

AVOIDABLE CRISIS: ON SRI LANKA'S POLITICAL CRISIS

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala [Sirisena's decision to withdraw his faction](#) from the ruling coalition and replace Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa has plunged the country into a political crisis. This was further complicated, a day later, by the President's move to suspend Parliament till November 16. Mr. Sirisena's fast-deteriorating relationship with Mr. Wickremesinghe was an open secret, and there were indications that he could be negotiating a possible partnership with Mr. Rajapaksa. But his sudden and secret manoeuvre caught everyone, including senior politicians, completely unawares. And before the details and implications of the political drama that was unfolding could sink in, Mr. Rajapaksa had been sworn in Prime Minister, beaming as he greeted the President, his chief rival until days ago. Mr. Wickremesinghe has termed his replacement "unconstitutional" and maintains that he remains Prime Minister. Confident of a majority, he has challenged the Rajapaksa-Sirisena combine to take a floor test in the 225-member House. By suspending Parliament, Mr. Sirisena is seen to have exposed his own insecurity about garnering the required strength. The next two weeks will be crucial, with attempts at horse-trading and assertions of political loyalty amid uncertainty. None of these is uncommon in Sri Lankan politics, but the circumstances, which are entirely of Mr. Sirisena's making, have led to a political upheaval that was avoidable. All this has come at a time of economic fragility, with a plummeting rupee, soaring unemployment and rising living costs.

Wickremesinghe's arrogance led to his sacking: Sirisena

Mr. Sirisena's appointment of Mr. Rajapaksa even before voting out Mr. Wickremesinghe on the floor of Parliament is nothing but blatant abuse of his executive powers. Guided by narrow political interests, the President's actions betray an utter disregard for the parliamentary process. In resorting to these emergency measures, he has not only put democracy in serious peril but also let down Sri Lankans, including a sizeable section of the Tamil and Muslim minorities that backed him in the critical 2015 election. The best forum to test political clout in a democracy is the legislature. An extra-parliamentary power struggle, that too using illegal means, heightens the risk of political thuggery and unrest. Still recovering from the violence and bloodbath during its nearly three-decade-long civil war, and grappling with the economic and social challenges in its aftermath, Sri Lanka cannot afford to recede from the democratic space that opened up in 2015. Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe had come together in an exceptional political alliance that promised to put the country back on the path of democracy, after a decade of Mr. Rajapaksa's authoritarian rule. Leaving aside the irony of Mr. Sirisena joining hands with Mr. Rajapaksa, who he had left and subsequently unseated from office, his desire to consolidate power by hook or by crook is extremely unfortunate. Though much damage has been done already, a fair vote must be ensured when Parliament reconvenes, if possible before November 16.

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The immediate task is to dial down the tensions over Sabarimala

M.J. Akbar should have resigned. Or else, asked to go

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