Sri Lankan election produces a hung parliament and further political instability

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The Sri Lankan election held last Friday has resulted in an indecisive outcome that can only lead to further political volatility. While President Chandrika Kumaratunga's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) boosted its position in the 225-seat parliament at the expense of the United National Front (UNF), no party or alliance has an absolute majority.

On February 7, Kumaratunga precipitated the elections by ousting the UNF government in order to resolve the ongoing standoff with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe over the conduct of peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But far from resolving the bitter factional conflict within Colombo's ruling elites, the poll has only served to intensify the political crisis.

In a desperate bid to bolster the flagging credibility of her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Kumaratunga forged a coalition with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a party that is based on a reactionary mixture of Sinhala communalism and populist demagogy. The UPFA was formally registered as a political party just one day before the government was sacked.

In the election, the UPFA won 105 seats. The major beneficiary, however, was not the SLFP, but the JVP. It more than doubled its parliamentary presence 16 to 40 seats, topping the preference lists in a number of electoral districts, ahead of leading SLFP figures. It is now in a position to demand strong representation in any UPFA cabinet. The SLFP, on the other hand, lost ground—dropping from 77 seats to just over 60.

The SLFP's other allies—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP)—have no gains at all. These old workers parties were virtually obliterated at the 2001 election. The CP has won just one seat, while the LSSP, which contested three, is yet to win any.

The JVP's inclusion in government for the first time can only heighten political tensions. Despite the UPFA's claims that it will abide by the ceasefire and restart talks with the LTTE, the JVP's hostility to any concessions to the Tamil minority threatens to scuttle the "peace process" and plunge the country back into civil war. For months, its speakers have been denouncing the UNF for betraying the country in negotiations with the LTTE.

The vote for the JVP reflects widespread popular alienation with both of the major political parties—the SLFP and Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) [the main component of the UNF]. The UNF's vote slumped by seven percent nationally to just 38 percent and the party now has just 82 seats in parliament, down from 109. The UNF lost all the southern electoral districts, except for Badulla, Nuwara Eliya, Kandy and Colombo. Nine ministers lost their seats.

The UNF's unpopularity stems directly from the sweeping economic restructuring measures demanded by corporate leaders, who are seeking peace in order to transform the island into a cheap labour platform for global capital. Over the past two and a half years, the UNF's policies have resulted in soaring prices and cutbacks to subsidies, jobs and social services that have provoked a wave of strikes and protests by workers, farmers, the unemployed and students.

Two other parties made significant gains. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—a grouping of Tamil parties that act as virtual proxy for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—gained 22 seats. The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—a Sinhala extremist party that fielded Buddhist monks as candidates—won nine. The result is a parliament strongly polarised along communal lines.

Having whipped up Sinhala chauvinism and boosted the position of the JVP, Kumaratunga now confronts a number of intractable political problems. The JVP's strong showing in the poll can only sharpen divisions within the SLFP which was split over forming the coalition in the first place. Moreover, the UPFA is still eight seats short of a parliamentary majority and the JVP's strong performance limits which parties it can approach for support.

In addition to the UPFA's 105 seats, Kumaratunga can count on one seat from the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP)—a Tamil party that collaborated closely with the military. She may also try to woo the UNP's former allies—the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, the Ceylon Workers Congress and the UpCountry Peoples Front, based among Muslims and Tamil plantation workers respectively. But these parties have previously declared they will not join a government with the JVP.

The UPFA could try to reach a deal with the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) but any arrangement with this extreme rightwing formation would make peace talks with the LTTE impossible. The JHU is adamantly opposed to the "peace process" and insists that Sri Lanka become a theocratic state that entrenches the supremacy of Buddhism and the Sinhala majority. It appealed to disaffected layers of the middle class by denouncing the corruption of the major parties and pledging to "clean up" parliament.

While the vote for the JHU nationally was 6 percent, it achieved considerably higher support in the urban districts of Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara and Kandy. In Colombo where the JHU won

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18 percent of the vote and three seats, the party pushed the UNP into third place in several divisions, including Kesbewa and Maharagama, where it received 29.4 percent. These are outer suburban areas that have a higher percentage of small businessmen, traders and other sections of the middle class, and where the JHU has focussed a vicious anti-Christian campaign.

Encouraged by its overall result, JHU leaders told a press conference on Sunday that they anticipated becoming the "main party in the country." Having denounced the existing political parties for corruption, the JHU insists that it will not be part of any coalition, but will decide its position on a case by case basis. According to JHU organiser Athuraliye Rathana Thera, the party will insist on new parliamentary seating arrangements so JHU members will be neither on the opposition nor government benches.

After denouncing the UNF for its soft approach to the LTTE, it is unlikely that the UPFA would turn to the LTTE-backed TNA for support. The TNA won over 90 percent of the vote in the northern districts of Jaffna and the Wanni, and lower votes in the eastern districts. The TNA's high vote was due, at least in part, to the LTTE's harassment and intimidation of other Tamil political parties in the North and East. Voter turnout in both Jaffna and Wanni was low—47.3 and 66.3 percent respectively—after the election commissioner refused to establish polling booths in LTTE-held areas.

The TNA is itself split, after the LTTE's military commander in the East, V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, broke away and set up his own command in early March. Of the seven seats won by the TNA in the east, five MPs are loyal to Karuna. The split threatens to lead to an armed confrontation between the two LTTE factions and to undermine any renewal of the peace talks. It also compounds the difficulty facing the UPFA or the UNP in forming a government.

Even if Kumaratunga does manage to get a parliamentary majority, it will be highly unstable. No agreement exists between the SLFP and the JVP on the basis for talks with the LTTE. The JVP has previously rejected the SLFP's plans for a limited devolution of powers to the North and East. At the same time, a UFPA government will be under pressure from big business and the major powers to push ahead with privatisation and economic restructuring. JVP leaders have already strongly signalled their support to the corporate elite but such policies would rapidly alienate many of those who voted for them.

Not surprisingly, the election result has been greeted with pessimism by commentators—both local and foreign. An unnamed Asian diplomat told AFP: "I don't think you could ask for a more militant parliament in Sri Lanka than this. Looks like we are losing the middle ground here. It would be a challenge to get anything done in this new House." Warning of possible anarchy, a western diplomat said: "What is important is to see what kind of life expectancy the next parliament will have."

An editorial in the *Sunday Island* editorial repeated its long-held view that the SLFP and UNP should come together in a grand coalition. "The best thing Kumaratunga can do for this country is to work towards a national government that she sought not so long ago from weakness," it declared, warning "the global support and the $US4.5 billion available to underwrite a fair and just settlement [to the war] must not be lost as the southern mainstream parties jockey for self advantage."

The *Sunday Leader*, which has backed the UNF government, declared gloomily: "Within just two years a nation looked at as promising internationally that was capable of ushering in peace after 20 years of war and an economic upsurge was by Saturday teetering on the brink of chaos." The commentator could offer no way out of the political impasse and concluded that the UNF "will rue the day they decided to go soft on the President after the 2001 election victory in the name of cohabitation and thereby aided and abetted Kumaratunga to make Sri Lanka a basket case."

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned throughout the election campaign, the present situation holds great dangers for the working class. Kumaratunga is increasingly resting on the military, the state apparatus and Sinhala extremist layers. Incapable of resolving the deepening social and political tensions, she will not hesitate to resort to autocratic forms of rule, directed against workers and the oppressed in particular.

The SEP was the only party to advance a socialist program in the elections based on the independent mobilisation of the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—to fight for its common class interests. Its candidates campaigned for the immediate withdrawal of all Sri Lankan military forces from the North and East to lay the basis for unifying workers in a common fight against the worsening conditions created by capitalist exploitation. The SEP fights for the establishment of the United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a United Socialist States of South Asia and internationally.

The SEP received 159 votes for its slate of candidates in the Colombo district, coming 14th in a field of 28 slates. The vote indicates that an important layer of workers and young people, while still very small, is prepared to consciously reject the communal politics that dominates every aspect of official political life in Sri Lanka. But it also sharply reveals the political confusion and crisis of perspective among broad layers of working people. While deeply hostile to the major parties, most voters saw no alternative but to register a protest vote for parties based on programs that are fundamentally opposed to their class interests.

We urge the many workers, youth and intellectuals who read the SEP's manifesto, attended SEP meetings or followed the SEP campaign to draw the necessary conclusion by seriously studying the party's program and perspective, and applying to join its ranks.

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