

NEWS ROUND UP

Wednesday, November 28, 2018

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President plans to bypass P'ment to fund Govt. expenses

President Maithripala Sirisena will use constitutional provisions that enable him to access public funds sans parliamentary approval to fund government expenditure until March 2019 in place of a Budget if Parliament is dissolved, his spokesman said yesterday.

A Vote on Account to access funds was given the nod at a meeting of the Cabinet appointed by President Sirisena which he presided over yesterday.

Speaking at a press briefing held at the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) head office, MP Mahinda Samarasinghe said the Vote on Account seeks to access funds to manage state affairs for up to three months in 2019. The Vote on Account (VoA) was presented by Sirisena's Finance Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, it is uncertain when the VoA is to be presented in Parliament or if it will be presented. Samarasinghe also argued that there were provisions in the Constitution giving the President power to gazette the VoA in the event the Parliament stands dissolved. The provision allows access to money from the Consolidated Fund for a period of three months.

"To access funds from 1 January next year, we need either a Budget or a Vote on Account.

The Vote on Account has been approved by Cabinet. If Court upholds the decision to dissolve Parliament, there are provisions in the Constitution giving power to the President under Article 150 (3). He can issue a proclamation and gazette the Vote on Account. It is legal to do so and this is allowed for three months," he claimed.

Article 150. (3) reads as follows: "Where the President dissolves Parliament before the Appropriation Bill for the financial year has passed into law, he may, unless Parliament shall have already made provision, authorize the issue from the Consolidated Fund and the expenditure of such sums as he may consider necessary for the public services until the expiry of a period of three months from the date on which the new Parliament is summoned to meet."

Assuring that all necessary actions would be taken to ensure that the country could be run smoothly in any event, Samarasinghe claimed that the relevant officials had initiated action on the matter already, insisting that there would be no issue to access funds until the end of the year.

"We don't have an issue in accessing funds in 2018, as once the Appropriation Bill can be approved in Parliament we can then access funds from the Consolidated Fund based on that. It is legal. There is legislation in the country to make loan repayments without it being referred to Parliament," he said.

The SLFP is likely to boycott the debate on the motion presented by a group of United National Party Parliamentarians to block funds to the office of the Prime Minister, citing that debating an issue which is before a court of law is sub judice. A group led by UNP parliamentarians has filed a Quo Warranto case before the Court of Appeal regarding former President Mahinda Rajapaksa holding the office of Prime Minister when two no confidence motions had been passed against him in Parliament.

"We are not sure if this can be taken up and we have asked the Speaker to seek the opinion of the Attorney General on the matter," SLFP spokesperson MP Dayasiri Jayasekera explained. The SLFP is set to make a final decision on the matter today when the parliamentary group meets, he said.

"The tradition and process of separation of power dictates that the Legislature and Judiciary do not trespass onto each other's territory," Jayasekera said.

Agreeing with his colleague, Samarasinghe also objected to the clauses included in the motion, which indicate that two gazettes issued by the President, first removing the sitting Prime Minister and the second appointing a new one, were illegal.

“First of all we must decide whether this motion can be tabled in Parliament as it questions the actions taken by President Sirisena and the release of two presidential gazette notifications,” he said.

The President in a party leaders meeting earlier objected to the no confidence motion based on that clause, saying he would accept a revised motion passed in Parliament without the clause. .(Daily FT)

Speaker remains unfazed

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya, who was unshaken by the UPFA parliamentary group refusing to cooperate to continue parliamentary sittings, leading the house into chaos, assured Parliament that he would continue to be Speaker for as long as lawmakers needed.

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya

He told Parliament that he was unafraid to don a prison uniform if that was what was required to defend “truth, justice and fairness”. (AH)

Inviting the Opposition to remove him from the post, the Speaker held that a no confidence motion should be moved against him if the UPFA disliked his rulings.

“I have trust in all Parliament officers, including the Secretary General, including the Editor of the Hansard. I am proud of them. I am not moved by my effigies being burnt. I hail from the village and it is good to burn effigies to avoid evil eyes. In case they decide to burn more, I have no issue,” said the Speaker, who also rejected violating any rules and regulations of Parliament and the Constitution.

Rejecting the UPFA allegations of interfering with Hansard records and the alleged counterfeit documentations, Speaker Jayasuriya said he had never in his life forged any document.

“I support any investigation into this matter. If I have acted in an unacceptable manner, the best thing is to bring in a no confidence motion against me,” he added. .(Daily FT)

UPFA boycotts Parliament

United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) parliamentarians yesterday said that they had decided to boycott Parliament until Speaker Karu Jayasuriya conducted Parliament in adherence with Standing Orders and the Constitution.

However, the actions of the Speaker were stoutly defended by United National Party (UNP) members who insisted that he had held to the highest standards of ethics in discharging his duties. (AH)

The UPFA parliamentary group submitted a letter to Speaker Jayasuriya requesting him not to make the Hansard reports pertaining to Parliament sessions on 14, 15, 16, 19, 21 and 23 November public, claiming that the said reports were “not legally acceptable”. In the letter, the UPFA has stated that the sessions held on the specific dates were not held according to the Constitution and had violated the Standing Orders.

UPFA MP Dinesh Gunawardena, elaborating on the reasons behind the group's decision to boycott, said: "We informed Mahinda Rajapaksa of our decision to boycott Parliament sessions until the Speaker operates under the Constitution and Standing Orders. Today also there was no Order Paper. The Speaker is acting of his own accord. This has now become a Sirikotha party meeting. Parliament now sits violating the Standing Orders. We are a group of MPs who refuse the Speaker's erroneous decisions. We demand that he come back on the right track."

Assuring the country that the UPFA parliamentary group had not violated the laws of the land or the Standing Orders during the recent chaos in Parliament, MP Gunawardena said: "Whatever party we are in, we have to act according to the Constitution. We shall not accept anything done violating the Constitution. The President has also informed the Speaker to act according to the Constitution and correct the resolutions passed against the lawful procedure. Parliament sits without Standing Orders or an Order Paper. There was no party leaders' meeting as well. We cannot bow down to these actions. All these actions violate the Constitution and Standing Orders. Until the Speaker starts to act according to the Constitution we shall not participate in Parliament sessions."

UPFA MP Nimal Siripala de Silva held that Parliament was not a place to act according to personal impulses and desires.

"There should be a ruling party and an opposition in the House. But the Speaker is only acting with the Opposition. There is no ruling party, Prime Minister or Cabinet present. So how come Parliament sits? Speaker Karu Jayasuriya has utterly destroyed Parliament traditions," he said.

However, UNP lawmaker Eran Wickramaratne, drawing the House's attention to the UPFA finding fault with Speaker Jayasuriya and boycotting Parliament, held that it was an uncivilised and premature move.

"It is a day in which we have an awkward situation where a purported government in this country has actually decided not to attend Parliament. It is not unusual for oppositions across the world to sometimes boycott parliaments because they have disagreements with the majority or the governments of the day. But you never get a situation where a party claiming to be a Government boycotts Parliament. This unusual situation shows this purported Government is an absolute sham because it is unable to prove through a majority that it is actually a government," he said.

According to MP Wickramaratne, the history of Parliament democracy has shown that the job of the Speaker is a very difficult job.

"If you take British parliamentary history, normally the Speaker is accompanied by two MPs on the first day to the Speaker's chair. It was a job or a responsibility that somebody took up reluctantly. If you look at British parliamentary history, many Speakers finally lost their lives because they had to stand up to the Executive or the King of the day. This tradition still continues in the British Parliament," he added.

Drawing attention to the Sri Lanka Parliament, where the Speaker is also accompanied by two people to the Speaker's chair after being appointed, he identified the job as a curse which no MP would prefer to take.

"This continues in our Parliament in a different way when two people accompany the Speaker to the Speaker's chair. It is a job that many MPs would not envy. If you look at history it is a job that entails standing up to the Executive, whoever the Executive might be across the world. Parliament is supreme and independent from the Executive. This tradition will have to be maintained always. You have stood up to the Executive in the past and Parliament has been devalued for appointing a Government, unable for a month to prove its majority in the House. On 14 and 16 November a motion which was proposing that they have no confidence was proved and passed. The Standing Orders were suspended with a majority

and this is not uncommon in Parliament,” added MP Wickramaratne while supporting Speaker Jayasuriya.

UNP MP S.M. Marikkar, raising a point of order, held that UPFA MP Udaya Gammanpila had threatened to arrest the Speaker under the charge of making fake documents.

“Gammanpila had accused the Speaker of making unauthorised changes to the Hansard. He had threatened to file charges against the Speaker under the penal code. We want an investigation into this allegation,” Marikkar said.

UNP MP Navin Dissanayake, addressing the House, held that the Speaker was the bravest lawmaker he has ever known.

“Speaker Jayasuriya’s recent conduct and how he withstood the enormous pressure proved that he was braver and more courageous than my late father Gamini Dissanayake and late Minister Lalith Athulathmudali who steadfastly fought for principles of democracy,” said MP Dissanayake.

Taking matters forward, the UPFA parliamentary group also announced its decision to boycott the sitting at a press conference held at the parliament complex yesterday.

Accordingly, the UPFA parliamentary group, now headed by MP Mahinda Rajapaksa, had met before, reaching the decision to boycott House sittings to force Speaker Jayasuriya to give rulings to suit their thinking. .(Daily FT)

Tourism hit by political turmoil

The constitutional standoff has damaged the tourism industry, forcing many Sri Lankans out of their jobs and hotels to incur revenue losses during the upcoming season, UNP MP Prof. Ashu Marasinghe said yesterday while moving an adjournment motion in Parliament on the tourism industry.

According to MP Marasinghe, who moved the motion under Standing Order 19 (1), development in the tourism industry seen under the Coalition Government has declined during the last 30 days. “The Unity Government was able to develop Sri Lanka to be one of the top destinations in the world.

Today this has gone down to saying Sri Lanka is not a safe destination to travel to. Many conferences are cancelled. ‘So Sri Lanka’ is a new marketing campaign launched in the UK and now we are unable to make use of that launch. In Sigiriya alone there is a big drop in tourists. Airport arrivals have dropped by 20% a day,” he said. .(Daily FT)

Sri Lanka rupee, bonds open steady

Sri Lanka’s rupee opened steady on Wednesday, quoted wide at around 180.20/181.00 rupees to the US dollar in the spot market, and bonds were largely unchanged amid a continuing political crisis in the country, dealers said.

The rupee closed around 180.50/90 rupees to the US dollar on Tuesday.

Gilt yields opened steady in the secondary market on dull sentiment, dealers said.

A three-year bond maturing in 2021 was at 11.88/97 percent, unchanged from the previous close.

A five-year bond maturing in 2023 was also unchanged at 11.95/12.05 percent, as was an eight-year bond maturing in 2027 at 12.33/45 percent.

Sri Lanka is sinking deeper into constitutional crisis with loyalists of president Maithripala Sirisena announcing a boycott of parliament accusing the Speaker of bias.

It's now more than a month since Sirisena sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replaced him with former strong-man president Mahinda Rajapaksa, dissolving parliament and calling for elections in January.

The country's Supreme Court issued an interim injunction against the dissolution of parliament which has since twice passed a no-confidence motion against Rajapaksa who has refused to yield.

An expanded bench of seven judges have been named to hear a case against the dissolution of parliament next month.

The court of appeal will hear a case this Friday disputing the legitimacy of Rajapaksa's Cabinet. .(Economy Next)

Alipay, Dialog Axiata to give mobile cash to Chinese tourists in Sri Lanka

Dialog Axiata has struck a partnership with China's Alipay, the world's largest mobile and online payment platform, to extend its eZ Cash mobile wallet service to Chinese tourists in Sri Lanka.

"The Alipay mobile wallet service will now be available at merchants to cater to the needs of Alipay users from China, who frequently travel and shop in Sri Lanka," a statement said.

"The partnership with Dialog will enable Alipay payment acceptance at a large base of local merchants, creating opportunities for local merchants to better target the large number of visiting Chinese tourists and expatriates living in Sri Lanka," said Cherry Huang, General Manager for Alipay Cross-border Business in South and Southeast Asia.

Supun Weerasinghe, Group Chief Executive of Dialog Axiata said the deal to facilitate Alipay customers with their payments in Sri Lanka through Dialog's 20,000 strong eZ Cash retail partner network eliminates the hassle of converting currency.

"Through its first partnership in Sri Lanka, Alipay intends to expand reach by leveraging Dialog's multiple merchants and touchpoints, extending payment services to Chinese visitors in Sri Lanka," the statement said.

With over 700 million active registered users in mainland China, Alipay is an alternative cashless payment system predominantly used by Chinese public and offers the convenience of payment services without the need for large amounts of cash.

Alipay, the Alibaba affiliated mobile payments arm of China's Ant Financial Services Group, is the highest valued fintech company in the world. .(Economy Next)

Sri Lanka SEC says aiming for swift action against illegal activity

Sri Lanka's capital markets regulator is working to set up a regulatory framework enabling swift action against illegal activity, Vajira Wijegunawardane, Director General of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said.

The SEC has long enjoyed robust and healthy relations with its counterparts in the Asia Pacific region, he told a five-day forum it hosted in Colombo to train financial regulators on enforcement and litigation.

"Our aim ultimately is to put in place a regulatory framework within which swift and decisive action is the norm of the day and which serves as a credible deterrent to unscrupulous actors in our market," Wijegunawardane said.

"The dialogues we hope to set in motion at this regional seminar and at other future events in the same vein will doubtless serve as catalysts towards this end."

The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Financial Regulators Training Initiative (FRTI) forum drew over 60 participants from local regulatory organizations like the Colombo Stock Exchange, Attorney General's Department, Financial Intelligence Unit of Central Bank of Sri Lanka and SEC.

Officials from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Philippines, Nepal, Thailand, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea also attended the seminar.

The APEC FRTI provides cost-effective training for junior and mid-level staff of financial supervisory and regulatory agencies and stock and derivative exchanges, a statement said.

"Financial regulators are faced with many challenges as a result of Information Technology, new forms of financial crime, use of virtual currencies and digitalization of services," it said.(Economy Next)