

Popular Opposition to Wickremesinghe's Election Could Spill Over Into Violence in Sri Lanka

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*Sri Lanka was braced for more unrest after newly appointed president **Ranil Wickremesinghe** vowed to crack down on the protests that toppled his predecessor, condemning them as “against the law”.*

Speaking after being MPs picked him as successor to **Gotabaya Rajapaksa**, Wickremesinghe made it clear he would not tolerate those he perceived to be stirring up violence.

“If you try to topple the government, occupy the president's office and the prime minister's office, that is not democracy; it is against the law,” he said.

“We will deal with them firmly according to the law. We will not allow a minority of protesters to suppress the aspirations of the silent majority clamoring for a change in the political system.”

Wickremesinghe is expected to name the leader of the parliament and old schoolmate Dinesh Gunawardena as prime minister on Thursday. Gunawardena is known as a strong Rajapaksa loyalist, and served as a cabinet member when Mahinda Rajapaksa was president, and then again when Gotabaya Rajapaksa was president.

In recent days, Wickremesinghe, who [declared a state of emergency](#) this week, had made statements calling protesters “fascists” and indicating he would not be afraid to crack down on the demonstrations.

Less than an hour after he was declared president on Wednesday, a court order was issued prohibiting anyone from congregating within a 50-metre radius of a statue that stands at Galle Face in Colombo, where protesters spurred by the country's economic collapse have

been camped out for months.

People Defy Order

However, people defied the order and dozens gathered on the steps of the president's offices, which are still occupied by the protest movement, to shout rallying cries of "deal Ranil" – a reference to Wickremesinghe's reputation as a scheming politician – as well as "Ranil bank robber", referring to a bank bond scam he was implicated in. Hundreds of police and military stood on the periphery but did not interfere in the rally.

After being selected by MPs as president, Wickremesinghe called on the opposition parties for an "end to division" and said he wanted to "bring everyone together so that a national consensus is formed as to the way forward".

But questions remain over whether Wickremesinghe would be able to put together a cross-party unity government acceptable to the people, after the major opposition parties had pledged their support for the presidential candidate he defeated.

Wickremesinghe has been prime minister six times and is close to the Rajapaksa family. Protesters fear that he will protect the Rajapaksas from being held accountable, as he has been accused of doing in the past, and would not instigate the constitutional change being demanded by the protest movement, including an end to the system of executive presidency.

Wickremesinghe is due to serve for the rest of Rajapaksa's term, until November 2024.

Ranil Does Not Have Mandate

"Ranil will be chased away, he is a crook and he does not have a mandate," said Anura Goonaratna, 53, a toy exporter. "This protest movement is going to get worse. There has to be an end to this and the only ending we will accept is throwing Ranil out, whatever it takes."

China's Loan

Analysts have disputed the China debt-trap narrative in Sri Lanka. China only accounts for 10% of Sri Lanka's debts, most of which were concessionary loans and the repayments only accounted for less than 5% of the country's annual foreign debt servicing.

US: High Interest Rate

A much greater drain on the country's foreign exchange reserves were international sovereign bonds, much of which are from the US, which were borrowed by the country at high interest rates. It was these bond repayments – which were due to total over \$1.5bn in 2022 – that drained Sri Lanka's reserves and ultimately forced them to default in May, as the country was virtually bankrupt.

People Are Unhappy

Ranil Wickremesinghe's election as President could again plunge Sri Lanka into another round of political unrest and instability.

Ranil has little credibility with the general public. In some places, protests called for Ranil Wickremesinghe to quit ahead of today's elections but these were not mass rallies.

According to some analysts it may not be as easy to mobilize protests.

Anticipating possible demonstrations, the Colombo Port Magistrate's Court issued an order Wednesday preventing anyone from reaching within a 50 meter radius of the S.W.R.D. Bandarnaike statue which is located at the protest site at the Galle face green in the capital.

Neither Ranil nor the members of parliament have credibility with the voters.

The fear is that this may lead to another round of street protests, calling for Ranil to quit.

Sri Lanka at the moment can ill afford another political turmoil when the President and the new government he appoints has to focus on getting the economy back on track. That won't be an easy job. Much will depend on whether the protesters are back on the street and how the President tackles the fresh volley of unrest.

Rumor mills in Sri Lankans are now pointing fingers at New Delhi for ensuring Wickremesinghe's victory.

Denying these charges, the Indian High Commission in Colombo tweeted : "We have seen baseless and purely speculative media reports about efforts at political level from India to influence political leaders in Sri Lanka regarding elections in the Sri Lankan Parliament to the post of the President of Sri Lanka." And again "(We) categorically deny these media reports as completely false. They are clearly a figment of someone's imagination." Another tweet said that India "does not interfere in internal affairs and democratic processes of another country".

Numbers in Parliament Do not Depict True Composition On The Ground: Says AKD

Claiming that the composition of Parliament did not represent the true desire of the people, NPP leader **Anura Kumara Dissanayake** reiterated that an opportunity should be given for a new mandate as there was no genuineness for any form of government established in the current Parliament.

He told Parliament that the composition which is shown through numbers in Parliament was not the real composition on the ground.

"There is a huge contradiction between the desire of the people outside and the Parliament," he said. He said they always stood for an interim government for a short period of time headed by a President and a Prime Minister who had no future political agendas.

He said however, they failed to come to a consensus despite discussions with several political parties. Dissanayake alleged that MPs had been bought over this time also just as in the past.

"When I saw the number of parties extending support for Dulas Alahapperuma, I thought he would receive more than 113 votes. It is now clear that the members in the political parties do not always stay with the policies of the parties. We have a past where MPs were sold for

money. This situation has not changed,” he said.

Our Candidate Could not Win: Rajapaksa

Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa said that his party’s candidate was unable to win the Presidential election in Parliament yesterday.

“We presented Dullas. We voted for him, but lost. Somebody has to win,” he told media in Parliament.

“He (Ranil) got more votes, so he became the President. That’s what has happened. We are waiting to see what will happen in the future. Whatever the government is, it must work for the people of the country,” he said.

“There are different opinions. Some say this is the opinion of the people. We say this is not the opinion of the people,” he also said.

Commenting about the protesters, the former President said “I think the struggle is over now. The youth who are engaged in the struggle at Galle Face must understand that now. They must now leave and get on with their work,” the former Premier said

Arson Attack On Ranil’s Private Residence: Four Suspects Remanded

Four suspects arrested over the incident of setting fire to Acting President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s private residence in Colombo were yesterday remanded till July 27 by Colombo Fort Magistrate’s Court.

These four suspects are to be produced before an identification parade on the next hearing date.

Defence Counsel appearing for the suspects alleged that police have failed to arrest the main suspect involved in the incident. In reply, the CID informed Colombo Fort Magistrate **Thilina Gamage** that an individual named **Ivan Perera** wanted for questioning over the incident has already fled the country and further said the airport authorities have been informed in this regard.

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