

Sri Lanka's ruling coalition crumbles, but president refuses to resign

Saman Gunadasa
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The Sri Lankan government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse holds an unstable, wafer-thin majority in parliament amid widening anti-government protests fueled by desperate shortages of food items, fuel, medicines and electricity. Working people are compelled to wait for hours in long queues just to secure the essentials for life and then at exorbitant and rising prices.

The parliamentary session was called yesterday in the wake of the resignation of the entire cabinet except Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the president's brother. President Rajapakse appealed to the opposition parties on Monday to take part in a new cabinet but was flatly rejected by the three major opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Under the pressure of mass protests demanding the resignation of the president and the government, the ruling coalition is crumbling. Groups of government parliamentarians and minor coalition parties announced their decision in parliament to leave the government yesterday and sit as “independents.”

These included 12 members of Rajapakse's own Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, 16 from ten smaller parties, 14 from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and two from the plantation-based Ceylon Workers Congress. As a result, the government commands just 114 seats in the 225-seat parliament—as of yesterday at least.

President Rajapakse has bluntly rejected the demands of protesters for his resignation and has instead offered to swear in as the next government any party that can demonstrate a majority in parliament. The offer is a desperate and cynical offer to the opposition parties. Under the executive presidency, Rajapakse retained enormous powers, including to sack the government at any time.

The president also understands that for all their posturing, none of the opposition parties has any solution

to the crisis, other than impose further burdens on working people. All of them defend the capitalist system to the hilt, which means putting corporate profits and repayments on huge foreign debt ahead of the essential needs of the majority. The SJB's criticism of the government is that it should have begged for an IMF bailout sooner—in other words more austerity, sooner.

The immense political crisis of the government was underscored by the resignation yesterday of the newly appointed Finance Minister Ali Sabri and finance ministry secretary S.R. Artygala. Sabri's resignation came less than 24 hours after his appointment on Monday, along with three other ministers to form a skeleton cabinet.

Sabri, who was the president's personal lawyer, took over from Basil Rajapakse, who was due to go to Washington this week for discussions over an IMF bailout package. The turmoil in the finance ministry as well as central bank, whose governor resigned on Monday, is a measure of the country's deep economic crisis.

The country has been hit hard by the pandemic as well as the government's criminal “let it rip” policy that allowed COVID-19 to spread island-wide. The economic crisis dramatically escalated following global dislocation produced by the US-NATO proxy war with Russia in Ukraine.

Sri Lanka's dwindling foreign reserves mean that it has no money to pay for imports of essential items. The country is on the brink of default. The country's stock and bond markets have been stumbling due to the escalating crisis. On April 4, the All Share Price Index was down by 32.5 percent this year. Bloomberg labeled the Colombo Stock Exchange as the second-worst performer after Russia.

In parliament yesterday, Minister of Education and leader of the house Dinesh Gunawardane challenged the opposition to demonstrate that it has a majority and to inform the president that it can form a government. No

such demonstration took place.

In a demagogic speech, SJB leader Sajith Premadasa, who is also opposition leader, called on the president and the entire government to resign. “The time has come to change the executive presidency. Let us use this opportunity,” he declared. But neither Premadasa nor the leaders of the other opposition leaders outlined what they would do to address the economic and social crisis.

Premadasa’s call to “change the executive presidency” is a ruse to appeal to popular sentiment for an end to the autocratic presidential powers. Opposition parties have routinely called for changes to the executive presidency but when in office have done little or nothing to modify it. Premadasa’s failure to outline a single concrete measure is to hide the austerity agenda that the SJB would institute if in office.

The executive presidency must not simply be changed or modified. It must be abolished. Rajapakse holds sweeping powers not just to install or dismiss governments, but to arrogate to himself ministries and to rule by decree. He is currently defence minister, which gives him control not only of Sri Lanka’s huge military apparatus but also the police.

The SJB is the majority breakaway from the right-wing United National Party, which changed the constitution to institute the executive presidency in 1978. Neither the SJB nor any of the other opposition parties has any intention of abolishing the executive presidency which has served the ruling class in times of crisis—such as the present—as the lever to marshal the state apparatus and security forces against the working class.

Yesterday Rajapakse ended the state of emergency, which can be reimposed at any time. He still has a battery of anti-democratic laws—including the ability to ban strikes in key public sectors. While offering to install an opposition government, which he can dispense with as he wishes, he is certainly involved in close talks with the military top brass, with whom he has the closest of relationships.

Defence Secretary Kamal Gunaratna yesterday issued a thinly-veiled threat to protesters saying security forces will not hesitate to enforce the law against those involved in violence. He accused some protesters “of deliberately engaging in violent protests in an organised manner causing damage to public and private properties and disrupting the day-to-day life of the people on main roads and in public places.”

These comments are a warning that the current regime is prepared to exploit any pretext to mobilise the security

forces to suppress the nation-wide protests. Rajapakse, who billed himself during the 2019 presidential election as the strongman needed to save Sri Lanka, has installed former and serving generals in key administrative positions, and has the power to impose dictatorial forms of rule.

The central demand of the protests is that Rajapakse has to resign. There is no question that Gota has got to go! But who and what government is to replace him? No faith can be placed in any of the opposition parties or combinations of parties—all of which have a proven track record of defending the interest of big business, the super-rich, foreign investors and above all, international finance capital.

The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in this protest movement and calling on workers to form rank-and-file action committees independent of all of the myriad establishment parties and the trade unions that have treacherously sold out the rising movement of strikes and protests over the past two years. Only on that basis can the working class begin to advance its own class demands and solution to the social crisis, and provide a road out of the social misery facing the rural masses and urban poor.

The establishment of action committees in every factory, workplace and working-class suburb forms the foundation to advance the call for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement policies for the socialist reorganisation of society to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. The fight for such a perspective necessarily requires a turn to workers around the world who confront similar pressing needs that are already propelling them into struggle throughout South Asia, the Middle East and Africa, as well as in the advanced capitalist countries, including the United States.



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