

Sri Lanka crisis escalates as Supreme Court overturns Sirisena's dissolution of parliament

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In a dramatic intensification of the factional conflict raging inside Sri Lanka's ruling elite, the Supreme Court yesterday issued an interim order overturning President Maithripala Sirisena's dissolving of the national parliament. The court will issue its final verdict on December 7.

The Supreme Court made its ruling after hearing 12 fundamental rights petitions challenging Sirisena's dissolution of parliament on November 9. Petitioners included several political parties—the United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—as well as “civil society” groups and individuals. Five petitions were submitted in support of Sirisena's proclamation.

The court decision elevates the brawling inside the ruling elite into a major constitutional crisis with a stand-off between Sirisena and the Supreme Court, and also between his recently appointed prime minister, Mahinda Rajapakse and Ranil Wickremesinghe, the previous PM. Wickremesinghe is likely to win a vote of confidence in parliament which is being reconvened today.

Sirisena dissolved parliament late last Friday in violation of the constitution and declared that a general election would be held on January 5 and a new parliament convened on January 17. Yesterday's Supreme Court interim blocking order also applies to the election date announcement and nominations that were to be lodged between November 19 and November 26.

While lawyers for those opposing Sirisena's dissolution of parliament argued that it violated the constitution, Attorney-General Jayantha Jayasuriya insisted that the court had no jurisdiction to determine the fundamental rights petitions opposing the dissolution of parliament. The president's powers in this regard, he declared, are “unambiguous.” The three-judge bench, headed by Chief Justice Nalin Perera, however, decided to hear the petitions.

Dissolution of parliament is one of a series of anti-democratic actions by the Sri Lankan president over the past two weeks. On October 26, in a political coup, he sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, replacing him with the former President Mahinda Rajapakse, and prorogued the parliament until November 16. Facing local and international criticism, Sirisena changed the date to November 14.

The president's prorogation was a manoeuvre to allow Rajapakse to secure majority support in the parliament. Despite intense horse trading, Rajapakse declared last week that he had been unable to garner the required numbers, prompting Sirisena to dissolve the parliament.

Following yesterday's Supreme Court ruling, the UNP and other opposition parties and groups enthusiastically proclaimed the interim order as a “victory” for democracy and the people.

Workers and youth must reject these claims. The interim order is a manifestation, on a higher and more explosive level, of the deep divisions gripping the Sri Lankan political elite. Workers and the poor cannot defend their social and democratic rights through the political representatives of the bourgeoisie or the judiciary which is another repressive instrument of capitalist state.

The interim order reflects fears in ruling circles that Sirisena's blatant breaches of the constitution could add further fuel to a growing movement of protests and strikes by workers and the rural masses. If a means of defusing the acute political crisis is not found in the next three weeks, the court could still rule in favour of Sirisena.

Following the court order, UNP leader Wickremesinghe declared in a tweet: “Let's go forward and re-establish the sovereignty of the people in our beloved country.” He told the media that his party would ‘fight to the last’ to save democracy, the supremacy of parliament, and in defence of the constitution.

Wickremesinghe's pompous rhetoric echoes the

ridiculous claims by Sirisena that his authoritarian actions are to “defend democracy.”

Every faction of the ruling elite has been thrown into crisis about what to do about the mounting economic problems and global geopolitical tensions confronting Sri Lankan capitalism, as well as the deepening social opposition of workers and the poor against the government attacks on their social rights. Sri Lanka’s rival bourgeois parties have never defended the democratic or social rights of the people; their record is one of systematic repression against the masses.

Yesterday, a jubilant JVP general secretary Tilwin Silva interrupted his speech to a public gathering to announce the Supreme Court order. The “conspiracy” of Sirisena and Rajapakse had been defeated, he declared, adding that there would be “more conspiracies” and his party was ready to defeat them.

In fact, the JVP has cynically embraced the UNP’s bogus “defence of democracy” campaign against the machinations of Sirisena and Rajapakse. In January 2015, however, it lined up with Sirisena and Wickremesinghe in a US-backed regime change operation to oust Rajapakse, claiming to be defending democracy from dictatorship.

While the Speaker told MPs that parliament will be convened today, the agenda is not clear. Wickremesinghe told the media that the parliament would demonstrate he has the majority. “We will show that we are the legitimate government,” he said and called on “government servants to follow the Constitution.” He also declared that the police “should adhere” to his instructions.

At a press conference held last night, several ministers from the new so-called Rajapakse government claimed the Speaker had no authority to reconvene the parliament.

More significantly, Sirisena responded to the court order by convening a special meeting last night with Sri Lanka’s national security council and military commanders. No details have been revealed about what instructions he issued but the media has reported that he asked commanders to tighten security across the country. Inspector General of Police Pujitha Jayasundara has also instructed police to curb any violence that may occur.

The US and other major international powers have intensified their pressure on Sirisena following his dissolution of parliament. Sirisena and Rajapakse have both tried to appease international concerns.

Foreign minister Sarath Amunugama called a meeting of all foreign diplomats in Colombo, but according to Reuters, ambassadors from Britain, Netherlands, Norway, France, Australia, South Africa, Italy and Canada did not

attend. The European Union, the US and Germany sent representatives and India a junior official.

A US statement criticising the dissolution declared, “President Maithripala Sirisena’s decision to dissolve Parliament poses a vital threat to Sri Lanka’s democratic institutions” and an EU statement said, “A fully functioning Parliament is an essential pillar of democracy.”

Japan yesterday expressed its concerns about the political crisis and “the dissolution of the parliament.” The major powers are not concerned about democracy or social rights of the working class in Sri Lanka or anywhere else.

Washington backed the regime-change operation that brought Sirisena into the presidency in January 2015 and strengthened its military and political relations with Sri Lanka. Its current interventions in the escalating crisis in Colombo are in order to maintain those relations.

While the US and other major powers are currently backing Wickremesinghe, Washington is not averse to working with Rajapakse if he is willing to serve American interests.

The working class and the rural masses in Sri Lanka cannot defend their democratic or social rights through any of the ruling class parties or appeals to the judiciary. What is required is the independent mobilisation of workers and youth against every faction of the elite and on the basis of the revolutionary socialist program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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