Sri Lanka leader keeps defence, finance in new cabinet

AFP – Sri Lanka President Anura Kumara Dissanayake retained the key defence and finance portfolios in a new cabinet he announced Monday after sweeping snap parliamentary elections last week.
The leftist leader, who won the September presidential election, confirmed his interim cabinet colleagues – Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya and Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath – would keep their portfolios.

Dissanayake's decision to call polls nearly 10 months ahead of schedule and secure legislative backing for his agenda was vindicated when his National People's Power (NPP) won 159 seats in the 225-member assembly.

The more than two-thirds majority is the biggest any party has won since the South Asian nation introduced proportional representation under a 1978 constitution.

"We must ensure that this absolute power does not corrupt us absolutely," Dissanayake told the new 22-member cabinet at a nationally televised ceremony.

"This huge power that has been given to us must be exercised with responsibility, to fulfil the aspirations of the people who had been oppressed economically and politically for too long."

The new government holds its first parliamentary sitting on Thursday.

It is expected to prepare a budget for 2025 in line with an ongoing International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout secured by the previous government.

An IMF team is in Colombo for talks with the new leadership before releasing the next instalment of $330 million.

Sri Lanka went to the IMF for a rescue package after the country defaulted on its $46 billion external debt in April 2022 during an unprecedented economic meltdown.

The worst shortage of foreign exchange to finance even the most essential imports of food and fuel led to months of street protests that forced then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to temporarily flee the country and resign.

Dissanayake had campaigned on a pledge to renegotiate a controversial $2.9 billion IMF bailout secured by his predecessor Ranil Wickremesinghe.

But since taking office, he has resolved to maintain the existing agreement with the international lender, and has been strongly backed by the country’s private sector.

The outgoing parliament was dominated by the party of Mahinda and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, two brothers from a powerful political clan who have both served as president.

Their party won just three seats.

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