

Sri Lanka: Factional deadlock remains in lead up to Supreme Court ruling

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena continued to manoeuvre over the past week in a desperate attempt to secure a deal with leaders of the United National Party (UNP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) ahead of scheduled Supreme Court hearings and an expected December 7 ruling on the country's constitutional crisis.

UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was ousted as prime minister in a political coup by Sirisena and replaced with former President Mahinda Rajapakse on October 26. When it became clear on November 9 that Rajapakse could not secure a parliamentary majority, Sirisena unconstitutionally dissolved parliament, 20 months ahead of its scheduled term, and declared that there would be new elections in January 2019.

The Supreme Court, following petitions from Wickremesinghe's faction, intervened to temporarily halt the dissolution of parliament, pending hearings this week.

Sirisena has already refused to accept two parliamentary "no-confidence" motions in Rajapakse passed by the Wickremesinghe's United National Front (UNF), with the support of the TNA and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). This week, 14 TNA members of parliament signed a letter telling the president that they would only support a UNP-led government.

Last Friday night, Sirisena met separately with TNA and UNF leaders, calling on them to pass a resolution in parliament requesting him to appoint a new prime minister. Discussions with UNF leaders ended in a deadlock after Sirisena declared that he would not appoint Wickremesinghe as prime minister, despite his majority support. Another discussion planned for yesterday was postponed at the last moment and rescheduled for today.

In fact, a resolution calling on the president to appoint a prime minister with majority parliamentary support was tabled late last month and, according to media reports, will be moved on Wednesday by the JVP. The Wickremesinghe faction, which is currently backed by Washington, is intensifying its campaign and organising demonstrations for a "people's power" movement.

Sirisena's attempts to make a deal followed an appeal last week by Wijedasa Rajapakse, a minister in the newly-appointed Rajapakse government. He called on the parliamentary speaker, Karu Jayasuriya, to meet with Sirisena and come up with an "agreement" between the warring factions to break the "constitutional deadlock."

Wijedasa Rajapakse's speech reflected concerns in the ruling elite that the bitter factional fighting will alienate working people. "The people will ask us how we will be able to solve their problems," he said. If we listen to what youth are saying, he warned, "the day they reject parliamentary rule is very close."

Any attempt by Sirisena to negotiate a deal with the UNP requires the removal of Rajapakse as prime minister. Rajapakse, however, has made clear that he will not "resign" from the position. MPs supporting Rajapakse are currently boycotting parliament.

Wickremesinghe's faction now controls the Parliament Select Committee, which determines the main functions of the parliament, and last week passed resolutions stopping funds to the prime minister's office, cabinet ministers and their staff. The UNP has insisted that the use of state funds by Rajapakse and his ministers is illegal and have instructed state bureaucrats not to follow ministerial directives.

In response, the Rajapakse-led faction has declared that parliament has no power to curtail funds for the

prime minister or cabinet ministers. Rajapakse reiterated his demand for the dissolution of parliament and a new election at a press conference, claiming that the people had “sovereignty.”

In what appears to be a blow against Rajapakse and Sirisena, Sri Lanka’s Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Admiral Ravindra Wijegunaratne was remanded by a Colombo court last Wednesday to face charges related to war crimes during the island’s protracted communal war. Wijegunaratne is regarded as close to both Rajapakse and Sirisena, who may well have been counting on the military if the Supreme Court rules against them. The court’s directive followed concerted efforts by Sirisena to prevent Wijegunaratne’s arrest.

With the Sri Lankan rupee plummeting and growing foreign debt, the Colombo-based Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry is due to meet Sirisena today. According to the media, the business lobby group will use the meeting to “express their concern and alarm over the crisis and urge an early, constitutional end to it.”

The US, in line with its geo-strategic aims, and, in particular, its preparations for war against China, is backing Wickremesinghe. The Press Trust of India reported yesterday that an unnamed senior Trump official said discussions on Sri Lanka’s participation in Millennium aid investment assessment programs had been put on hold. The reason was, the US official explained, “concern about the extra-constitutional steps that President Sirisena has taken.”

Washington is not concerned about Sirisena’s authoritarian moves, but rather that the ousting of Wickremesinghe could disrupt close US military and political relations with Colombo. In January 2015, Washington orchestrated a regime change operation to oust Rajapakse, who it regarded as being too close to China.

Rajapakse is attempting to assuage the concerns of the US and its allies. On Thursday, he told the *Daily Mirror*: “We have no grudge against the Western world...We are taking steps to change their attitude towards us.” However, on the same day, his government signed a \$50 million contract with a Chinese company to develop Colombo port.

The central factors precipitating the ongoing political and constitutional crisis are Washington’s determination to prevent Colombo orienting towards

Beijing and the determination of all sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite to crush working class opposition to the attacks on living and social conditions demanded by national and global big business.

Whatever the immediate outcome of Sirisena’s manoeuvres and this week’s Supreme Court ruling, the political dangers confronting the Sri Lankan working class and the masses are immense. Sri Lankan workers cannot stand on the sidelines and allow the ruling elite to “solve” its crisis and unleash even more brutal assaults on social and democratic rights.

Workers should build independent action committees in workplaces, neighbourhoods and estates, mobilising the support of the rural poor and youth to fight for their democratic rights and class interests. What is required is a unified political struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government as part of fight for international socialism.



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