

Sri Lankan prime minister narrowly survives no-confidence resolution

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Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe survived a no-confidence motion by 122 to 76 votes after a 12-hour parliamentary debate last Wednesday. The motion was moved by the Joint Opposition, a parliamentary faction led by former president Mahinda Rajapakse. The group has publicly vowed to bring down the government.

The main pretext of the no-confidence motion was a multi-billion rupee scam involving Central Bank bonds and Perpetual Treasuries, a financial company, two months after President Maithripala Sirisena took office in January 2015. Wickremesinghe is accused of appointing and defending former Central Bank governor Arjun Mahendran, who was implicated in the scandal.

The motion also accused Wickremesinghe, who was law and order minister, of failing to promptly stop anti-Muslim riots by Sinhala Buddhist extremists last month in the Kandy district.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which is led by Sirisena, is a partner of the so-called national unity government with Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP).

SLFP parliamentarians were politically divided before Wednesday's vote—41 supported the government and 54 were with Rajapakse. The no-confidence motion deepened the factional tensions, further destabilising the government. On Wednesday, 16 SLFP parliamentarians loyal to Sirisena voted for the opposition resolution and at least 20 abstained.

Since the humiliating defeat of ruling coalition candidates in February's local government elections, Sirisena has sought to distance his SLFP loyalists from the government. The president did not publicly oppose the no-confidence motion but advised SLFP members to vote according to their "conscience." Senior SLFP minister Nimal Siripala de Silva demanded that

Wickremesinghe resign before the parliamentary debate, a proposal widely interpreted as a political message from Sirisena.

Sirisena has not publicly explained what he will do after a faction of his group endorsed the no-confidence motion. Wickremesinghe simply declared he would continue with the unity government after discussions with the president. Senior members of the UNP, however, are demanding the removal of SLFP ministers who voted with the opposition. Adding to Wickremesinghe's crisis, the SLFP ministers said they would not resign, declaring that the president was leader of the government.

The differences between Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse, however, are entirely tactical. The principal concern of the ruling class is a growing financial crisis and the mounting political opposition of workers, youth and the rural poor to the government's austerity measures.

Sirisena was elected president, with Wickremesinghe's backing, in 2015 by exploiting the mass opposition to Rajapakse's autocratic rule and anti-democratic attacks on social rights.

While the incoming administration introduced some cosmetic measures, mounting economic problems forced it to negotiate an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout loan and implement the IMF's austerity dictates. The past two years have been marked by increasing struggles of workers, students and farmers, as well as Tamils in the north and east, whose conditions were devastated by war.

Underscoring this popular opposition, on Tuesday thousands of workers at Colombo's Katunayake international airport staged a wildcat strike, blocking access roads and demanding higher wages. The militant walkout ended after government ministers quickly

promised to grant the strikers' demand.

At the same time, over 15,000 non-academic university workers remain on strike after walking out indefinitely in February. They are demanding higher wages and pension and medical schemes.

A day before the no-confidence debate, Central Bank Governor Indrajit Coomaraswamy pointed to the economic crisis and outstanding IMF demands. "We need to move away from the current political instability and achieve a stable outcome soon," he warned.

Coomaraswamy said the government should have implemented a new fuel price formula—i.e., raised prices in line with the world market—as previously demanded by the IMF.

"The deadline was missed as political instability struck in the wake of the local government election results," Coomaraswamy said. "A similar price transfer of electricity has been set for September but it is unclear whether the government will meet it."

The Rajapakse group's no-confidence resolution had nothing to do with the Central Bank bond scam or attacks on Muslims. The former Rajapakse regime and its close associates were mired in nepotism, corruption and Sinhala chauvinism.

Like Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, Rajapakse nurtured extreme-right Sinhala Buddhist groups and gave them a free hand to provoke anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim riots. Movements such as Bodu Bala Sena and Maha Sohon Balakaya, which were involved in the recent attacks on Muslims, began during Rajapakse's rule. Local members of the Rajapakse-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) have been arrested for their involvement in the anti-Muslim attacks in the Kandy district.

Rajapakse's SLPP won a majority of local government positions in the February elections by capitalising on the widespread popular opposition to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration. Rajapakse and his allies are building an extreme-right movement, appealing to the military, the Buddhist hierarchy and other right-wing forces to take on the working people.

Parliamentarians from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main bourgeois Tamil party, opposed Wednesday's no-confidence motion. The TNA supported Sirisena's election as president and has been a close ally of the pro-US government since then. Serving the geopolitical interests of US and India, the

TNA calculates that the best way to secure the interests of the Tamil elite is by assisting the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake told parliament the no-confidence motion was "politically motivated" by the Rajapakse camp, but falsely claimed it was "against corruption and racism."

The JVP manoeuvres between all factions of the ruling elite. It backed Rajapakse to come to power in 2005 and ten years later, in 2015, supported Sirisena. The JVP served for four months on Sirisena's national executive council to help stabilise his regime.

The desperate right-wing manoeuvres of these competing factions are a warning to the working class. The ruling class is committed to implementing the IMF's demands and has already deployed police and military against workers, students and farmers opposing the government's attacks on living conditions. Facing a worsening economic crisis, the factions are all moving toward the imposition of dictatorial forms of rule.

The working class must build its own independent socialist movement to rally poor farmers and youth, and fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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