

Following president's resignation, political turmoil in Sri Lanka intensifies

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The acute political crisis in Sri Lanka continues unabated, following huge anti-government protests in central Colombo on Saturday that led to the announcements that President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe will both step down. This follows three months of continuous and extensive protests demanding the president's resignation and relief from the severe social crisis caused by rampaging inflation and dire shortages of essentials including fuel, basic food items and medicines.

Protesters are still occupying the official residences of both the president and prime minister, as well as the offices of the presidential secretariat. The country's political and media establishment, along with corporate chiefs and religious leaders are warning of "anarchy" as they engage in desperate manoeuvring to install an interim, all-party government to buy time and maintain bourgeois rule.

President Rajapakse is due to step down tomorrow. The parliamentary speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardhane announced yesterday that he will convene parliament on Friday to declare the post of president vacant. "Nominations for the presidency will be called for on July 19 and a vote will be taken [in parliament] on July 20 to elect a new president," he said.

According to Abeywardhane, parliamentary party leaders also decided to form an all-party government under the new president and take steps to continue the supply of essential services. Who will take over as president and prime minister and the composition of the interim government are all the subject of intense wrangling behind closed doors.

Even who will function as acting president was the subject of bitter dispute at an all-party meeting convened last weekend. Constitutionally, the prime minister takes on the role in the event of the president's resignation, with the speaker next in line. As prime minister, Wickremesinghe proposed that he take over but was vehemently opposed by all other party leaders.

Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) leader Maithripala Sirisena, told the meeting that both the president and prime minister had to go, so as to provide at least the appearance of

genuine change. The SLFP and other opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), have all been pushing for an interim government and are engaged in frantic jockeying to determine who will lead it.

Whatever the composition of any interim government, when and if it is formed, it will be inherently unstable from the very outset. Of the 225 parliamentary seats, Rajapakse's party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), while deeply divided and split, still holds the most seats. The SJB has 54, the TNA 10 and the JVP 3, while the SLFP and Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) along with various communally-based Tamil and Muslim parties hold just one seat each. The SJB is a recent breakaway from the right-wing UNP and the SLPP from the equally reactionary SLFP.

The parliamentary line-up is a measure of the decay and disintegration of the political establishment under the impact of the deepening crisis of Sri Lanka and global capitalism. For decades after formal independence in 1948, political life in Colombo was dominated by two parties—the UNP and the SLFP, both of which have now been reduced to rumps. The bourgeoisie confronts its greatest political crisis in more than 70 years with its longstanding political props in tatters.

Behind the scenes, intense diplomatic activity is taking place, with the US playing a very active role in a bid to stabilise bourgeois rule. The fear in Washington and capitals around the world is that the revolutionary upheavals in Sri Lanka will give an impetus to the opposition in the working class internationally amid the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine that is fuelling rampant inflation.

Significantly, the US ambassador to Colombo, Julie Chung, was glowing in her praise of the JVP after a meeting with its leaders last Thursday. She declared that it was "a significant party," with "a growing presence" that "resonate[s] with the public during recent times." While acknowledging there had been "a lot of rhetoric in the past,"

she found the meeting “really refreshing and honest,” and concluded, “I think we have a good understanding.”

The JVP, a petty-bourgeois radical party, was formed in 1966 on the basis of the “armed struggle” and an ideological mixture of Sinhala communalism, Maoism and Castroism. It has long since exchanged its jungle fatigues and automatic weapons for a comfortable place in the political establishment. The US no doubt calculates that its empty radical posturing will be useful, for a time, under conditions where all of the parties are viewed with deep suspicion and hostility. JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake yesterday threw his hat into the ring, declaring that he was prepared to lead an interim government.

Any interim government will rapidly face intense popular opposition. Far from addressing the pressing social needs of the working class and rural masses, it will be compelled to implement the severe austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in an effort to secure an emergency loan. The country is effectively bankrupt, lacking the foreign reserves to purchase fuel, food, medicines and other essentials.

Yet the IMF is insisting on behalf of international finance capital and the country’s creditors on drastic measures that will only further the suffering of ordinary people under conditions where starvation is becoming widespread, the health system is on the brink of collapse, and those with jobs do not have the means to get to work due to the lack of fuel. Last month, annualised inflation hit 54.6 percent and food inflation spiralled to 80.1 percent. However, all of the parliamentary parties, including the SJB and JVP, declare that there is no alternative but to go begging to the IMF and to implement its agenda.

Parliament itself is already regarded with intense suspicion and hostility. The popular slogans of the past three months not only include “Gota go home”—that is, Rajapakse resign—but also “225 go home”—in other words, all of the parliamentarians should resign. In the midst of this intense political crisis, a particularly pernicious role is being played by various pseudo-left organisations, notably the Frontline Socialist Party that has been prominent in the protests. All of them, in one way or another, foster the dangerous illusion that an interim government will bow to popular pressure and end the suffering of the masses.

The IMF agenda, to which all of the establishment parties are committed, cannot be imposed democratically or peacefully. Without the independent political intervention of the working class, any interim government will be used to buy time, confuse and demoralise the masses, sow poisonous communalism and pave the way for police-state repression and dictatorial forms of rule.

The country’s executive presidency has sweeping powers to install and dismiss governments, assume cabinet posts, call out the military and impose emergency rule. Gotabhaya Rajapakse could use any or all of those powers until, as announced at least, he steps down tomorrow. Significantly, his first action, after taking refuge on a naval vessel last weekend, was to meet yesterday with the country’s military chiefs. Any replacement as president would assume these autocratic powers.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only political party in Sri Lanka fighting for the mobilisation of the working class independent of and against the bourgeoisie and all its political servants on the basis of a revolutionary socialist perspective. It rejected an appeal by the SJB to participate in all-party talks last weekend on an interim government and warned in an open letter that such a formation would only be the means for imposing even greater burdens on working people.

From the outset, the SEP has urged workers to form their own action committees, independent of the treacherous trade unions, to fight for their class interests. It has proposed a series of policies, including the repudiation of all foreign debt, the seizure of the wealth of the billionaires and corporate elite, and workers’ control over the means of production and distribution to be used to meet the pressing needs of working people. The SEP has also warned of the danger of dictatorial rule and called for the abolition of the executive presidency and repeal of the battery of anti-democratic legislation that is directed against the working class.

The program of the SEP is socialist internationalism. It rejects the foul communal politics that has been continually used by the Colombo establishment and calls for the unity of all workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. It also urges workers to turn to their class brothers and sisters throughout South Asia and the world who are facing similar attacks on their living conditions. The SEP’s political struggle in Sri Lanka provides crucial lessons that need to be taken up by workers internationally.



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