

Nation-wide protests escalate, plunging Sri Lankan government into deep crisis

Our correspondents
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Mass protests continued throughout Sri Lanka yesterday demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse over skyrocketing inflation, shortages of fuel and other basic commodities, and hours of electricity blackouts every day. The government is in a deep political crisis after protests on Sunday in defiance of its state of emergency and a 36-hour curfew backed by a huge police and military mobilization.

Protests are taking place in all parts of the island. Around 1,000 students from Jaffna University in the North and hundreds from the Eastern University in Batticaloa held protest marches. Large demonstrations occurred in other cities and towns, including Homagama, Maharagama, Moratuwa, Gampaha and J-Ela in the west, Kurunegala in the northwest, Anuradhapura in north central and Galle and Matara in the south. Numerous smaller protests took place in small towns and at road junctions.

Protesters shouting “Go-Gota-Go” and other slogans surrounded the houses of many government parliamentarians. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse’s private residence, Carlton House in Tangalle in the south of the island, was surrounded by a group of protesters, and police used tear gas to disperse them. Police erected barricades to block several demonstrations.

In response to Rajapakse’s attempts to form an interim government, protesters carried placards such as “No to patchwork” clearly rejecting the latest manoeuvres. Others expressed the intense popular anger over the lack of food, medicine and fuel. Still others expressed no confidence in any of the major parties, saying: “Power to people,” “Don’t kill our future,” “Enough is Enough” and “Give us back the cheated money.”

Sections of the working class joined the mass protests. More notably, hundreds of nurses and junior staff health workers demonstrated outside the Colombo National Hospital. University teachers and non-academic workers also joined the protest campaign in Peradeniya. In several places, lawyers took part.

The government is lurching from one crisis to the next. Yesterday, President Rajapakse accepted the resignation of the entire cabinet with the exception of his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, and issued a desperate appeal to the opposition parties to join an interim government to resolve the current crisis.

All three major opposition parties flatly rejected the offer. Opposition leader and head of the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) Sajith Premadasa declared: “We are not prepared to accept any post in a government which includes SLPP [Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna].” The SLPP is the main party in Rajapakse’s ruling coalition.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) also dismissed the idea. “His offer to reconstitute the cabinet with opposition MPs is nonsensical and infuriates the people who have been demanding his resignation,” TNA spokesman Mathiaparanan Abraham Sumanthiran told the media.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) bluntly declared that to join such a government would be political suicide. “He really must be a lunatic to think that opposition MPs will prop up a government that is crumbling,” JVP leader MP Anura Dissanayaka told reporters in Colombo.

None of these parties has hesitated to collaborate with the government in the past. They attended All Party Conferences in 2020 and backed Rajapakse’s premature reopening of the economy in mid-2020 allowing COVID-19 to run rampant through the island. However, such is the level of popular anger that none

of them dare associate themselves with the thoroughly discredited Rajapakse government.

While the SJB, JVP and TNA all denounce President Rajapakse and call for him to go, none of them has any solution to the current economic crisis other than to impose new burdens on the working classes and rural masses. The SJB has repeatedly called on the government to go cap in hand to the IMF for a bailout package, which it is now doing—a move that will inevitably come with harsh austerity measures.

As of noon yesterday, Rajapakse had appointed only four ministers. Rajapakse's former lawyer and justice minister, Ali Sabry, was installed to replace the president's brother Basil Rajapakse as the finance minister. Basil Rajapakse has been widely criticized, including within the ruling coalition, for his handling of the economic crisis. G.L. Peris, Dinesh Gunawardane and Johnston Fernando were reappointed to their portfolios in foreign affairs, education and highways.

The government was thrown into further turmoil with the resignation of the Central Bank governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal yesterday over differences with the government on how to address the economic crisis. The central bank was due to release its April monetary policy review and make a decision on interest rates today. It gave no indication as to when that would now take place.

The Sri Lankan economy has been hard hit by the global economic dislocation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been greatly intensified by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. The severe lack of foreign exchange has disrupted the import of petroleum products, essential food, medicines, and other basic commodities. The country is hovering on the brink of default on its huge foreign loans.

Amid the worsening crisis, the Colombo Stock Exchange suspended trading twice on Monday due to a sharp fall in the benchmark share price index. The Sri Lankan stock market lost 23 percent in March, after falling 11 percent in the previous month, with an overall drop of 32 percent so far this year.

The political turmoil will only deepen today with the convening of parliament, where all the signs point to the ruling coalition losing its majority. In the face of mass opposition, a number of parties and dissident groups have indicated that they will leave the coalition

and function as independent groups.

Former state minister Nimal Lanza has said 50 parliamentarians of the ruling SLPP will function independently in parliament from today if the government attempts to continue its present tactics. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) with 14 MPs raised questions yesterday about the four newly-appointed ministers and declared it will leave the ruling coalition. If that takes place, the government would be reduced to a minority in the 225-seat parliament.

Regardless of its composition and form, the next government, constituted of parties that defend capitalism to the hilt, can do nothing to alleviate the suffering of working people. As is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic, all these parties place the profits of big business and the wealth of the super-rich ahead of the well-being, health and lives of the majority of ordinary people.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka is the only party intervening in the opposition movement urging the working class to take matters into its own hands. It is calling for the formation of action committees in factories and working-class suburbs, independent of the trade unions, which have sat silent throughout this crisis, and all the parties of the capitalist class. Such action committees can form the basis for a workers' and peasants' government, which is the only way of resolving the crisis in the interests of working people through the implementation of socialist policies as part of the fight for socialism internationally.



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