

## International

# Supreme Court rules against Sri Lanka president, impeachment edges closer

## Wickremesinghe's party welcome verdict as victory for democracy

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's Supreme Court opened the way for potential impeachment proceedings against the president yesterday, ruling that he broke the law by dissolving parliament last month. The verdict is a major blow to Maithripala Sirisena, seven weeks into a political crisis in the Indian Ocean island nation that has sparked alarm abroad and concern over its finances. The seven-judge bench unanimously agreed that Sirisena violated the constitution when he dissolved parliament last month and called a snap election nearly two years ahead of schedule.

"I make order that the November 9 Gazette (decree) sacking parliament... has no force or effect in law and declare its operation illegal," Chief Justice Nalin Perera said as he delivered the landmark judgment to a packed courtroom. Sacked prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's party had said it would await the outcome of yesterday's decision before deciding whether to open impeachment proceedings.

Sirisena triggered the unprecedented political crisis on October 26 when he fired Wickremesinghe and appointed contentious former strongman Mahinda Rajapakse in his place. There was no immediate comment from either

Sirisena or Rajapakse. However, Rajapakse's legislator son, Namal, told reporters outside the court house that they did not agree with the verdict. "We do not agree with the decision of the court, but we do not have a higher court to appeal to," he said.

### Coup

The leftist JVP, or the People's Liberation Front, said the sacking of the prime minister in October was a "coup orchestrated by Sirisena and Rajapakse" and called for a resolution in parliament to bring them to justice. "This first thing this (restored) parliament should do is to investigate the coup and bring both the president and his illegal prime minister to justice," JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake said. Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) welcomed the verdict as a victory for democracy.

"As a country we have to be joyful that we have an independent judiciary that acted as a check on an errant executive," UNP deputy leader Sajith Premadasa said. Sirisena dissolved parliament on November 9 when Rajapakse, the man he appointed as prime minister, was unable to prove a majority in the 225-member assembly. Constitutional provi-



**COLOMBO:** A supporter of ousted Sri Lanka's prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe holds a flare and shouts slogans with other supporters as they celebrate Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ruling outside the Sri Lankan Supreme Court in Colombo. —AFP

sions were clear that he could not dissolve the legislature until it completes four and a half years out of its five-year term, which ends in August 2020.

Four days later after parliament was sacked, the Supreme Court issued an interim ruling suspending Sirisena's decree and restoring parliament, which almost immediately passed a no-confidence motion against Rajapakse, the purported premier. Wickremesinghe's party and their allies command a majority in parliament. On Wednesday, the legislature voted

overwhelmingly to demand the reinstatement of Wickremesinghe with the power struggle just weeks away from a government shutdown.

Members of Wickremesinghe's party and their allies voted 117-0 asking Sirisena to reverse his October 26 dismissal of his former ally. However, Sirisena has vowed he will not reinstate Wickremesinghe. Courts have also prevented Rajapakse and his disputed cabinet exercising power until they can prove their legitimacy. A hearing by the Court of Appeal on Wednesday was put off until January 16. —AFP

## India's ruling party to tackle problems after state poll setbacks

**NEW DELHI:** Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party officials gathered yesterday for talks on a general election due by May, with their deliberations overshadowed by the party's defeat at the polls in three heartland rural states. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) said the gathering, to be chaired by the party's president, Amit Shah, is a regular quarterly meeting but the losses in its stronghold states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, confirmed this week, are likely to dominate discussions.

Disgruntled voters blamed the slow pace of job creation and weak farm prices for the Hindu nationalist party's defeat in the states, two of which it ruled for three straight terms. "We realize that rural distress and employment generation are the key issues and we are working on them," said BJP spokesman Gopal Krishna

Agarwal, who will attend the meeting that starts in the afternoon and could be addressed by Modi. "They will have to be tackled, and we will take suggestions from wherever needed."

Senior BJP minister Nitin Gadkari told the ET Now business channel on yesterday that the agriculture sector may have been neglected under their government. Agarwal said the party already had a strategy for the upcoming general election, which must be held by May, and it would hold another big gathering next month. A chartered accountant who is also a director in a state-run bank, Agarwal said increasing lending for job-generating small businesses was a key focus, as was enhancing procurement of grain from farmers by government agencies at state-mandated prices so there are no distress sales.

The government announces so-called minimum support prices for most crops to set a benchmark, but state agencies mainly buy limited quantities of staples such as rice and wheat at those prices, restricting benefits of higher prices to only around 7 percent of the country's 263 million farmers, according to various studies. Following the state election setbacks, Modi's government is expected to announce loan waivers worth billions of dollars to woo farmers, government sources told Reuters this week. —Reuters

## Bangladeshi journalists self-censor as election approaches

**DHAKA:** With less than a month to go to a general election, many journalists in Bangladesh say they are living in fear of ever-tightening media laws and engaging in self-censorship as a result. While Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration has won plaudits globally for welcoming hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution in Myanmar, critics have lashed out at it for cracking down on free speech and an increasingly authoritarian rule.

In interviews Reuters conducted with 32 journalists and editors across print, digital and broadcast media in Bangladesh, the vast majority said the recent strengthening of defamation laws with a new Digital Security Act (DSA) has spread a climate of fear in the industry. Dozens of journalists were arrested for defamation under the earlier law, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act.

The DSA goes further - penalizing obtaining papers, information, or pictures from government offices without official consent, said Asif Nazrul, a professor of Law at the University of Dhaka. "It

would make investigative journalism on corruption, human rights abuses and bad governance very tough, if not impossible," he said. Another piece of legislation, the Broadcast Act 2018, was proposed in October to regulate broadcast news portals.

Both laws restrict bail and allow arrests without a warrant. The government has denied accusations it's trying to curb press freedom and Hasina assured a press briefing in October that "journalists who do not publish false news need not worry" about the DSA. Journalists, however, question the timing of the laws and have staged protests in recent weeks in the capital Dhaka, particularly against the DSA, which they say will thwart their ability to report independently, especially on the upcoming election.

Critics of Hasina, who is seeking a third straight term in power, say the Dec. 30 election will be a litmus test for the strength of democracy in Bangladesh. The last election in 2014 was boycotted by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as unfair and shunned by international observers, with more than half the seats uncontested. Matiur Rahman Chowdhury, editor-in-chief of Manab Zamin, a popular Bengali-language daily, said self-censorship was becoming common. "As an editor, I feel sad when I kill a report that was the outcome of several days of exhaustive work by a reporter. But I take the decision purely to save the reporter, because I know the risks involved in publishing it," he said. "I fight every moment with myself and with my shadow." —Reuters