

Sri Lanka still has no finance minister amid continuing anti-government protests

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Days after the resignation of the entire Sri Lankan cabinet, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has not been able to find a taker for the crucial post of finance minister. The country is currently embroiled in its worst economic crisis in decades and stands on the brink of default. Dwindling foreign exchange has led to shortages of fuel, food and medicines, soaring prices and lengthy electricity blackouts sparking continuing mass protests demanding the resignation of the president and his government.

Basil Rajapakse, the president's brother, was the finance minister and has been widely blamed for the economic crisis, including within the ruling coalition. When he stepped down, along with the rest of the cabinet on Monday, he was replaced by Ali Sabry, the president's personal lawyer and close confidant. Less than 24 hours later, he also resigned.

The president has been scouring the Colombo establishment to find a replacement but as of yesterday no one appeared willing to accept the poisoned chalice. The *Daily Mirror* reported that former Trade Minister Bandula Gunawardena had been approached, but "showed reluctance" to accept the offer.

With rising public anger against the government, "all government MPs are reluctant and seem to be passing the ball from one to another with the president unable to find a suitable candidate to the portfolio," the article stated. It explained that time was running out for the president because the finance minister has to head a delegation to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Washington by the second week of April to seek desperately needed economic assistance.

Rajapakse has appointed a new Central Bank governor and Finance Ministry secretary, but no one wants to take responsibility for leading the team that has to beg for an emergency bailout from the IMF. Any such package would inevitably come with severe austerity measures that will certainly provoke angrier protests under conditions

where hunger and starvation loom.

The inability to find a finance minister only underscores the enormity of the economic and political crisis engulfing the government and Colombo political establishment as whole. The government currently consists of a skeleton cabinet comprising the president, the prime minister, and three other ministers for foreign affairs, education and transport.

The perplexity in ruling circles was further highlighted by the farcical character of the two-day debate in the parliament on Wednesday and Thursday. Wholesale defections on Tuesday reduced the government numbers to a wafer-thin majority of 114 seats in the 225-seat parliament.

In opening the debate on the crisis, the speaker warned that the country faced impending starvation. None of the parliamentarians paid any attention and the debate descended into a pantomime.

Government MPs accused the opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—of whipping up the protests and inciting "violence." In reality, the opposition parties have had little or no role in the protests that have overwhelmingly erupted outside of their control.

The opposition parties are just as terrified of this mass popular movement as the government. They refused the plea by Rajapakse to join a government of national unity.

SJB MPs protested in parliament, again demanding the president's resignation, but party has no solution to the crisis facing the masses. It has been urging the government for weeks to go to the IMF and accept its draconian terms for a bailout.

JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake revealed the class character of his party when he declared that the JVP was ready and willing to collaborate with other capitalist parties in forming an interim government—as long as President Rajapakse resigned.

“The citizens of this country will not accept any interim government or other mechanism that will come while the president continues to be in office,” he said. “The president must resign. Under this condition we are ready to discuss any proposal... [for] a coalition or an interim administration.”

The JVP, which is notorious for its populist, at times even socialistic, demagoguery, has been posturing as a supporter of the protest movement and declaiming on the need for a “people’s government.” Dissanayake has made clear what the JVP’s proposed people’s government really is: a sordid combination of capitalist parties and politicians cobbled together behind the backs of working people.

The working class had already experienced the JVP in office when it joined the coalition government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 2004–2005 amid considerable political turmoil. The four JVP ministers, with Dissanayake himself as minister of agriculture, livestock, land and irrigation, were instrumental in enforcing the IMF’s austerity demands, particularly in rural areas. The JVP would have no hesitation in doing the same today under conditions of a far deeper economic crisis.

The *Financial Times* reported on Wednesday that the Sri Lankan rupee has overtaken the Russian ruble as the world’s worst performing currency. The value of the rupee has dived by 32 percent since the start of the year. The Colombo Stock Exchange, according to Bloomberg, is running a close second to the Russian bourse as the world’s worst performer.

Inflation hit 18.5 percent of GDP in March, but food inflation is far higher at 30 percent, making it ever more difficult for working people to buy food, even when they can find supplies. The real situation is far worse. Steve H. Hanke, a Johns Hopkins University economist, has calculated that inflation in Sri Lanka had soared to 55 percent by March 24—the sixth highest in the world after Venezuela, Zimbabwe, Lebanon, Turkey and Sudan.

The public health system is breaking down. Sri Lanka imports more than 85 percent of its pharmaceutical needs and the government has no US dollars to pay for them. Gotabhaya Ranasinghe, a cardiologist at the National Hospital in Colombo, told the *Guardian* that hospitals were running out and many lives were at stake.

“There are important heart medications, medicines for blood pressure, heart attacks, all are running out. I have heard that many cancer drugs are also not available anymore, so it is a very worrying situation,” he said.

“People are struggling, they are out on the streets, but we are stuck in a terrible limbo and I can’t see a way out of it.”

Yesterday, doctors, nurses and other hospital workers held protests throughout the country demanding a solution to the health crisis. Over the past two days, protests have taken place in many cities, including Colombo, Kalutara, Ratnapura, Kandy, Kurunegala, Trincomalee, Ratmalana, Moratuwa, Galewela, Bingiriya and Maharagama.

Some public sector unions, including in the health, education and electricity sectors, have reluctantly called limited protests in Colombo and other cities. These same unions have betrayed one strike struggle after another over the past two years. They are only intervening now to try to contain and suppress the anger that is welling up among their members.

Thousands of university students from Moratuwa, Uva Wellassa, Rajarata, Wayamba and the Open University also joined the protests yesterday. Some school students also joined in.

The political establishment is mired in deep crisis at present. But unless the working class advances its own solution to the desperate situation confronting the masses, the capitalist class will prevail and impose even greater burdens on working people, through dictatorial means if need be.

Yesterday, the Socialist Equality Party published a statement on the *World Socialist Web Site* calling for the bringing down of the Rajapakse government and the abolition of the autocratic executive presidency. The SEP urged workers to form their own independent action committees and outlined a socialist program of action to secure food, fuel and medicine.

We urge workers and youth to carefully study the statement and put it into action. Above all, if you agree with this political perspective, join and build the SEP as the mass revolutionary party needed to lead these struggles.



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