

Rajapakse-aligned MPs boycott Sri Lankan parliament

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Yesterday, MPs supporting Mahinda Rajapakse boycotted parliament. Rajapakse was appointed prime minister on October 26 by President Maithripala Sirisena in an unconstitutional political coup, which dismissed Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

Last Friday, parliament resumed after several days of turmoil and angry clashes, in order to elect a select committee on parliamentary business. But Rajapakse's supporters walked out of the session when they were unable to secure a majority on the committee.

Since his appointment as prime minister, Rajapakse has been unable to win a confidence vote in the parliament, despite strenuous attempts to win over rival MPs with cabinet ministries, ready cash and other perks.

Yesterday, MPs from Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP)-led United National Front, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) used the parliament to hurl demagogic accusations against Rajapakse's faction. Apart from journalists, the parliamentary galleries were closed to the public and large numbers of security personnel deployed around the parliament building.

The ongoing factional warfare and political crisis has shattered the carefully cultivated image of parliament as an august and democratic assembly, engaging in serious discussion on issues of public interest. Parliament has been revealed as an empty shell and talk shop, which is used to cover up the dictatorial nature of the capitalist state.

In an exclusive interview with the *Sunday Times* on November 25, Sirisena declared: "If it is proven that Mr. Rajapakse does not have a majority I believe he will take a decision." He then added, "I have no possibility of re-appointing Mr. Wickremesinghe. I will stick to that principle."

In other words, Sirisena takes no responsibility for his decision to appoint a prime minister who did not have a parliamentary majority. Moreover, his so-called "principle" is one that constitutes a violation of the constitution, and of specific amendments that he and Wickremesinghe had previously proposed and adopted.

The escalating factional warfare has not only exposed the right-wing turn of the ruling class, but the desperate and reactionary attempts by the pseudo-left organisations and the trade unions to proclaim parliament as the best form of rule.

Sirisena is desperately attempting to distance himself from the former "unity" government, and thus his role in the IMF-dictated attacks on the social conditions and democratic rights of working people. He is now cynically promising to appoint a presidential commission of inquiry into corruption under Wickremesinghe's premiership.

The Sirisena-Rajapakse faction is placing its hopes on a general election early next year, calculating that, as the so-called caretaker government, it will be able to use state resources, including the police and the military, to secure a parliamentary majority.

Rajapakse also expects to use Sinhala-Buddhist extremists to whip up a national security scare campaign, using claims of a resurgence of the Tamil separatist movement. He will also posture as the defender of Colombo's military "war heroes" that slaughtered tens of thousands of civilians in the final months of the island's protracted civil war.

This chauvinist campaign will be used to try and divert attention from the Rajapakse government's record of suppressing democratic rights and attacking living standards through price hikes, wage freezes and cuts to social subsidies. Rajapakse told the media that a new government under his leadership would keep state

expenditure under “strict control.”

Meanwhile, Wickremesinghe and the UNF are using various judicial and parliamentary manoeuvres to secure government. The UNF has filed several petitions in the Supreme Court, against Sirisena’s dissolution of parliament, which are scheduled to be heard in early December. Two additional petitions have been filed in the court of appeal: one opposing the appointment of Rajapakse as prime minister and the other arguing that Rajapakse and his ministers are illegally holding office.

Wickremesinghe told a November 24 meeting in Kandy that any government that “does not have a majority should resign. They cannot hold on to office like leaches. If they do not resign, even after November 29, when the next vote is taken in parliament, we will have to take to the streets.”

Wickremesinghe is placing his hopes on support from the US and other world powers, which backed the January 2015 regime-change operation that ousted Rajapakse as president and installed Sirisena. Rajapakse was removed in order to shift Colombo’s foreign policy away from Beijing and bring it into line with the US-led preparations for war against China.

The US and other imperialist powers are closely monitoring Sri Lankan developments and stepping up political pressure on Sirisena.

Last week, US Senator Chris Van Hollen wrote to Sirisena expressing deep concern about the political crisis. “The actions taken during the last few weeks,” Van Hollen declared, “put at risk the rule of law and democracy in Sri Lanka. The decision to oust the sitting Prime Minister, suspend the Parliament, attempt to hold snap elections, and reject the votes of Sri Lanka’s democratically-elected representatives, could also threaten the progress made in strengthening our bilateral relationship.”

A political comment last week in Sri Lanka’s *Sunday Times* reported that “some countries are mulling [over whether to] take punitive actions,” such as placing sanctions on “politicians and their immediate families who were, in their view, directly responsible for alleged violations of the Constitution.”

Key sections of local big business and industry have voiced their displeasure over the political crisis and Sri Lanka’s deteriorating economic situation.

Last week, the Sri Lanka Association for Software and Services Companies (SLASSCOM), the country’s

fifth-largest and highest value-adding exporter, called for a “swift and constitutional settlement” to the governmental crisis .

SLASSCOM Chairman Jeevan Gnanam said the industry body was “disappointed to see the current state of indecision.” He warned, “Unless this is done immediately, Sri Lanka will not be viewed as a compelling or competitive destination to attract foreign investment.”

Over recent months, more than 100,000 public and private sector workers, including from the plantations, have taken industrial action and held demonstrations demanding the government and other employers increase pay and improve working conditions.

On Monday, tens of thousands of upcountry plantation workers took industrial action and protested to demand a minimum wage of 1,000 rupees per day. The strike attracted strong support from workers in other sectors and small shop owners in the area.

Working people, however, must understand that serious dangers are posed by the sharp rightward turn by every faction of the ruling class. None of these parties—or their “left” henchmen—defends democracy. Behind all their democratic posturing, Sri Lanka’s ruling elite is preparing to step up its class war attacks through the establishment of police state forms of rule.

The working class must develop new action committees in the workplaces, large estates and neighbourhoods and intervene with its own independent political perspective. Such committees will become critical to the struggle against the profit system, and for a workers’ and peasants’ government, based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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