

Extreme right make significant gains in Sri Lankan elections

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The results of general elections held in Sri Lanka on Tuesday reveal widespread disaffection with the major parties generated by the country's protracted civil war, falling living standards and the growth of unemployment and poverty. But the main beneficiaries have been the Sinhala extremist parties—Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Sihala Urumaya Party (SUP).

The share of the vote won by the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) declined to 45 percent, down from 48 percent in the 1994 elections. Significantly it lost seats in its strongholds of Polonnaruwa and Hambantota, where poverty-stricken peasants have been agitating for higher produce prices and other assistance. Four PA ministers lost their seats including trade minister Kingly Wickramaratne. It has 107 seats—six short of a majority in the 225-seat parliament.

Within the coalition, the old working class parties—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL)—have all but collapsed. For the first time since independence in 1948, the LSSP failed to win any seat in its own right. Its leader Batty Weerakoon may secure a seat from the national list. The CPSL lost two seats. It retains one seat plus Indika Gunawardana, a nominal CPSL member, won a seat by campaigning as a member of the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the chief component of the ruling alliance.

The opposition UNP was unable to capitalise on hostility to the government. Its share of the vote declined from 44 percent in 1994 to just 41 percent despite its promises to boost wages and government spending on social services. The party has won only 89 seats, five less than it obtained in 1994. Key UNP figures, including former minister Renuka Herath, lost their seats.

The party that made the most gains was the JVP which now has 10 seats in parliament compared to one previously. It was able to win seats not just from its traditional social base among disaffected youth in rural areas but also in the capital of Colombo and surrounding suburbs. Its overall vote increased to 518,774 from 344,173 in the presidential election held last December.

While the party is routinely referred to as “Marxist” in the international press, the JVP is based on a political perspective that is fascistic in character. Its campaign combined vague anti-capitalist rhetoric against big business and agitation over falling living standards with strident Sinhala chauvinism and patriotic calls for the defence of “the motherland” in the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

During the late 1980s, the JVP launched fascistic attacks on the working class and its organisations, murdering hundreds of workers and leaders of left parties. It was only able to return to the political mainstream in 1994 when it was granted official recognition by the Peoples Alliance government. But the chief responsibility for resurrecting the JVP and giving it “socialist” credentials in the working class lies with the opportunist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which for most of the late 1990s participated in a formal alliance with the JVP. The vote for the NSSP, which contested the election under its own New Left Front banner, fell considerably from 1994 and it failed to win a seat.

In the aftermath of the elections, big business has invited the JVP, along with the other major parties, to participate in a policy discussion forum. The media, which gave the JVP considerable coverage in the course of the campaign, is now describing it as the country's “third force.” The JVP initially ruled out supporting either the PA or UNP but is now engaged in leadership meetings to reconsider its position.

Other Sinhala extremist groups also made gains. The neo-fascist SUP, which was formed earlier this year and received broad coverage in sections of the Colombo press, received an overall vote of 116,574, gaining one seat from the national list. Within the PA, there was also a marked shift towards openly chauvinist groups and candidates. The Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), which joined the ruling coalition at the last minute and failed to win any seats in the 1994 election, gained two seats under the PA banner.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which stood a slate of 23 candidates for the Colombo district, received 389 votes in response to the party's vigorous campaign for the withdrawal

of troops from the north and east and the implementation of socialist policies. In its first election as an officially recognised party, the SEP used the opportunity to seek to clarify the complex historical and political issues that have led to current social disaster facing working people.

The small vote for a genuine socialist alternative reflects the considerable political disorientation and confusion generated among workers by the betrayals of their old leaderships. Insofar as the working class continues to identify the LSSP and the CPSL as “socialist” and fails to draw the necessary conclusions from their protracted degeneration, it is left politically disarmed in the face of the dangers posed by extreme right wing groups such as the JVP and SUP.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has called upon the PA to form the next government. While both major parties have been engaged in furious behind-the-scenes negotiations with minor parties, the PA now claims to have secured a parliamentary majority with the support of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC).

The EPDP, a Tamil party which operates closely with the military, won five seats mainly due to the low turnout on the Jaffna peninsula—just 22 percent of registered voters cast a ballot. The SLMC, a communal party based among Tamil Muslims, gained six seats under the PA banner and another four seats under its own National Unity Alliance banner. SLMC leaders only agreed to back the PA after being given assurances that the election system would be reformed.

UNP leaders have been in discussions with other parties to form “a multi-party democratic government”. The opposition party is unlikely, however, to get the support of the 24 MPs it needs to achieve a parliamentary majority. Two other Tamil parties—the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) with five seats and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) with three—have indicated that they will not support either the PA or UNP.

The political situation is highly volatile. Even though the JVP and SUP may not be part of the government they will have a big say in dictating its policies. Since April, when the army suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the LTTE, the extreme rightwing groups have sought to create a climate of Sinhala chauvinist hysteria to press for the stepping up of the war, an end to the “peace process” brokered by Norway, and no concessions to the country's Tamil minority.

In early August, Kumaratunga failed to win the necessary two-thirds parliamentary majority for a package of constitutional changes aimed at providing the basis for a negotiated end to the war, and rapidly accommodated to the campaign of the extreme right. After calling the elections early, the PA launched a series of military offensives against

the LTTE on the Jaffna peninsula. Last week the president announced that the government would pull out of the Norwegian diplomatic initiative and wage war to “annihilate” the LTTE and its leadership.

The election campaign was characterised from start to finish by appeals to Sinhala chauvinism, mudslinging and outright thuggery. Seven people were killed on election day in violent clashes between parties, bringing the total death toll for the campaign to 71. In Kandy, in the central hills area, the election commissioner annulled the results from 23 polling centres on the basis of reports of ballot box stuffing and the use of violence to influence voting. He also invalidated the results from the entire Kilinochchi district in the war-torn northern province.

In this highly unstable political situation, sections of big business and the media have renewed their call for the PA and UNP to come together to form a government. For the last two years corporate chiefs have been pressing the major parties to reach a consensus over the constitutional package and to find a means to end the war, which they now regard as a barrier to their economic interests.

This week the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce issued a statement appealing for the two parties to establish “a government of national unity and reconstruction through a bipartisan approach and lead the country through its most critical phase of development.” The editorial of the *Daily Mirror*, a prominent daily, called for the PA and UNP “to pull the country out of the political and economic turmoil”.

In the wake of the election, the PA still needs the support of the UNP to pass the constitutional package. Both parties, however, are beholden to the extreme right wing which called the tune during the elections and will do the same in the new parliament. After 17 years of war, which has cost over 60,000 lives, the working class is about to be dragged into another round of fratricidal bloodletting and will be forced to bear all of its economic and social burdens.



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