

Sri Lanka's new president faces crisis over forming a government

K. Ratnayake

23 November 2005

The newly elected Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapakse, confronts a political crisis within days of being sworn in last Saturday. Far from the conflicts and tensions wracking the Sri Lankan ruling class being resolved by his narrow victory in the November 17 election, they have immediately re-surfaced as he attempts to form a government.

Rajapakse's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has just 71 members in the 225-seat parliament. It has yet to win the backing of any more MPs. The UPFA had clearly hoped that it would be able to form a government with the support of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which had campaigned for Rajapakse during the election. Only last Saturday, former cabinet minister Mangala Samaraweera, declared that "cabinet changes are on the card" and the JVP "has already agreed to accept cabinet portfolios in the Rajapakse government". Wijitha Herath, a leading JVP member, however, told the *Hindu* on Monday that his party had not yet made a decision. Some reports now indicate that the JVP intends to sit in opposition, supporting Rajapakse from the "outside".

The JVP's hesitation to join the government underscores not only the new president's problems, but also its own. The JVP left the previous UPFA government of former president Chandrika Kumaratunga in June, on the basis of opposition to Kumaratunga's attempts to establish a joint post-tsunami operational management structure (P-TOMS) with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The JVP's walk-out was an attempt to shore up its eroding base of support, under conditions where it had been widely discredited by its role in government. The UPFA had broken all the promises it had made to ordinary working people in the course of the 2004 parliamentary elections, attacking living standards and social facilities.

Upon leaving the government, the JVP intensified a Sinhala chauvinist campaign against any concessions to

the LTTE, in order to divert social discontent into communalism. Following the calling of the presidential election, it entered into an agreement to support Rajapakse on condition he scrap the P-TOMS and review the ceasefire agreement that had been signed with the LTTE in 2002 to end the 20 year civil war. If implemented, these demands could spark the resumption of military conflict.

Throughout the campaign, the JVP took the lead in advancing a series of empty promises that Rajapakse would improve living conditions. Now that the new president has assumed office, and confronts the same economic, social and political crisis as Kumaratunga, the JVP appears to be calculating that any participation in the new government would further undermine its political credibility. It may well decide that it can better exploit the disaffection of the masses by remaining in opposition.

The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), another Sinhala extremist party that supported Rajapakse on the basis of anti-Tamil chauvinism, has likewise issued no statement on whether it is prepared to join a Rajapakse government.

For his part, Rajapakse is still conducting behind-the-scenes horse-trading to win support. If he is unable to put together a majority, he will confront a major dilemma, as he cannot constitutionally dissolve the parliament for one year. While initial reports indicated that he would announce a cabinet on Monday or Tuesday, this has now been postponed, with no definite date set.

On November 21, Rajapakse appointed Rathanasiri Wickremanayake, a leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the largest party in the UPFA—as the new prime minister. Under Sri Lanka's executive presidential system, the post of prime minister is largely ceremonial. Nevertheless, the appointment of Wickremanayake, one of the most ardent Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists within the SLFP, constitutes a clear appeal to the JVP and JHU to enter the government.

Wickremanayake has held several ministerial positions in SLFP-led governments since the 1970s and was appointed Buddhist Affairs Minister and Deputy Defence Minister in Kumaratunga's UPFA government. Last year, he advanced an "anti-conversion" bill, fraudulently called the "Act for the Protection of Religious Freedom," which would criminalise attempts to convert Buddhists to other religions.

Rajapakse appointed Wickremanayake as prime minister despite the SLFP's earlier decision to give the position to Kumaratunga's brother and former UPFA foreign minister, Anura Bandaranaike.

The bypassing of Bandaranaike is a sign of the deep-going conflicts that exist within the UPFA and the Sri Lankan ruling class as a whole. Although instrumental in negotiating the JVP-SLFP agreement to form the coalition in 2004, Bandaranaike criticised Rajapakse for lining up with the JVP in this election, declaring it would be an obstacle to pushing through the peace settlement with the LTTE being demanded by Sri Lankan big business and the major powers.

Reaching a deal with the LTTE is seen as vital to carrying through economic restructuring, slashing government spending and attracting to Sri Lanka a share of the foreign investment that is flowing into the Indian subcontinent. For that reason, big business largely supported Ranil Wickremesinghe, the United National Party (UNP) presidential candidate, who had pledged to carry through its agenda.

The corporate sector has already signaled its disappointment with Rajapakse's victory. More than 103 billion rupees (\$US1.3 billion) was wiped off the Colombo stock market during trading on Friday and Monday. The All Share Price Index (ASPI) plunged by 165 points, or 7 percent, while the blue chip Milanka Index (MPI) crashed by 250 points, or 8 percent, over the two days. The appointment of Wickremanayake as prime minister on Monday also affected the market, with fears that Rajapakse's policies could result in the resumption of the war and disrupt economic restructuring.

The *Daily Mirror* financial pages reported that the Colombo stock exchange had offered a 63 percent return prior to the presidential election, which had slumped to just 14 percent on Friday and Monday. An analyst told the newspaper that the "new president and his government have to do something quickly to restore investor confidence". Yesterday, the stock market rose by some 3 percent, but financial commentators are predicting the volatility will continue.

As well, the major powers have started to apply pressure to Rajapakse to toe their line. On Monday, US State Department spokesman Adam Ereli condemned the LTTE for boycotting the election but declared that Rajapakse "confronts many significant and immediate challenges," including "to strengthen the ceasefire agreement and bring renewed vigour to the peace process so that progress may be made towards a negotiated solution".

This insistence goes directly against Rajapakse's election promise to "review" the ceasefire agreement and seek to alter its terms. The intervention was a reminder that Washington and other powers have major strategic and economic interests in South Asia that they will not allow the Colombo government to compromise. Likewise, the international media, including the Indian press, are describing Rajapakse and Wickremanayake as "hawks," "hawkish" and "hardliners" to designate them as opponents of the so-called peace process.

The fact that the latest election has produced yet another political impasse in Colombo can only fuel the discussion taking place in Sri Lankan ruling circles that they must turn toward authoritarian forms of rule.

Underscoring the threat that exists to the democratic rights of the Sri Lankan masses, Rajapakse has convened a sitting of parliament for next Friday to obtain approval to extend the state of emergency imposed in August, following the assassination of former foreign minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar.

At the same time, the energy companies Shell and Laughs have just increased the price of gas by 7 percent—a decision that cannot have been made without Rajapakse's knowledge, since gas and other fuels are subsidised by the government. The price rise will intensify popular opposition to the new regime.

Rajapakse's insistence on continuing emergency rule is an indication that, amid political uncertainty and rising class tensions, he is preparing to use his autocratic powers. The emergency laws give sweeping powers to the security forces and police to arrest anyone without a warrant. They also empower the president to declare any service essential and to make industrial action illegal.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact