

Sri Lankan president reshuffles cabinet amid sharpening political crisis

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Last Monday, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse announced six changes to his cabinet, appointing new heads to the foreign affairs, health, education, transport, mass media and power ministries. A new “development coordination and supervision” ministry was also created.

Rajapakse’s sudden cabinet reshuffle came amid an escalating economic and political crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and intensifying pressure from the US and India that Colombo distance itself from China.

The most significant change was the appointment of Professor G.L. Peiris, who previously headed the education ministry and is now Sri Lanka’s external affairs minister. Peiris replaced Dinesh Gunawardena who becomes the education minister.

Peiris, who is chairperson of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, has held key ministerial portfolios in successive regimes since 1994, including as foreign minister in the government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse. His latest appointment is in line with backroom moves by senior government leaders to appease Washington.

According to an August 15 *Sunday Times* column, Peiris attended a dinner hosted by the US ambassador Alaina B. Teplitz at her Colombo official residence five days ahead of his new appointment. Finance minister Basil Rajapakse, one of the president’s brothers, reportedly “encouraged” Peiris’s attendance at the dinner. The only other individual invited was parliamentarian M. A. Sumanthiran, a spokesman for the pro-US Tamil National Alliance (TNA).

While no details have been revealed about the dinner discussions, the *Times* said it focused on a “political solution to the ethnic conflict.” This is diplomatic language for “the devolution of power” to the Tamil

elite in the North and East in Sri Lanka and is used by the US to enlist the support of the Tamil parties for Washington’s buildup against China.

In early May, the *Times* reported that Basil Rajapakse had held “informal” meetings with the State Department officials during a US visit for medical treatment. The newspaper noted that he met with Ambassador Teplitz before leaving for the US. Citing government sources, the *Times* said that he met with Lalith Chandradasa, Sri Lanka’s consul general in Los Angeles, and travelled with him to Washington for the State Department talks.

The visit, according to the *Times*, was “to explore opportunities to improve relations with the US and to convey the government’s stated position that it takes a neutral stand on international issues.” The perception in Washington is that Colombo “has tilted very heavily in favour of China,” the newspaper noted.

President Rajapakse has also reportedly met with two senior US embassy officials on separate occasions. No details, however, have been revealed about their discussions.

The US and India, Washington’s main regional partner in its military preparations against China, are hostile to the Rajapakse regime’s relations with Beijing. The COVID-19 pandemic has battered the Sri Lankan economy and seen the cash-strapped Colombo government turn to China for increased investments and loans.

In April, Colombo opened the China-funded Colombo Port City (CPC), which is a significant component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is part of Beijing’s geo-strategic plan to ensure the free movement of its imports and exports via the Indian Ocean and Central Asia. It is in response to the US-led efforts to militarily encircle China.

Washington's attempts to pressure the Rajapakse regime to distance itself from Beijing are also being pursued in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). In March, the US, UK and other major powers passed a UNHRC resolution for an investigation into war crimes and human rights violations committed during the final years of Colombo's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The war, which ended with LTTE's defeat in May 2009, saw the killing of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and hundreds of others, including LTTE leaders, who surrendered to the military.

The resolution empowered the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to "consolidate, analyze and preserve information and evidence" for "relevant judicial proceedings." The resolution also called for the involvement of Tamil parties in the "reconciliation process."

In her report to the UNHRC, High Commissioner Michele Bachelet called for a war crimes investigation by UNHRC member states and the imposition of targeted sanctions on those guilty of war crimes.

Washington has no interest in defending the rights of Sri Lankan Tamils. The US supported Colombo's war and former President Mahinda Rajapakse's authoritarian regime and only began raising human rights issues when Beijing emerged as the main provider of financial assistance and military hardware for Colombo.

The US sponsored various UNHRC resolutions to force Mahinda Rajapakse to break relations with China. When these failed to produce a shift, Washington, backed by New Delhi, orchestrated a regime-change operation replacing Mahinda Rajapakse with pro-US Maithripala Sirisena as president in January 2015. The TNA fully endorsed the political shift.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's appointment of Gunawardena as education minister is highly significant and occurs as almost 250,000 teachers and principals continue their now seven-week online learning strike. Sri Lankan media outlets claim that the new minister will be able to deal with the striking teachers. President Rajapakse has repeatedly declared that his administration confronts a major economic crisis and cannot grant the teachers' demands.

The removal of Pavithra Wanniarachchi as health minister and his replacement with Keheliya

Rambukwella is an attempt to find a scapegoat for the government's catastrophic response to COVID-19. While the opposition parties and the media have denounced Wanniarachchi, the escalating infections, deaths and collapsing health system are the direct responsibility of the Rajapakse regime and the entire ruling class.

Last week's cabinet reshuffle was also occasion for the Rajapakse clan to further expand and consolidate its rule. Namal Rajapakse—President Rajapakse's nephew and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse's son—was made the minister for coordination and supervision, a newly created position. The appointment is in addition to him being the sports minister and holding other state ministerial portfolios.

These cabinet changes will not resolve the deepening crisis of the Rajapakse regime or satisfy Washington, which is demanding Colombo break its ties with Beijing and fully embraces its war plans against China.



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