

The political crisis in Sri Lanka: Its lessons for the international working class

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The political crisis that has raged in Sri Lanka for the past three weeks merits the careful attention of workers around the world.

Events on this island of 22 million people, lying off India's southern tip, are being propelled by the same processes, rooted in world capitalist breakdown, that are shaping political and socio-economic life around the globe.

Principal among these are:

- A US-led revival of militarism and great-power strategic rivalry that threatens, absent the revolutionary intervention of the working class, to plunge humanity into a third world war;

- A resurgence of class struggle as working people strive to put an end to decades of austerity and rampant social inequality;

- The breakdown of democratic, legal-constitutional forms of rule as all sections of the capitalist elite turn to reaction and authoritarianism.

Three weeks ago today, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena illegally sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe, the head of the United National Party (UNP), as the country's prime minister and installed in his stead the former president, Mahinda Rajapakse.

This was an abrupt reversal. One, moreover, that immediately set alarms bells ringing in Washington, since it cut across the longstanding US drive to harness Sri Lanka—which bestrides the world's most important shipping lanes—to its military-strategic offensive against China.

At the end of 2014, US imperialism, aided by its close regional ally India, had concocted an alliance between Sirisena, hitherto a loyal Rajapakse ally, and Wickremesinghe and his UNP. Just weeks before the January 2015 presidential election and only days after quitting Rajapakse's government, Sirisena was proclaimed the "common opposition" candidate to Rajapakse.

Sri Lanka's president from 2005 until his ouster in the 2015 US-orchestrated regime-change operation, Rajapakse had enjoyed Washington's steadfast support as he mounted a war of extermination against the separatist LTTE in which tens of

thousands of Tamil civilians perished. But he ran afoul of Washington by accepting large-scale Chinese investment, including in infrastructure.

The trigger for Sirisena's October 26 constitutional coup was the crisis provoked in ruling circles by the growing, working class-spearheaded, popular opposition to the brutal IMF-dictated austerity measures imposed by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime. In the months prior, the ostensible government allies, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, had desperately sought to shift public opprobrium for the deteriorating conditions of the masses onto one another. Meanwhile, Rajapakse agitated for a return to power, casting himself as a "strongman" who would whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism to split the working class and push through further pro-big business "restructuring."

Under conditions where the US has transformed all South Asia and the entire Indian Ocean region into a pivotal arena in its drive to encircle, isolate and subjugate China—as symbolized by the Pentagon's recent renaming of its Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command—the political crisis and infighting within the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie could not but become enmeshed in the geopolitical rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

Egged on by the US, the European Union, Canada, and somewhat less conspicuously India, Wickremesinghe and his UNP have defied Sirisena, refusing to recognize Rajapakse as prime minister or the fiat of his newly-appointed cabinet.

Sirisena has responded with increasingly blatant anti-democratic actions. When Rajapakse proved unable to secure support from a majority of legislators through horse-trading, Sirisena illegally ordered parliament disbanded and a fresh election. After the Supreme Court disallowed this, pending a final ruling on December 7, and parliamentarians voted "non-confidence" in Rajapakse in a vote Wednesday, Sirisena, in open breach of the constitution, affirmed the autocratic principle that the prime minister is whomever he appoints, irrespective of whether his choice is backed by parliament.

Already the commander-in-chief under the constitution, Sirisena has arrogated still more power by naming himself head of the ministries in charge of the police and the media. And, in a further ominous development, soldiers and tanks have been

deployed in parts of Colombo's suburbs and police commandos stationed outside parliament and all government ministries.

Wickremesinghe and his UNP are exploiting the illegal actions of the Sirisena-Rajapakse cabal to pose as the defenders of democracy. What a monstrous fraud! Wickremesinghe is eager to get his hands back on the machinery of state, with the help of Washington, London and New Delhi, so he can continue integrating Sri Lanka into the US war drive against China while imposing IMF austerity on Sri Lanka's workers and toilers. The UNP, it need be added, is no less steeped in anti-Tamil chauvinism than the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Sirisena and Rajapakse. It was the UNP under Jayawardene that launched the anti-Tamil civil war that convulsed the island from 1983 to 2009, and it was the UNP that injected Sinhala chauvinism into the DNA of the Sri Lankan state, when at independence it stripped Tamil plantation workers of their citizenship rights.

None of this has stopped the pro-US Tamil bourgeois party, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA); the Sinhala populist, ostensibly "left" JVP; and the various pseudo-left groups from flocking to the UNP's phony democratic banner.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, insists, and has insisted during all the twists and turns of the last three weeks of brawling within the ruling class, that the working class must mobilize to assert its own class interests, independently of and in opposition to both rival bourgeois camps.

In an October 31 statement, "Fight for a socialist solution to the political crisis in Sri Lanka," the SEP called on the working class to oppose both the Sirisena-Rajapakse and the Wickremesinghe-led UNPs' "grab for state power." "No one," it declared, "should have any illusion that these venal representatives of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie will defend democratic and social rights."

"The political coup," it continued, "is an acute expression in Sri Lanka of the worsening global economic crisis, sharpening geo-political tensions, particularly between the US and China, and the resurgence of class struggles internationally."

The statement went on to explain that parliament has always been a smokescreen behind which the bourgeoisie has ruthlessly pursued its own interests at the expense of the democratic and social rights and aspirations of the working class and oppressed masses. But today, under conditions of geopolitical crisis and mounting social opposition, including, to the consternation and fear of the bourgeoisie, the growing class unity of Tamil and Sinhalese workers, that façade is breaking down.

Whichever faction ultimately comes out on top of the increasingly bitter faction fight—yesterday there were fisticuffs on the floor of the Sri Lankan parliament—will be a government of an increasingly authoritarian character committed to

ruthlessly imposing austerity and otherwise enforcing the predatory interests of the capitalist elite. Rajapakse, it should be underscored, has publicly declared his readiness to work with Washington.

However, to this point, the US has spurned his appeals. The Trump administration is determined to see no letup in its offensive against Beijing. To underline this, US Ambassador Aliana Teplitz attended Wednesday's parliamentary session so she could personally watch over the no-confidence vote. And in a related development, Facebook, which like the other US-based tech giants works hand-in-glove with the US intelligence agencies, removed a post from the *World Socialist Web Site's* official Tamil-language Facebook page that exposed the TNA's close ties to Washington.

The only force that can secure democratic rights, social equality, and genuine independence from imperialism is the working class, rallying the rural and urban poor behind it in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, based on a socialist-internationalist program.

Similarly, the only progressive antipode to the US war drive is the mobilization of the international working class against the capitalist social order. The Chinese Communist Party regime, the representative of the oligarchy that emerged in the 1990s from the restoration of capitalism, seeks to counter Washington though its own military build-up and drive for global economic and diplomatic influence. In a move that can only give grist to US imperialist propaganda, Chinese President Xi welcomed Sirisena's October 26 political coup.

The putrefaction of Sri Lanka's parliamentary order, amid mounting social crisis and surging global tensions, underscores above all the urgency of building a revolutionary leadership—that is the SEP (Sri Lanka) and sections of the ICFI in every country—that can arm the incipient movement of the working class with a socialist program that corresponds to the objective logic and global character of its struggle.

Keith Jones and K. Ratnayake

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