

Sri Lankan president's "all party conference" fails to overcome political crisis

By Rohantha De Silva
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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena, falsely posing as an arbiter of the rival factions fighting for state power, held an All Party Conference of parliamentary parties yesterday. The conference ended without any agreement between the contending groups.

The meeting was attended by several United National Party (UNP) MPs led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was dismissed as prime minister on October 26 by Sirisena, and leaders of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, All Ceylon Muslim Congress and the Tamil Progressive Alliance of plantation unions.

The other faction was headed by former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who was appointed as new prime minister by Sirisena, and included several leading MPs from the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the plantations-based Ceylon Workers Congress.

Parliamentary speaker Karu Jayasuriya was invited but did not participate in the meeting saying it was meant for political parties. There are sharp tensions between Sirisena and Jayasuriya. The president supports the Rajapakse faction while the speaker is a senior member of Wickremesinghe's UNP.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) refused Sirisena's invitation to the meeting, declaring that he was the "creator of the crisis" and that he had to resolve it. The JVP, which is attempting to distance itself from Wickremesinghe, is, however, backing his party's efforts to regain power.

Sirisena's meeting was convened against the back drop of three consecutive days of bitter parliamentary fighting between supporters of Rajapakse and of Wickremesinghe. Parliament was reconvened on Wednesday after the Supreme Court issued an interim ruling overturning President Sirisena's dissolution of parliament.

Physical confrontations and violent clashes erupted when the UNP and opposition parties moved

no-confidence motions against Rajapakse and his new government on Wednesday and Friday. Speaker Jayasuriya ruled that the resolutions were passed with majority support on both days. On Thursday, Rajapakse made a statement to the parliament, but it broke up after the opposition tried to move a resolution rejecting his speech.

Sirisena rejected the first no-confidence vote and called on the UNP to remove a section criticising his appointment of Rajapakse as prime minister as "unconstitutional." At yesterday's All Party Conference, he rejected Friday's vote on the "modified" no-confidence motion, saying it should be voted on electronically, or by calling names, for it to be regarded as "trustworthy by the people and internationally."

Sirisena also called on MPs to act "decently" but offered no explanation for the violent behaviour of his factional supporters. Sirisena and leaders of the rival factions are somewhat nervous about the political impact on the Sri Lankan masses of the unruly fighting in parliament, which was broadcast live on television.

The UNP leadership told Sirisena that they could bring the 113 MPs who supported the "no-confidence proposal" to meet with him. Sirisena rejected the suggestion.

After the meeting, however, the UNP leadership insisted they would submit another motion to the parliament today. Rajapakse supporters said they would not allow such a proposal unless it was "properly" presented.

Wickremesinghe, who is backed by the US and its allies, is determined to continue his bid for power. Colombo-based diplomats from the US, EU, UK, Australia and Japan visited Wickremesinghe at Temple Trees, the prime minister's official residence, after yesterday's All Party Conference.

On November 15, American, Japanese, Australian and

Indian government officials meeting in Singapore, prior to the ASEAN summit, discussed the escalating political crisis in Sri Lanka. A US State Department statement said that its senior officials stressed the need for joint efforts to “advance shared regional interests, including support for the new Maldivian government, and encouragement of an outcome to political developments in Sri Lanka consistent with democratic principles.”

Washington and its international allies have no concern for “democratic principles” but are motivated by their own imperialist concerns and, in particular, are determined to undermine all Chinese economic and political influence in the Asia-Pacific region.

Recently-elected Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih came to power last month with behind-the-scenes backing from Washington and New Delhi. The US and India opposed former Maldives President Abdulla Yameen because of his close ties with Beijing.

Sirisena became Sri Lankan president in 2015 following a regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse orchestrated by Washington and with Wickremesinghe’s help.

Washington had no opposition to Rajapakse’s authoritarian methods of rule but was hostile to his close ties with Beijing. The US considers that any government led by Rajapakse would be a pro-Chinese regime that would undermine its political and military preparations for war against China.

The International Monetary Fund is also putting pressure on Sirisena and Rajapakse, announcing that it has delayed the last instalment of a \$1.5 billion bailout loan to Colombo. Sri Lankan Central Bank Governor Dr. Indrajit Coomaraswamy revealed last Wednesday that the IMF payment had been postponed, pending the outcome of the political crisis. Washington no doubt had a hand in this decision.

The international media is also widely using Chinese President Xi Jinping’s congratulatory message to Rajapakse—immediately following his appointment as prime minister—as “proof” of Beijing’s influence. China, which is manoeuvring to counter US geo-political activities, hopes that a Rajapakse regime would boost Colombo’s ties with Beijing.

Rajapakse, however, has sent signals to the US and India that his government would be prepared to work with them. In September, he visited New Delhi and met with Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi. When Donald Trump became US president in 2017, Rajapakse immediately sent a congratulatory message.

On Friday, Wickremesinghe cynically told the media

that the ferocious fighting in parliament was a “blow to democracy” and “a blow to all of us who are voters of Sri Lanka in whom the sovereignty lies.” UNP governments, which instigated the almost 30-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, like all other bourgeois regimes in Sri Lanka, have systematically suppressed the democratic rights of the Sri Lankan masses.

Rajapakse, who endorses Sirisena’s call for new elections, continues to posture as a “defender” of democratic rights, declaring that if the Sri Lankan parliament is unable to resolve the political crisis, then “the people should be allowed to intervene. When the voters are given power, no one will have a problem.”

These claims are false. Rajapakse was voted out in the 2015 presidential election because workers and the poor opposed his attack on social and democratic rights and bloody atrocities carried out against the Tamil minority during the war.

The “democratic” demagoguery of the Wickremesinghe and Sirisena-Rajapakse factions is bogus. Their real concern is not “democracy” but widespread social discontent and the eruption of protests and strikes among workers, youth and the poor.

Both formations, and their erstwhile allies, are political representatives of the venal Sri Lankan capitalist class. Whichever faction wins government will move, sooner rather than later and with the backing of international finance capital, to unleash vicious attacks on the rights of all working people.

The working class must urgently intervene on the basis of the revolutionary perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, and to rally the working masses, the youth and the rural poor to fight for workers’ and peasants’ government based on a socialist program.

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