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Lankan parliament can pass law to enhance presidential powers, says Speaker

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COLOMBO, PTI

Sri Lankan Parliament Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena on Tuesday said that the government's proposed 20th Amendment to the Constitution that aims to bolster the powers of the President could be passed in the 225-member assembly with two thirds majority.

The government on September 2 gazetted 20A, a new proposed legislation that would replace the 19th Amendment introduced in 2015 that curtailed the powers of the president and strengthened the role of Parliament. The Speaker said that the bill was consistent with

the Provisions of Article 82(1) of the Constitution and requires a special majority to be passed.

Abeywardena said that the Supreme Court had ruled that the bill could be passed in the 225-member assembly with two thirds majority.

He said that the apex court had also ruled that Clauses 3,5,14 and 22 in the amendment in their present form are inconsistent with Article 3 read with Article 4 of the Constitution and requires a referendum. However, the inconsistency of Clause 3 and 14 will cease by voting in amendment at the committee stage, he said.

The government, during



Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

the hearing, pledged in the Supreme Court that amendments would be moved at the committee stage so that there would be no need to hold a referendum.

The clauses which need a

referendum covers restoration of full legal immunity for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his ability to dissolve a parliament elected for five years after just one year in office.

When the announcement was made in the assembly, the main Opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)'s request to postpone the debate on 20A was rejected. The SJB in a letter had cited the new Covid-19 prevention regulations gazetted this week by the government where strict social distancing needs to be maintained.

It said that parliamentary sessions with seating less than a meter apart would pose a health risk as the island was fac-

ing a new outbreak of the pandemic. Parliamentary officials said that the debate would start at 10 am on Wednesday and will be concluded on Thursday evening with the vote on the second reading.

The amendment which aims to restore full executive power on president Rajapaksa above parliament has met with resistance within the government's own quarters and from among the powerful Buddhist clergy supporters of the ruling party.

The government sources said that the amendment would be duly enacted in Parliament before November 17 when the 2021 budget is scheduled to be presented.