

Factional acrimony continues as Sri Lankan president appoints new cabinet

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22 December 2018

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena finally appointed a new 28-member cabinet on Thursday, three days after Monday's previously scheduled deadline.

The ministers were selected from the ruling United National Front (UNF) headed by Ranil Wickremesinghe, whom Sirisena reluctantly swore in as prime minister on Sunday. Sirisena had previously sacked Wickremesinghe on October 26, declaring that his government was mired in corruption and had destroyed the "good governance concept."

Sirisena's delay in appointing a new cabinet indicates that bitter factional infighting continues within Colombo's political elite and points to the ongoing instability of capitalist rule within the island nation.

After sacking Wickremesinghe in October, Sirisena appointed former President Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister and swore in a new cabinet. Sirisena's political coup failed, however. Rajapakse was unable to win majority support in the parliament and the Supreme Court ruled that the president's dissolution of the parliament was unconstitutional.

The US and its allies also made clear they would not allow Rajapakse to form a government because of his political orientation toward China. Washington will not tolerate any disruption to its anti-China agenda in the region. It placed intense pressure on Sirisena to reappoint Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

Sirisena swore in 28 ministers on Thursday, rejecting two of the 30 names submitted by Wickremesinghe. Under the constitution, the president is the commander-in-chief of the three armed forces as well as defence minister. Sirisena, however, has also appointed himself law and order minister, a position he assumed after sacking Wickremesinghe as prime minister. This decision is another indication that he wants to concentrate the most important state powers in his own

hands.

According to media reports, Sirisena reluctantly handed over the media ministry to the UNF, but only after it agreed to allow his political supporters to be placed in control of key media institutions. Wickremesinghe told the media he planned future discussions with Sirisena over the ministerial appointments.

Wickremesinghe, who is acutely aware of the political and economic crisis confronting Sri Lankan capitalism, is attempting to consolidate his power. His government has the largest number of MPs in the parliament, but is 10 short of a simple majority, and depends on the support of 14 Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MPs.

The United National Party (UNP)-led UNF includes the Sinhala chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya, the All Ceylon Muslim Congress and the plantation-based Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA). The National Union of Workers, Democratic People's Front and Up-country People's Front are members of the TPA. Many of its leaders were given cabinet, state or deputy ministerial positions to try to keep the unstable coalition glued together.

Yesterday a UNP working committee endorsed calls by Wickremesinghe for the UNF alliance to include other formations and be renamed the National Democratic Front (NDF). Wickremesinghe told a rally on Monday that the NDF is "needed to promote and protect democracy. I ask everyone here, and the public at large, to give us a two-thirds majority at the next general election."

As the historical record demonstrates, the only thing that Wickremesinghe and his UNP "defend"—just like Rajapakse, Sirisena and their political parties—is the capitalist profit system, at the expense of the working

class and the poor.

When parliament resumed on Monday, Speaker Karu Jayasuriya declared he had decided to appoint Rajapakse as parliamentary opposition leader. No explanation was provided as to why he removed the incumbent, TNA chief R. Sampanthan, as opposition leader.

Leading MPs from the UNP and TNA opposed Rajapakse's appointment and pointed out that the former Sri Lankan president and his supporters were members of Sri Lanka Podujana Peramunam but had originally been elected to parliament as members of the United People's Freedom Alliance. According to the 19th amendment to the constitution, any MP who changes party allegiance loses his or her seat. Factional acrimony will continue on this issue until Speaker Jayasuriya issues a ruling.

Irrespective of the immediate outcome of the factional manoeuvres in parliament, the key factors that produced the bitter infighting over the past two months remain. The government is highly unstable, the economic crisis is deepening and opposition is mounting from workers and youth over wages, jobs and austerity measures.

Plantation unions this month shut down indefinite strike action by hundreds of thousands of estate workers demanding a 100 percent wage increase. Fearful that the industrial action would escalate out of its control, Ceylon Workers Congress officials falsely claimed that Sirisena had promised to settle workers' demands and ended the strike. The pledge was completely bogus.

Government railway workers are also calling for strike action over their long outstanding pay demands. Like the plantation union bosses, railway union officials sent their members back to work, claiming Sirisena would resolve their claims.

Yesterday, Wickremesinghe's government passed a "Vote of Account" resolution, giving itself four months to present a full budget. Reappointed finance minister, Mangala Samaraweera, declared that the budget would provide economic concessions for the people.

These promises will come to nothing because the government will have to implement the International Monetary Fund's austerity demands. Amid Colombo's factional war, the IMF withheld the final \$US500 million instalment of its latest \$1.5 billion loan until

"political uncertainty" ended.

A *Sunday Times* economic columnist warned last week that "postponement or even cancellation of this IMF loan would not only have an adverse impact on the external reserves and debt repayment capacity." It would undermine Sri Lanka's credibility in "international financial markets and among investors." The author pointed out that the government has to pay \$1 billion in loan repayments next month and another \$500 million by April.

While welcoming the new cabinet, Ruwan Edirisinghe, president of the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Sri Lanka, bluntly declared that the big business lobby group was "not bothered" about which government was in power. "What we want from the government of the day is to ensure that they take responsibility for the economic development of the country"—that is, that corporate profits continue to climb.

Rajapakse told parliament yesterday that the government had to "take a look at the people's side [and] reduce the price of goods. We need to make this change. People are facing a lot of hardship. If we had not come back then, the country would have had to face a similar situation experienced in France and Greece."

Rajapakse's speech amounted to empty posturing. While in power until 2015 he used the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to justify imposing the dictates of national and international finance capital.

His "advice" to the government is another indication of the sensitivity of the entire capitalist class to the mounting anger among workers and the poor over the ongoing attacks on social and living conditions. Far from defending democracy, the ruling class as a whole is turning toward dictatorial forms of rule to suppress the inevitable eruption of mass struggles.



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