousted Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe battled for control of the Parliament Select Committee (PSC) because it determines the parliament's functions, including its agenda.

Last Sunday, at an "all party conference," President Maithripala Sirisena told the opposition led by Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) he did not accept the no-confidence motions passed against Rajapakse, his appointee, because they did not follow parliamentary standing orders.

At the beginning of yesterday's parliamentary session, Speaker Karu Jayasuriya said that as party leaders could not agree on the PSC's composition, he had nominated members according to "the provisions secured by the constitution."

Jayasuriya allocated five seats each to Rajapakse's faction and the UNP, and one each for Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA). As the JVP and TNA back the UNP, the opposition now controls the committee, as well as the Speaker's post. Jayasuriya is a senior member of the UNP.

House Leader Dinesh Gunawardena, a Rajapakse supporter, declared that his faction would walk out to "oppose the unconstitutional composition" of the PSC. He accused Jayasuriya of acting partially.

After the government members left the chamber, the remaining 121 MPs voted on the committee nominations electronically, according to a proposal by JVP MP Vijitha Herath. The JVP, posing as a champion of parliamentary democracy, is effectively backing the UNP's machinations to regain office.

UNP leaders jubilantly claimed the vote also showed that the majority of the parliament opposed the Rajapakse-led government, which they claim Sirisena illegally appointed.

The opposition MPs continued the parliamentary session until the evening to propagate their criticisms of Sirisena for installing Rajapakse to replace Wickremesinghe as prime minister. After their speeches, parliament was adjourned until next Tuesday.

At a media conference, House Leader Gunawardena later declared that the government would boycott the parliament and decide later whether to participate after considering its next agenda.

By controlling the PSC, the UNP-led opposition seeks to cripple the Rajapakse administration. Supported by the JVP and TNA, it has submitted a motion to suspend funds to the office of prime minister, which could be passed on November 29.

The opposition also plans to submit another no-confidence motion to parliament before December 4, when the Supreme Court starts hearing petitions against Sirisena's bid to dissolve the parliament. On November 12, the court suspended Sirisena's proclamation dissolving parliament pending a further hearing.

In 2015, the US and other global powers backed Sirisena to defeat Rajapakse in a presidential election because Rajapakse was regarded as too close to China. Sri Lanka is a strategic location in the drive by Washington, with India's support, to combat China's influence across the Indo-Pacific region.

The bitter fight between the two competing factions around Sirisena and Rajapakse on one hand, and Wickremesinghe on the other, has nothing to do with the democratic or social rights of the people, as they both pretend. All of those involved have participated in administrations that protected the capitalist profit system at the expense of the working people and poor. Both

groupings are seeking power in order to impose the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity program against mounting working class resistance.

At a meeting in the southern town of Beliatta on Thursday, Rajapakse reiterated his call for an election. “All people in this country are saying that the best way to solve the crisis is to go before the people,” he said, promising concessions, including for farmers and small holders.

This is cynical posturing. In power from 2005 to 2015, Rajapakse recommenced the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to divide the working class and suppress opposition to attacks on social rights.

Rajapakse has clamoured for a parliamentary election since his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) won a majority of councils in February’s local government polls. Calculating that the SLPP could exploit the popular opposition to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, he promised to establish a “strong government” and salvage country from an “anarchic situation.”

Whichever faction grabs power, it will deliver ruthless attacks on workers and the poor. The country’s dire economic problems are exacerbating the political crisis and increasing the pressure of the global powers, which are currently backing Wickremesinghe.

This week, the Moody’s rating agency downgraded Sri Lanka and the IMF said it would delay its next loan program discussions “pending clarity on the political situation.” Reuters reported that during the past four weeks alone, 17.2 billion rupees flowed out of the bond market, along with 7.8 billion rupees from the stock market. Yesterday, the Sri Lankan rupee dropped to new low of less than 180 per US dollar, nearly a 15 percent depreciation since the start of the year.

Mangala Samaraweera, the finance minister under Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, told a media conference that their government “managed the economy very carefully, trying to put as little burden on the people as possible, because we inherited a lot of debt.” This is a lie. Samaraweera championed IMF policies and imposed the burden on workers and the poor, triggering continuous protests.

Samaraweera’s praise of past policies is another warning that the next regime, whether led by Wickremesinghe, Sirisena or Rajapakse, will have no choice but to intensify these attacks and resort to dictatorial forms of rule to do so.

The US and other powers are continuing to weigh their

options in the ongoing crisis. On Tuesday, Colombo-based diplomats from the US, UK, Canada, Norway, Switzerland, EU, India, Korea and Bangladesh met with TNA parliamentarians, led by its leader R. Sambandan.

After the meeting, Sambandan told the media: “It is unacceptable that all these efforts are getting stalled in the absence of a government or a PM. Action should be taken immediately to resolve the crisis.” He added: “The diplomats have said we will do what we can do.”

The TNA, which represents the interests of the Tamil capitalist class, is working with the UNP and Wickremesinghe. Having close ties with Washington, the TNA is not only looking for privileges for the Tamil elite but to position Sri Lanka to serve the geopolitical interests of US imperialism.

Under this pressure, Rajapakse told his cabinet on Wednesday: “We expect to engage with the IMF along with other financing agencies.” He proposed a memorandum on the state of the economy.

Rajapakse secured an IMF bailout loan in 2009 after the global financial crisis and the anti-Tamil war sharply affected the economy. The IMF loan conditions meant slashing subsidies and increasing the prices of food, fuel and other essentials. The US and European powers backed Rajapakse’s war against the LTTE, but turned against him when he sought aid and investment from China.

These competing factions of the ruling elite offer the working class no choice. Behind the bogus championing of parliamentary democracy, they are preparing for authoritarian forms of rule.

Workers must form their own action committees in workplaces, large estates and neighbourhoods to build an independent socialist movement to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government as part of the struggle for international socialism.



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