

The US hails Wickremesinghe's reinstatement as Sri Lankan prime minister

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20 December 2018

Colombo has been showered with praise by the US and its allies after President Maithripala Sirisena swore in United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister last Sunday. Sirisena's decision reversed his unconstitutional removal of the UNP leader and installation of former President Mahinda Rajapakse on October 26.

The immediate and enthusiastic support for Sirisena's about-face is another indication of the concerted pressure brought to bear by the US behind the scenes for Wickremesinghe's reappointment. The US "advice" to Colombo to uphold "parliamentary democratic norms, constitution and rule of law" was simply a smokescreen to cover up its geo-political agenda in the India-Pacific region.

Sirisena's dismissal of Wickremesinghe last October was in response to sharp political divisions within Colombo's political elite. The conflict was fuelled by growing tensions between the US and China, a mounting crisis in the Sri Lankan economy, and above all the eruption of militant struggles by workers in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The bitter dispute between Sri Lanka's two political factions—one led by Sirisena and Rajapakse and the other by Wickremesinghe's UNP and its allies—is over how best to deal with the mounting popular resistance to International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures.

The US and its regional partner India were concerned that the close military relations developed with Colombo during the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government as a part of their escalating confrontation with China would be undermined by an incoming Rajapakse government.

US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Alaina Teplitz, welcomed Sunday's reappointment of Wickremesinghe, declaring in a Twitter comment, that the decision "upheld Sri Lanka's democratic and constitutional norms." Sri Lanka, she added, "is a valued partner in the Indo-Pacific and we

look forward to continuing to develop our relationship with the government and people in this country"—i.e., to increase Colombo's involvement in US military preparations for war against China.

Teplitz's tweet was echoed by State Department spokesman Robert Palladino who noted: [W]e look forward to engaging with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and his cabinet to advance cooperation on bilateral and regional issues of common interest."

Washington, of course, is not concerned in the slightest with Sri Lanka's "democratic and constitutional norms." The US fully backed the Rajapakse government's anti-democratic methods of rule and its bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But when China emerged as a major military hardware supplier and provider of financial aid to Colombo, Washington suddenly "discovered" human rights violations in an attempt to pressure Rajapakse to distance his government from China.

When these moves failed to persuade Rajapakse to change his foreign policy orientation, Washington, with the aid of Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, orchestrated the regime-change operation that brought Sirisena to power in the January 2015 presidential election.

The incoming Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration immediately reoriented Sri Lanka away from China and began closely integrating the Sri Lankan military with its US counterpart.

The close military relations between the two countries are reflected in the temporary logistics hub established by the USS John C. Stennis, a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier, in Trincomalee in eastern Sri Lanka. According to a December 6 article on the US Navy's website "the hub provides logistics support to US Navy ships operating in the Indian Ocean."

As Lieutenant Bryan Ortiz, USS John C. Stennis's

stock control division officer explained: “The primary purpose of the operation is to provide mission-critical supplies and services to US Navy ships transiting through and operating in the Indian Ocean. The secondary purpose is to demonstrate the US Navy’s ability to establish a temporary logistics hub ashore where no enduring US Navy logistics footprint exists.”

On December 14, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia David J. Ranz visited Sri Lanka and the Maldives to “strengthen” relations. The trip occurred after the recent pro-US regime change in the Maldives and just before Wickremesinghe’s reinstatement.

Sirisena also came under pressure from the IMF to “reconsider” his previous dismissal of Wickremesinghe. In November, the bank announced that it was withholding the final installment of its loan to Sri Lanka until the “political uncertainty” in Colombo was resolved. Additional pressure was exerted by the US postponement of its Millennium aid program for Sri Lanka and the announcement by US ally Japan that it was delaying its aid and investment project to the island.

Commenting on Washington’s postponement of the Millennium aid program, US Ambassador Teplitz told the Colombo-based *Daily FT* on December 10: “We are waiting to see how the crisis [in Sri Lanka] is resolved before we could resume our negotiations and go forward. ... There is definitely an impact from the crisis on some of our bilateral opportunities.”

India immediately praised the return of Wickremesinghe. Indian Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said that “India welcomes the resolution of the political situation in Sri Lanka” and declared that the Modi government was “confident that India-Sri Lanka relations will continue to move on an upward trajectory.” New Delhi considers Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries as its backyard and is hostile to China developing its influence in the region.

An EU statement welcomed “the peaceful and democratic resolution of the political crisis in accordance with Sri Lanka’s constitution” and pledged to continue supporting “the island nation’s efforts towards national reconciliation and prosperity for all.” When Sirisena sacked Wickremesinghe as prime minister in October the EU threatened to “reconsider” GSP tariff concessions provided to Sri Lankan exports.

China issued a pro-forma statement welcoming the “resolution of the political situation” in Sri Lanka and declaring that it would work with the new government

and all Sri Lankan political parties to promote “cooperation between the two countries.” This response cannot hide the fact that Wickremesinghe’s reinstatement undermines China’s position in Colombo.

Both of Sri Lanka’s warring factions sought the support of the major imperialist powers. Rajapakse insisted that he had “no grudge” against these powers and that his party was “taking steps to change their attitude towards us.”

These international pressures and fear of growing class struggle, expressed at its sharpest in indefinite strike action taken by tens of thousands of plantation workers, which emerged outside of the unions’ control, were key factors forcing Sirisena to reinstate Wickremesinghe.

After Sunday’s swearing-in ceremony, Wickremesinghe pompously thanked those “who stood firm” to defend the constitution and “ensuring the triumph of democracy.” His reinstatement does not end the crisis of the Sri Lankan ruling elite, which will intensify as pressure from US imperialism and international capital continues. Like his imperialist masters, Wickremesinghe and his UNP do not “defend democracy” but are involved in a headlong rush by the entire Colombo establishment towards authoritarian forms of rule.

Under his administration, Sri Lanka’s population of 20 million will be subjected to even harsher IMF-dictated austerity measures and will be further drawn into the maelstrom of major power rivalry and the US drive to war.



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