



Sri Lanka: crisis resolved, for now

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Sri Lanka's constitutional crisis, during which there appeared to be two governments at one point and no government at all at another, has been resolved, at least formally. On December 16, the country's Supreme Court ruled unanimously that President Maithripala Sirisena had acted unconstitutionally when he sacked the then prime minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe, replacing him with Mahinda Rajapakse, and then closed parliament and called early elections for January. Having previously said he would never again appoint Wickremasinghe as PM, even if every MP voted for him, Sirisena has now reinstated him.

While that decision ends the political stand-off between Wickremasinghe and Rajapakse as to which one is really the PM, the political reverberations of the whole episode will continue to shake the island in the coming year. Quite apart from the legal implications of having acted against the Constitution, Sirisena's political stature has been severely eroded and any hopes he had of securing a second term must surely now be shattered. Equally, the prospects for the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, SLFP, of which he is the Leader, in parliamentary elections that must be held within the year, are not good, it had already lost members to Rajapakse's Sri Lanka People's Party, SLPP.

Rajapakse himself has not come out of the crisis well, either. Earlier in the year, his star seemed to be rising once again as the SLPP won handsomely in local elections but now he is clearly associated in the popular mind with the underhand and unconstitutional plotting of Sirisena. In addition, his own position as an MP is likely to be challenged because he was elected as a member of the United People's Freedom Alliance, UPFA, but has subsequently joined the SLPP and the Constitution requires MPs to resign if they change party.

Since the unpopularity of Ranil Wickremasinghe was probably one of the main factors in persuading Sirisena to sack him, it is rather ironic that he, of all people, has benefitted most from the whole debacle. By refusing to recognise his removal from office, organising a parliamentary majority in his defence and mobilising significant mass demonstrations in his support, he has done a great deal to redeem himself in the court of "public opinion".

Prospects

The formal return to "business as usual", however, cannot hide the deep malaise within Sri Lanka's whole political system. It cannot erase the public's memory of Rajapakse's MP's hurling furniture at the Speaker of Parliament and throwing water laced with chilli powder at fellow MPs in an attempt to prevent a vote of confidence in Wickremasinghe.

Perhaps most importantly of all, it will not change the policies that had made Wickremasinghe so unpopular. The advantage of coming out on top in the crisis may be short-lived and there is no shortage of rivals to be the UNP's next presidential candidate, the most frequently mentioned being his current deputy, Sajith Premadasa. Given the serious damage done to the economy by the crisis, which led to a collapse in tourism, a devaluation of the rupee and a raising of interest rates when all the ratings agencies downgraded the country's status, the economic situation is now far worse. The Treasury is reported to have calculated that the crisis cost R102 billion (some £510 million).

Public disillusionment with politicians and parties is obviously entirely justified but, as we have seen in many other countries, it can be channelled into highly reactionary movements. This was certainly Mahinda Rajapakse's strategy in the past and he is probably still guaranteed the Sinhala chauvinist vote, with the support of much of the Buddhist clergy

and groups such as the clerical fascists of Bodu Bala Sena. However, to win a presidential election he may need to seek broader support and his emphasis now is on "policies to benefit all Sri Lankans". If not Mahinda, then he has two brothers, Gothabaya and Basil, who could take his place.

While the Right try to blame the country's ills on a combination of their political opponents and oppressed minorities, the Left needs to draw the real lessons from the crisis. Popular discontent is ultimately rooted in the sense of betrayal of democratic principles and that is the issue upon which the Left should mobilise. Sirisena may not have got away with his almost dictatorial plan to remove the government and close the parliament but the people have had no say in that, any more than they had a say in Wickremesinghe's economic policies, the failure to seriously investigate either war crimes against the Tamils or the corruption scandals or, for that matter, even when there will be new elections to parliament.

Democracy

When people say that the whole system is rotten, they are right - and the answer is to change the whole system. For us, as socialists, the change needs to be one that removes the existing state apparatus and replaces it by a system of democratically elected workers' and farmers' councils, supporting a government that will socialise all the main sectors of the economy and then plan their use to maximise the fulfilment of human needs, not private profits.

Although that is our strategic goal, we clearly cannot move straight towards it, it requires the support of the majority of workers and that has to be won by applying tactics that can be supported by the majority and can lead towards that goal. Parliamentary democracy is always limited by the reality that economic power in society is in the hands of a small class of capitalists.

Nonetheless, we are in favour of the most radical forms of democracy within a capitalist society; we want equal votes for all from the age of 16, we want all branches of government, including both the judiciary and the security forces, to be accountable to elected authorities, we want the abolition of the whole presidential system, which serves only to limit the power of the elected MPs, we want all elected representatives to be recallable by their electors and paid the average wage, we want the rights of minorities, including the right of national self-determination, to be guaranteed.

The list could, of course, go on, but the point is that most of these rights, although democratic, are not included in the existing constitution. We need a new constitution and for that we need a democratically elected Constituent Assembly. That is a demand that can appeal well beyond the ranks of committed socialists and, indeed, well beyond the working class. That is a potential strength. While not hiding our own, socialist, goals, we can propose campaigns and actions that can be supported by others who do not share those goals.

The existing rulers will not want any such reform - it would strike at one of the roots of their power - it will have to be fought for and we will propose working class forms of campaign and action to force them to concede our demands. In the course of such campaigning, we can not only popularise the demand for a Constituent Assembly but also propose the building of working class organisations within which the workers' particular demands such as trade union rights, equal pay, health and safety legislation, health insurance, access to employers' accounts and so on, can be identified and formulated.

In the longer term, such organisations as workplace committees, union branches, women workers' organisations, tenants' associations, young workers' groups, would no doubt extend their roles, in times of difficulty becoming the organisers of working class action on a broader scale, eventually the mobilisation of the whole working class to overthrow the existing state and install a workers' government. It is the task of revolutionaries today to develop and popularise such tactics that can link today's issues, such as the recent constitutional crisis, to the strategy of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism.