

Sri Lankan president struggling to form all-party government

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Despite initial promises from the opposition parliamentary parties, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe has not yet been able to cobble together an all-party regime. Thus far, only minor parties have agreed to join such a government.

On August 3, when Wickremesinghe called for an all-party government during his inaugural speech to the new parliamentary session, most of the opposition parties expressed their willingness to take part. His aim was to rally the Colombo political establishment to jointly impose the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) savage austerity measures and suppress any opposition by workers and the poor.

Sri Lanka's parliamentary parties all fundamentally agree with the IMF austerity program as the solution to the unprecedented economic crisis. They fear, however, the mass popular opposition that the widely despised Wickremesinghe will face when implementing the brutal austerity measures. Wickremesinghe is the sole MP of the United National Party and was installed as president by the discredited parliament. His main support base is the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse who was forced to flee the country.

Over the past two weeks Wickremesinghe has held discussions with the main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), as well as the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Muslim and Tamil parties.

While the SJB has officially announced that it supports an all-party government it will not join it. SJB leader Sajith Premadasa declared that his MPs "agreed to work through an empowered system of parliamentary committees" to support the government but would not accept any ministerial positions.

In line with that position, SJB MP Harsha de Silva has been appointed chairman of parliament's committee on public finance. SJB MPs Eran Wickremaratne and Kabir Hashim have also been proposed to head the parliamentary committees on public enterprises and on public accounts, respectively.

Internal frictions, however, have emerged within the SJB over the willingness of de Silva, Wickremaratne and Hashim to join the government and accept ministerial positions. Last week, these MPs jointly announced that they will not openly criticise the government.

Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena is scheduled to hold further separate talks this week with the SJB, the SLFP and the National People's Power (NPP), which is led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The JVP/NPP has already rejected any participation in Wickremesinghe's all-party regime and is calling for an "urgent general election" and a new administration with a "mandate" to implement the austerity measures.

SLFP general secretary Dayasiri Jayasekera told the media on August 15 that his party will also support "an all-party government as proposed by President Ranil Wickremesinghe," but was "not willing to take any positions in the government."

The SLFP is also a 'rump' party with only nine members of parliament. Two SLFP MPs—Nimal Siripala de Silva and Mahinda Amaraweera—however, have been government ministers for some time and remain members of the party.

The bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has voiced its support for the all-party proposal. TNA spokesman M. A. Sumanthiran, after a discussion with Wickremesinghe, said that his party was "willing to work with the government from outside, supporting progressive steps that may be taken."

The TNA has submitted a "ten-point program," which includes the release of political prisoners still detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), return of private land currently occupied by military and repeal of the PTA, as the basis for its "outside support" for Wickremesinghe.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the plantation-based Ceylon Workers Congress and the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), have voiced their willingness to join an all-party government. The other three plantation-based unions—the National Union of Workers, the Democratic People's Front and the Up-country People's

Front—have said they are still considering the president’s invitation.

The disparate response of these political parties, along with some backpedalling from their earlier agreement with Wickremesinghe’s appeal for an all-party government, highlights the enormous political crisis of Sri Lanka’s ruling elite.

The ruling class and its parties have been thrown into crisis during the past four months by the historic anti-government uprising of workers and the poor in response to the country’s disastrous economic and social conditions.

Mass demonstrations and general strikes demanded the resignation of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his regime and an end to shortages and the unbearable cost of essentials. While the ongoing protests forced Rajapakse to flee the country, Wickremesinghe, his equally despised successor, is determined to implement even greater attacks through the IMF’s program.

Unable to secure the agreement from key opposition parties, Wickremesinghe is reportedly now attempting to persuade MPs from some of these parties to join an all-party regime by offering them cabinet positions. This sort of horse trading is a routine procedure in Sri Lanka to secure a parliamentary majority. The media is also reporting that Wickremesinghe is planning to call the regime a “national government.”

Wickremesinghe is desperate to show the IMF, big business and the international powers that he is able to establish political stability. An IMF staff team is scheduled to arrive in Sri Lanka for a week of discussions with the government on August 24.

He is also anxious for a quick agreement with the IMF in order to get financial assistance from other agencies, such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, and other countries. He hopes to secure a \$US3 billion loan under the IMF’s Extended Fund Facility.

Any finance from the IMF will require the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, privatisations, further cuts into subsidies and drastic inroads into remaining public education and health services, as well as higher taxes and further cutbacks to price subsidies for essential goods.

Two weeks ago, the government drove up electricity rates by over 75 percent, postal rates by 233 percent and foreshadowed future water rate increases. The government has already announced an early “restructuring” of the state-owned Electricity Board and Petroleum Corporation, as first targets in moves towards their privatisation.

Last week, the government unleashed violent police attacks on university students protesting in Colombo, arresting more than 20. They will be prosecuted on trumped-up charges of “unlawful assembly” and attacking the police.

Police are also seeking permission to detain Inter-University Student Federation convener Wasantha Mudalige under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Yesterday, Wickremesinghe extended a proclamation mobilising the armed forces across every district in Sri Lanka. These class-war measures are in order to impose the brutal demands of international finance that workers and the poor must pay for the crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism.

Electricity Board and Petroleum Corporation workers have already indicated they will resist the privatisation, with petroleum corporation workers holding a protest march today.

The working class cannot rely on the trade unions, which betrayed the general strike action by millions of workers on April 28 and May 6 and diverted them into support for SJB and JVP demands for a capitalist interim regime, following the ousting of Rajapakse.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) rejects any capitalist interim or all-party regime or any future “national government” whose task will be to intensify Colombo’s class war against workers and the poor. The SEP calls for the mobilisation of the immense social power of the working class to rally the rural masses against the government’s austerity measures and state repression.

The SEP calls for the building of action committees in every workplace, estate and neighbourhood and in the rural areas, independent of the trade unions and capitalist parties.

The SEP is campaigning for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on these action committees. The mobilisation of workers and rural poor in these action committees will pave the way for a political struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies as part of a fight for socialism internationally.



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