



Sri Lanka: President dissolves parliament

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Late on the afternoon of Friday, November 9, Sri Lanka's President, Maithripala Sirisena of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, SLFP, announced that he was dissolving the country's parliament and calling a general election in January. Although he did not think it necessary to explain his action, the reason is not difficult to find. Two weeks earlier, Sirisena, who came to power by defeating Mahinda Rajapakse, then the leader of the SLFP, in the election of 2015 and went on to form a government with Ranil Wickremasinghe of the United National Party, UNP, unceremoniously sacked Wickremasinghe and appointed Rajapakse as Prime Minister.

Within hours, supporters of Rajapakse had burst into TV stations and taken control while regional governments, dominated by his party, the Sri Lanka People's Front, SLPP, had pledged support to the new administration. However, such tactics did not work everywhere; when SLPP supporters tried to prevent the Minister for Petroleum entering his office on Sunday 28, his guards opened fire, wounding three, two of whom subsequently died.

Wickremasinghe, not surprisingly, challenged the legality of the President's actions, pointing out that a PM remains in office as long as they retain the support of a majority in Parliament. Clearly, Sirisena was far from certain that Rajapakse could prove that he had such a majority and so, at the same time as sacking the PM, he also suspended Parliament until November 16. No doubt he calculated that, with de facto control of the media, Rajapakse and his supporters, who include the clerical fascists of Bodu Bala Sena, could intimidate or bribe their way to gaining Parliamentary support by then.

For his part, the Speaker of Parliament, constitutionally independent of government, called on Sirisena to reconvene Parliament so that it could decide who should be Prime Minister. In a letter to diplomatic representatives, he also described Sirisena's actions as unconstitutional. Sirisena then appeared to give ground by proposing a shorter suspension of Parliament, until November 5 but later withdrew that and proposed November 14.

Meanwhile, Wickremasinghe, insisting that he remained the legitimate prime minister, occupied the official residence and mobilised his supporters to demonstrate in the capital, Colombo, and block any attempts to remove him.

For his part, Rajapakse began forming a cabinet, clearly aiming to attract deserters from the UNP by the offer of ministerial positions, and salaries. This was successful with 5 UNP MPs who accepted portfolios but others rejected the offer and publicised the bribes they had been offered.

Parliamentary arithmetic and the ability to mobilise supporters are not the only factors in this conflict between the main bourgeois parties. Sri Lanka is at the centre of the rivalry between China and the US, supported by India, which sees the island as within its "sphere of interest". Indeed, Rajapakse was only defeated in 2015 through the intervention of the "western" powers who ensured there was only one candidate opposing him - Maithripala Sirisena, his former ally! There is no honour among thieves!

It is, therefore, highly significant that the Chinese ambassador, Cheng Xueyuan, was among the first to congratulate the new Prime Minister on his taking office, while the ambassadors from the USA, UK and India initially declined an invitation from Sirisena and, instead, attended a meeting called by Wickremasinghe in the aftermath of his sacking.

Given the unpopularity of Wickremasinghe's government, which has not implemented the major reforms it promised,

not pursued charges against members of Mahinda Rajapakse's previous administration, and has overseen a steadily worsening economic situation, there is no reason why the broad masses of the population should rally to his defence.

Since the beginning of the year, the rupee has lost 11 percent of its value, making imports, especially oil, more and more expensive. In line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund, IMF, the "good governance" coalition also agreed plans for privatisation in both the education and health sectors but these met with stiff resistance. Recent months also saw major strikes on the railways and, two days before the sacking of the prime minister, a general strike or hartal on the plantations. The dire situation of workers there is summed up in their demand for a 100 percent increase in wages - which would still give them less than £5 per day!

Sirisena's dissolution of parliament will, no doubt, be challenged in the courts but, whatever the outcome, opposition to the undemocratic imposition of a Rajapakse government must not be confused with defence of Wickremasinghe. As the current situation shows, the UNP-led government was weak and internally divided, dependent on the support of the Tamil National Alliance as well as the LSSP and the CP.

Rajapakse represents a more consolidated right wing force that now includes not only deserters from the UNP but also extra-parliamentary forces such as the clerical fascists that stand ready to be used against working class resistance to the inevitable austerity programme. The workers' organisations should not stand by and watch such a force take governmental power.

In this situation, the workers and farmers of Sri Lanka, whether in the private or the public sectors, whether in the towns, the countryside or the plantations, whether Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim, have a common interest in defeating the coup. It is not a matter of defending Wickremasinghe but of defending the limited democratic rights vested in parliament. Who governs should not be left to the factional infighting of the ruling cliques, let alone the rival imperialists.

The trades unions and those parties who profess to represent the interests of the workers and farmers should mobilise their members and supporters on the streets, forming democratic committees at local level to organise not only demonstrations but strikes, up to an indefinite general strike, to force any new government to break from the IMF's austerity programme in the interests of the great majority of the population.

This latest political crisis is ultimately proof, once again, that no party committed to maintaining capitalism can possibly develop a semi-colonial country like Sri Lanka. As long as governments accept not only the requirements of the international institutions such as the IMF but also the exploitation of the country's resources by international corporations, whether they are based in the US, the EU, China or Japan, those governments will have to enforce policies such as privatisation and cuts in social services.

What is needed is a workers' party that is committed to forming a government based on the workers' own organisations and to overthrowing capitalism through a programme of nationalisation of the major sectors of the economy, under the control of the workers, so that their development can be planned in the interests of the majority of the population. Any such moves would undoubtedly come under attack from the existing state apparatus and repressive forces of the police and armed forces, that is why, from the outset, a workers' party has to be built as a revolutionary party.

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