

## India watches as Sri Lanka Speaker backs sacked PM



**Wickremesinghe, Rajapaksa**

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IN A relief to Sri Lanka's embattled leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, its Speaker, Karu Jayasuriya, refused to endorse his sacking as the prime minister, even as President Maithripala Sirisena on Sunday asserted that the appointment of Mahinda Rajapaksa as his successor was in strict accordance with the Constitution.

India, meanwhile, played safe and said that it hoped that "democratic values" and "constitutional process" would be respected. "India is closely following the recent political developments in Sri Lanka. As a democracy and a close friendly neighbour, we hope that democratic values and the constitutional process will be respected.

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We will continue to extend our developmental assistance to the friendly people of Sri Lanka," the Ministry of External Affairs' official spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said on Sunday.

In a letter to Sirisena, Jayasuriya backed the ousted prime minister's request to retain his privileges and security until another candidate could prove majority, saying it was "democratic and fair". He also questioned the President's decision to suspend Parliament till November 16, saying it will have "serious and undesirable" consequences on the country.

In his first address to the nation after sacking Wickremesinghe, Sirisena said his former ally's political conduct since the victory in 2015 elections was unbecoming. "He appeared to treat Sri Lanka's future as a joyride for a coterie of people around him who had no sense of the common man's thinking," he said.

"He completely destroyed the concept of good governance while corruption and waste became rampant. He was making arrogant arbitrary decisions, making a mockery of collective responsibility," Sirisena charged. "There was a huge gap in policy agreement between the two of us. I believe the cultural and policy differences between us con-

tributed to this political and economic crisis," he said.

Sirisena also accused the United National Party (UNP) leader of treating very lightly the alleged plot to assassinate him. "Having taken into consideration all crisis, the political and economic as well as the assassination plot on me, I was only left with one alternative which was to appoint former President Mahinda Rajapaksa as the prime minister," Sirisena said.

Rejecting Wickremesinghe's allegation that his sacking was unconstitutional and illegal, he said, "I must make it very clear that the new appointment (of Rajapaksa) was made on expert legal advice in strict accordance with the Constitution."

Sirisena on Friday night sacked Wickremesinghe and appointed former strongman Rajapaksa as the new prime minister. The next day, Sirisena suspended Parliament till November 16, after Wickremesinghe sought an emergency session to prove his majority.

The President also withdrew Wickremesinghe's personal security and vehicles in order to accord them to his 72-year-old successor, who staged a dramatic political comeback on Friday.

Sirisena's remarks came after the Speaker urged him to restore Wickremesinghe's privileges as the leader of the government who has "obtained a mandate to secure democracy and good governance".

"In this context, continuing the prorogation of Parliament until November 16 will have serious and undesirable consequences for our country, and I kindly request you to reconsider same. I consider it is my duty to draw your attention to the convention that a prorogation should be one in consultation with the Speaker," Jayasuriya said in his letter to Sirisena.

Sirisena's decision to suspend Parliament until November 16 was seen as an effort to coerce legislators into supporting Rajapaksa. Wickremesinghe has refused to vacate the prime minister's official residence-cum-office of Temple Trees.

The political crisis in the island nation on Sunday triggered violence as one person was killed and two others injured as the bodyguards of Petroleum Minister Arjuna Ranatunga, a Wickremesinghe loyalist, fired live rounds when supporters of Rajapaksa threatened the cabinet member.

— WITH PTI, COLOMBO