

Rightwing UNP wins general election in Sri Lanka

K. Ratnayake
14 December 2001

After seven years in opposition, the rightwing United National Party (UNP) has returned to power in Sri Lanka after winning a slim majority in the country's December 5 general election. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as Prime Minister last Sunday and his cabinet was appointed Wednesday. The election was called just 14 months after the previous one, after a group of parliamentarians deserted the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA), leaving the government in a minority and facing certain defeat in a no-confidence motion.

Both the PA and UNP campaigned for a stable majority—120 seats in the 225-seat parliament—to end the country's protracted political uncertainty. Despite the deep unpopularity of the government, the UNP was only able to win 109 seats and then as part of an alliance—the United National Front (UNF)—which included the PA renegades, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and two plantation-based organisations, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Upcountry People's Front (UPF).

As well as contesting seats under the UNF banner, the SLMC stood candidates in its own name in the Eastern Province, where a substantial section of the Muslim minority lives, and won five seats. As a result, the UNP alliance has 114 seats in parliament. It can also count on the support, initially at least, of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of four Tamil parties, which won 15 seats.

Despite the UNP's slender parliamentary majority, the election outcome represents a devastating repudiation of the President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her PA government. Sri Lanka has a complex voting system—196 MPs are decided on a proportional basis in 22 electoral districts and a further 29 seats are allocated from national lists, according to a party's overall vote. The PA's total proportion of the vote dwindled from 49 percent in 1994, when it first came to power, to 45 percent in the 2000 elections, and just 39 percent in the latest poll. It won a majority in just one district—down from 13 districts last year.

The erosion of PA support was most marked in rural districts such as Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura in the North Central province, and Matara and Galle in the south, where the UNP had experienced defeats in 11 successive elections at the national, provincial and local levels. In these areas, the UNP is still bitterly remembered for its brutal crackdown on rural youth in the early 1990s when the security forces and their associated thugs killed thousands. The PA also lost heavily among Tamil-speaking plantation workers in the central hills region—its vote in Nuwara Eliya down by 27 percent and in Kegalla by 8 percent.

The UNP won a majority in 17 electoral districts, up from only 3 districts last year, and its overall vote increased by 5 percent from 40.21 percent last year to 45.62 percent. In the capital Colombo, the largest voting district in the country, support for the UNP rose by 8 percent. In the heavily working class subdivisions of Borella, Colombo East and Ratmalana, the vote for the UNP increased by 10, 8 and 8 percent respectively over last year's result.

The UNP, which pledged to hold talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the country's protracted civil war,

made substantial gains among Tamil and Muslim voters—its vote rose by 9 percent in Puttlam, 7 percent in Kegalla and 8 percent in Matale. The allied CWC increased its vote significantly in plantation districts—by 8 percent in Badulla and 16 percent in Nuwara Eliya.

Last Friday, UNP leader Wickremesinghe hailed the party's victory as “an expression of people's power”. The outcome is not, however, a vote of confidence for the conservative UNP. Rather it is an expression of the hostility to the PA after seven years in office, its failure to end the war and its deepening assault on the social position of working people. In 1994, people voted to end the UNP's 17-year rule for the same reasons—the party began the brutal war in 1983 and initiated the free market policies that led to cutbacks to jobs and living standards.

Even in the 2000 election, the PA appealed to voters on the basis that the government needed the numbers in parliament to make constitutional changes to provide for a limited devolution of powers and talks with the LTTE. In the latest election, however, Kumaratunga allied itself with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). While not ruling out peace negotiations completely, the PA made a deliberate appeal to racist sentiment by accusing the UNP of having a secret deal with the LTTE to divide the country.

For its part, the UNP campaigned as the party of peace and called for negotiations with the LTTE. In doing so, it reflected the interests of the most powerful sections of big business, who regard the war as a major obstacle to attracting foreign investment and reviving the flagging economy. Tamil and Muslim parties rallied to UNP leader Wickremesinghe, along with the bulk of the privately-owned media, and painted him as a peacemaker.

If the latest election result shows anything, it is that the majority of voters want an end to a war that has cost over 60,000 lives and had a devastating impact on large sections of the population. At the 2000 election, voters gave Kumaratunga the benefit of the doubt and put her back into power. Now significant layers have swung to the UNP, not because they have great confidence in the party or have forgotten its previous record, but because they regard the UNP as a chance for peace.

If the rightwing UNP can parade as the party of “peace, democracy and prosperity,” it is the responsibility of the PA, which not only continued the war but the UNP's previous attack on democratic rights and living standards. In 1994, the PA was able to portray itself as “left” and even “socialist” with the support of all the “left” and radical parties and organisations, including the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party (CP), the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the *Ravaya* (Voice) and *Yukthiya* (Justice) groupings.

The LSSP and CP, which were formally part of the PA coalition, are widely discredited among layers of workers who supported them in the past. Only one LSSP candidate—a Buddhist priest—won a seat as part of the PA ticket in a rural area near Galle which was previously an LSSP stronghold but which the party has not contested under its own name for years. The CP lost both its parliamentary seats. These parties are little

more than bureaucratic shells, a fact underscored by Kumaratunga's contemptuous decision to pass over LSSP leader Batty Weerakoon, one of her ministers, in making the PA's selection from the national list.

As for the opportunist NSSP, it tentatively swung its support from the PA to the UNP—the party it denounced in 1994. The *Ravaya* newspaper openly campaigned for the UNP, peddling the illusion that the UNP would “end the war, establish peace, democracy and prosperity.” *Ravaya* said the same about the PA in 1994. What all of these “left” and radical groups have in common is hostility to the struggle to mobilise the working class to fight for its class interests independently of the capitalist parties.

Their betrayals have opened the door for the JVP to make significant gains in the election. The party increased its overall vote from 6 to 9 percent and its parliamentary seats from 10 to 16 at the expense of another Sinhala extremist party—the Sinhala Urumaya (SU)—and the PA. The SU lost half of its vote from the 2000 election and its single seat in parliament. The JVP consistently increased its vote in predominantly Sinhala areas in the south, west and northwest by between 3 to 5 percent. It gained five extra seats in the mainly rural Anuradhapura, Ratnapura, Gampaha, Kandy and Kegalla districts and one extra national list seat.

The JVP supported the PA's chauvinist attacks on the UNP and its alleged deal with the LTTE, offering itself as the most consistent advocate of Sinhala patriotism. At the same time it presented itself as the “radical” alternative to both of the major parties. The party was founded on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism, Maoism and Castroism in the 1960s but with the outbreak of the war in 1983 took on an openly fascist character. Its ability to win a following among some layers of workers in Colombo and other areas is a product of the disillusionment of the working class with the old bureaucratic leaderships—the LSSP and CP.

In predominantly Tamil and Muslim areas, the turn away from the PA was even more marked. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) formed an electoral coalition—the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—to contest the north and east while at the same time supporting the UNP's call for talks with the LTTE. The TNA, contesting under the TULF election symbol, dramatically increased its vote by 27 percent in Jaffna and 44 percent in Vanni, inflicting a heavy defeat on the PA's only Tamil-based ally, the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which lost two of its four seats.

The vote for the TNA would have been even higher if the security forces had not prevented voters from LTTE-held areas from going to polling booths. Government officials estimated that about 27,000 people in the Vanni and Mannar areas and another 30,000 in the Batticaloa district were prevented from voting. While the military claimed that it closed down the checkpoints for “security reasons,” there is little doubt that pressure was brought to bear from the PA government.

The election was one of the most violent on record, reflecting the desperation of both major parties to shore up their support. On the day of the poll, 10 SLMC supporters were killed in cold blood at Pathadumbara in the Kandy district, allegedly by thugs of the former PA minister Anurudhdha Ratwatte. Officially 2,247 incidents of election-related violence were recorded during the campaign, including 46 deaths. Election Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayaka warned that “the masses will lose faith in the electoral system” if the main parties did not call a halt to the violence in the future.

The surest sign of big business enthusiasm for the new UNP government was a huge leap in the Colombo stockmarket's All Share Price Index—by 107.4 points or 26 percent in the first four days after the election. It reached 678 on Monday, the highest level since May 1999. The Milanka index of blue chip companies shot up 293 points or 34 percent to reach an all-time high of 1,164 points during the same period.

Despite the initial exuberance, there are concerns in ruling circles that the UNP will face the same political problems as the previous PA

government. The UNP does not have a majority in its own right and depends on the support, either directly or indirectly, of Tamil and Muslim parties. Like the PA, the UNP is based on Sinhala chauvinism and any attempt to reach a deal with the LTTE will provoke opposition from Sinhala extremist parties such as the JVP and SU and also in its own ranks. If it does not press ahead with negotiations, however, the new government risks losing the support of the Tamil and Muslim parties, as well as big business.

Moreover, the UNP has the added difficulty of reaching an arrangement with Kumaratunga, who will remain president until 2005 and has significant executive powers under the constitution. To avoid conflict and political instability, big business has renewed its call for the formation of a national unity government.

Ceylon Chamber of Commerce chairman Chandra Jayaratna has called on Kumaratunga, Wickremesinghe and other party leaders to “get together and deliver political stability in the medium to long run through network partnership and a government of unity.” Both he and the IMF representative in Colombo, Nadeem Ul Haq, have bluntly warned that the next government has to implement the IMF's economic restructuring package, including privatisations, cuts to government spending, and “labour market reform”.

Wickremesinghe has proposed a national unity government but tensions with Kumaratunga have already surfaced over the formation of the cabinet. Kumaratunga only reluctantly gave up the defence portfolio. She refused to let the TV cameras cover her swearing in of Wickremesinghe as prime minister and tried to reduce the powers of one of the PA dissidents, S.B. Dissanayake—now a UNP minister.

The continuing political instability and the constant resort of both major parties to chauvinism points to the fact that neither the PA nor UNP are able to meet the most basic needs of the masses. Their various plans for negotiations and an end to the war are all based on a power-sharing deal between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites that would heighten communal tensions and deepen the exploitation of the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was the only party that called on workers to oppose all forms of racism and chauvinism and to present a socialist and internationalist program as the basis for the working class to mobilise independently to defend its own interests. The SEP warned that the sharpest indication of the anti-working class character of all of the parties, from the UNP and PA to the LSSP and JVP, was their support for the imperialist war being waged by the US on Afghanistan.

SEP received 243 votes for its slate of candidates in the Colombo district, which is an important indication that a class conscious section of workers and young people are beginning to look for a genuine socialist alternative. But it is also sharply reveals the lack of perspective among wide layers of workers. In the course of the campaign, the SEP found there was considerable hostility to the big business parties as well as a strong desire for peace, democratic rights and decent living standards. None of these will be provided by either the UNP or PA. We urge the thousands of workers, youth and intellectuals with whom we had discussions or who heard our candidates to critically examine the unfolding events in Sri Lanka and internationally through the *World Socialist Web Site* and to carefully consider our international socialist alternative.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact