

# Sri Lankan president reinstates sacked prime minister

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena swore in Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister yesterday, after having unconstitutionally sacked him seven weeks ago in what amounted to a political coup. The decision is a major setback for Sirisena who had repeatedly insisted that he could not work with Wickremesinghe and would never reappoint him.

Contrary to the claims of the Colombo media, the decision to reinstate Wickremesinghe will not end the political crisis but is just a temporary pause in the ongoing conflict within Sri Lanka's ruling elite.

After removing Wickremesinghe on October 26, Sirisena appointed former president Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister and then swore in a new cabinet, declaring it to be the government. The decision brought to the surface a bitter war between two factions of the ruling elite—one headed by Sirisena and Rajapakse, and the other by Wickremesinghe.

After sacking Wickremesinghe, Sirisena prorogued parliament until November 14 to enable Rajapakse to secure a parliamentary majority via bullying and bribery. When Rajapakse failed to get the numbers, Sirisena dissolved the parliament and called a new general election.

Sirisena's anti-democratic manoeuvre was temporarily halted by the Supreme Court in response to petitions from Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) and its allies, which included the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Sirisena ignored two consecutive parliamentary no-confidence motions passed against Rajapakse. However, on December 3, a Colombo appeal court issued a temporary restraining order against Rajapakse and his cabinet from exercising ministerial powers, effectively leaving the country without a functioning government.

Yesterday's swearing-in of Wickremesinghe followed a final ruling by the Supreme Court on December 13 that the president's dissolution of parliament was unconstitutional. The next day, another Supreme Court bench refused to stay the appeal court restraining order against Rajapakse and his cabinet. It postponed a hearing of that case until mid-January.

Sirisena made various face-saving remarks about his reinstatement of Wickremesinghe, claiming that he had done so as a leader who "respects the parliamentary traditions and

democracy." All his actions, including the dissolution of the parliament, he continued, were in response to the advice of "law experts" and based on "good intentions."

Responding to impeachment threats made by some UNP parliamentarians, Sirisena said that he was "not afraid to go to jail." However, UNP deputy leader Sajith Premadasa has ruled out impeachment and said that the party would collectively work with him.

Cynically posturing as a saviour of democracy, Wickremesinghe yesterday thanked those "who stood firm in defending the constitution and ensuring the triumph of democracy." The first objective, he added, was to return Sri Lanka "to normalcy" and "restart the developmental process."

Wickremesinghe is expected to select a new cabinet today and present his list to the president. The UNP-led United National Front (UNF), however, has only 103 MPs, and requires another 10 MPs for a majority.

According to press reports, Wickremesinghe is manoeuvring behind the scenes to declare a 'national government' with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and to expand the cabinet. Constitutionally, a one-party government is entitled to appoint a 30-member cabinet. The UNP is also seeking support from members of Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Wickremesinghe's democratic posturing is as bogus as Sirisena's claims that his actions over the last two months were to "save" the country and democracy.

Sirisena's about-face is in response to international pressure, particularly from the US and its European allies, and India, which have demanded the reinstatement of Wickremesinghe, and fears about the growing upsurge of strikes and protests.

Washington's main concern was that the appointment of Rajapakse as prime minister would undermine the military and political relations built during the past three years under the so-called unity government of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe.

Sirisena came to power in 2015 as part of a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington which opposed Rajapakse's close relations with Beijing. Sirisena, assisted by Wickremesinghe, denounced Rajapakse as dictatorial and ousted him as president in the 2015 election. Wickremesinghe was installed as prime minister.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe quickly brought Sri Lankan

foreign policy into line with the intensifying US-led confrontation against China. The new Sri Lankan “unity” government also began imposing austerity measures, as dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in exchange for a bailout loan.

From the outset, Washington responded to the bitter factional war in Colombo by backing Wickremesinghe and declaring that it should be “resolved” through the parliamentary process. Rajapakse sent his party leaders to meet with Western diplomats in Colombo in a futile attempt to secure their support.

Sirisena also came under international economic pressure. The IMF withheld final instalments of its loan until the “political uncertainty” was resolved; the US postponed its Millennium aid program; and Japan announced that it was delaying its aid and investment projects.

Writing recently in the Colombo-based *Daily Mirror*, Robert Blake, the former US ambassador to Sri Lanka, made Washington’s hostility to Rajapakse explicit. He should step down as prime minister, Blake declared, in order to “resolve the current political impasse and position Sri Lanka to be a leader and winner as the new Indo-Pacific great game unfolds.”

Translated into plain English, the so-called “Indo-Pacific great game” is Washington’s efforts to subjugate China through all means including diplomatic, economic and military. The end result will be a catastrophic military confrontation between nuclear armed powers.

The Sri Lankan ruling class is also terrified that the continuing political standoff would paralyse government functions, including a new budget, and accelerate the upsurge of strikes and protests by the working class, rural poor and youth in recent months against the government’s attacks on social and democratic rights.

This hostility was also reflected in local elections in February in which Sirisena’s SLFP and Wickremesinghe’s UNP suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). Sirisena attempted to distance himself from Wickremesinghe, blaming him for the “unity” government’s attacks on social and democratic rights.

The demagogic posturing by Sirisena and Rajapakse, on one side, and Wickremesinghe, on the other, as defenders of democracy is completely bogus. Both factions have long histories of brutal autocratic rule. Their bitter clashes are over how best to prop up capitalist rule and suppress the emerging mass opposition in the working class.

Now reappointed as prime minister, Wickremesinghe will use the economic crisis created by the factional infighting to intensify the attacks on the social and democratic rights of the masses.

Nothing, however, has been resolved. On Saturday, Rajapakse officially announced his resignation as prime minister and attacked the Supreme Court rulings for failing to support a general election.

“We are now engaged in a direct confrontation with a group of political parties that have continuously engaged in various subterfuges to avoid facing elections. We will bring the forces opposed to the country down to their knees by engaging the people,” he warned.

Rajapakse also made clear that he would intensify his campaign of anti-Tamil communalism. He lashed out against the UNP, which, he declared “has been taken hostage by the TNA [Tamil National Alliance]” and had to “adhere to the diktat of the TNA.” The TNA had sided with Wickremesinghe against Sirisena’s unconstitutional moves.

The political crisis which erupted in October exposed the reactionary nature of every faction of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. Behind the empty rhetoric about “defending democracy” is the fear of the ruling elites of mass struggles by the working class.

The political dangers now facing workers and the poor have not decreased, but have intensified. The working class cannot stand on the sidelines and allow the ruling elite to resolve its economic and political problems. Workers must mobilise and intervene as an independent political force for its own class interests based on the perspective of socialist internationalism.

Workers in every estate, workplace and neighbourhood should follow the example set by Abbotsleigh plantation workers in establishing an action committee, independent of the trade unions, and turning to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). What is necessary is a unified political struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist politics. Above all, we urge workers and youth to join and build the SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) as the revolutionary leadership needed to take forward this struggle.



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