

Sri Lankan crisis: SLFP holds rally to defend political coup

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Amid intensifying rivalry between factions of Sri Lanka's ruling elite, President Maithripala Sirisena and Mahinda Rajapakse held a rally yesterday at Battaramulla, in the suburbs of Colombo, to justify the October 26 political coup in which Sirisena sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and named Rajapakse as his replacement.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) rally sought to counter a protest held on October 30 by the United National Party (UNP), led by Wickremesinghe, and its campaign to regain office. Wickremesinghe has refused to vacate the prime minister's official residence, insisting that Sirisena reconvene parliament, which the president prorogued until November 16.

Sirisena issued a gazette notification yesterday to reopen parliament on November 14, in an attempt to deflect growing international pressure. The US, UK and EU have backed Wickremesinghe's stance, calling on Sirisena to convene the parliament.

Sirisena defected from former President Rajapakse's government in November 2014 to join hands with Wickremesinghe to contest the January 2015 presidential election as a common opposition candidate.

At that time, Sirisena criticised Rajapakse for his anti-democratic rule and attacks on social rights, and promised "good governance." Behind this rhetoric, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe were part of a regime-change conspiracy orchestrated by Washington to oust Rajapakse, whom the US considered pro-Chinese.

In 2014, Rajapakse, for his part, accused Sirisena of political back-stabbing.

Yesterday, however, Sirisena and Rajapakse jubilantly appeared on the same platform, saying nothing about this past. Instead, they praised each other to the hilt, underlining the decomposition of official politics.

Speaking of sacking Wickremesinghe, Sirisena pompously declared: "I ousted a vision that is

incompatible with our local culture and values, and that works according to foreign agendas." For the past three and half years, "poor people were suppressed by Ranil Wickremesinghe's economic and political vision," which carried out "an extreme neo-liberal form of governance."

These utterances display the utter hypocrisy of Sirisena who, together with Wickremesinghe, presided over sweeping austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government deployed the police and military to suppress protests by workers, farmers and students.

Significantly, Sirisena said that after the defeats suffered by the government during local government elections on February 10 he thought of changing the prime minister and invited Karu Jayasuriya, the parliamentary speaker, to take the post. Jayasuriya rejected his proposal.

In the local government elections, Sirisena's faction of the SLFP came third, and the UNP came second. Rajapakse's SLFP faction took control of the majority of councils under the banner of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna.

Those election results reflected the growing opposition among workers, rural poor and youth to the government's austerity measures. Many people voted for Rajapakse's party, not because of any positive support for him, but to express their hostility to the government's policies.

Sirisena, nervous about the rising discontent, also invited a UNP deputy leader, Sajith Premadasa, to become prime minister, but he did not agree either.

At the rally Sirisena declared: "I was looking for a man who loved the country and who could join forces with me to strengthen democracy. I found in Mahinda Rajapakse a man who could topple Ranil Wickremesinghe and his government."

Sirisena did not explain how Rajapakse, whom he condemned for violating democracy four years ago, could now strengthen democracy.

Rajapakse made only brief remarks. He said his bond with Sirisena was cemented now and could not be broken by the telling of lies. He said his government, “with the help of all countries,” would strengthen democracy, work for the welfare of the people and make the country prosperous. He promised to fulfil the needs of the Tamil minority.

This is a blatant fraud. In the January 2015 presidential election, Rajapakse was defeated because of his attacks on democratic rights, imposition of IMF austerity measures and the military’s atrocities against Tamil civilians during the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Over the past 10 days, the Rajapakse camp has lured several MPs from the UNP and the opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA) to its side. According to media reports, this filthy horse-trading is continuing. Sirisena prorogued the parliament to give Rajapakse time. Now jointly led by Sirisena and Rajapakse, the SLFP had only 96 members in the 225-member parliament and needed 17 more MPs to gain a majority.

At a media conference yesterday, UNP MP Range Bandara Dissanayake played an audio recording of an offer by a pro-Rajapakse MP and several others promising him 500 million rupees (\$US2.8 million) for defection. Media outlets have reported that amounts of 200 to 300 million rupees, as well as well-paid ministerial posts, have been offered for such defections. Although buying MPs is not new in Sri Lankan politics, it has sunk to a disgusting new level.

Speaker Jayasuriya yesterday issued a statement declaring he only accepted the status of parliament as it existed before October 26, “as the majority is of the opinion that all changes made in the Parliament are undemocratic and inconsistent with traditions of Parliament.” That means he would not accept Rajapakse as prime minister. He added: “The new political alliance must prove its majority in Parliament.”

Jayasuriya noted that “severe violations of democratic principles,” such as “the forcible taking over of the administration of media institutions and other public sector institutions, disregarding the moderate employees and information to the effect that various perks and privileges are offered to Members of Parliament.”

Jayasuriya is a leading member of the UNP, which is notorious for its anti-democratic actions. He has been encouraged by recent visits by diplomats of the major powers, who asked him to reconvene the parliament.

Wickremesinghe told Reuters yesterday: “Countries are

sensitive, they have concerns, democratic countries have concerns.” In reality, these powers, notably the US, are opposed to Rajapakse because of his past leaning toward China, not out of any concern for democracy.

The speaker has accepted a no-confidence motion by UNP MPs against Rajapakse’s appointment. The TNA and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have announced they will support the motion, effectively lining up with the UNP’s bid to regain power.

Indicating the mounting tensions, Wickremesinghe gave an interview to AFP on Friday warning of a possible “bloodbath.” He said: “We will be calling on our people not to resort to violence... A few desperate people can start off a bloodbath.”

This statement is a warning of the desperate measures that both factions of the ruling class are prepared to use to grab state power. Whichever party or parties ultimately consolidate their hold on power will implement the IMF austerity measures and ruthlessly suppress any opposition.

Sections of the ruling elite are expressing anxiety about the growing disillusionment among workers and youth. The *Daily Mirror* editorial yesterday stated: “Ordinary Sri Lankans are beginning to view politicians as the scum of the earth and this is bad for democracy as a whole, as it erodes, especially, young people’s faith in the democratic and parliamentary system.”

The editorial urged an end to “the worsening situation within the parliamentary system,” warning: “If the ongoing imbroglio is allowed to spiral out of control it could once again lead young people to contemplate extra-parliamentary means to bring about change.”

The real fear of the ruling elite is that the democratic façade of parliament is crumbling, and the working class will take to the revolutionary socialist road to find a way out of the social and economic crisis created by capitalism.



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