

Rajapakse narrowly wins Sri Lankan presidential election

K. Ratnayake

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Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the candidate of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), emerged yesterday as the narrow winner in Thursday's Sri Lankan presidential election. Rajapakse secured 4,880,950 votes or just 50.29 percent of the total against his main rival Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP), who received 4,694,623 votes or 48.4 percent. The new president will be sworn in within the next 14 days.

Rajapakse just scraped over the constitutionally required 50 percent, avoiding a count of second preferences. His margin was the narrowest of the four presidential elections held since 1982 in what was a sharply polarised vote. Rajapakse, who signed electoral pacts with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), won his strongest support in the predominantly Sinhala south of the island. Wickremesinghe fared better in mixed Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities in Colombo, the central hills districts and the east.

For the ruling class, the election has resolved nothing. Rajapakse's extremely narrow victory means that the next regime will be just as unstable as the last, with no popular mandate whatsoever. The new president inherits a political crisis from his predecessor, Chandrika Kumaratunga, which has produced five general and presidential elections since 1999. While he will have control of the powerful executive presidency, his ruling SLFP-led coalition still constitutes a minority in the parliament. New conflicts between the two arms of government are set to erupt, and the new president may be forced to call yet another general election in an attempt to find a way out of the political impasse.

At the centre of the crisis is the failure of both major parties to resolve the country's 20-year civil war. Despite his false claims to be a man of peace, Rajapakse's electoral pacts with the JVP and JHU have set the course for renewed war. The two Sinhala extremist parties

demand an end to a joint mechanism between the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the distribution of tsunami aid and a drastic revision of the terms of the current ceasefire. Having agreed to what are effectively ultimatums, Rajapakse's pledge to negotiate directly with the LTTE is a dead letter.

Rajapakse is now heavily in political debt to the JVP. The organisation featured prominently in his campaign, with JVP leader Wimal Weerawansa appointed as his chief political advisor. JVP leaders were present at his rallies, and party members carried out much of the grass roots campaigning. There is no doubt that the JVP will now demand a high price for its support, including senior ministries—a move that will only intensify sharp differences within the SLFP over the wisdom of its JVP deal.

More fundamentally, the inclusion of JVP figures in key government positions will exacerbate the political crisis wracking the entire official establishment. As part of the government, the JVP will be compelled to implement the economic agenda of the IMF and World Bank, and this will further alienate its base among the rural poor. To divert attention from its actions, the party will step up its demagogic attacks on the LTTE, heightening communal tensions and the danger of war.

There are already ominous signs that the LTTE has concluded that a peace deal with Colombo is impossible. While publicly declaring that Tamils in the north and east of the island were free to vote, the LTTE leadership declared November 17 to be "a day of mourning". It failed to stand any candidate of its own and, through a mixture of thuggery and threats, ensured that an unofficial boycott was in force throughout these areas.

In the north, the boycott was all but total. In Jaffna district, in contrast to the overall voter turnout of 75 percent, only 1.2 percent of registered voters went to the polls. In other northern districts, the figures were also

low—just 34.3 percent in the LTTE-controlled Wanni district, for example. In the eastern districts, where the LTTE has been engaged in a bitter battle for control against a rival breakaway faction, the turnout was generally less than 50 percent.

In the past, the LTTE has tended to advocate a vote for Wickremesinghe, who has postured as the principal advocate of the “peace process”. The LTTE leaders regarded the process as the best vehicle for prosecuting their own goal of establishing themselves as a new capitalist regime in the north. But, having been left in limbo since the peace talks stalled more than two years ago, and facing growing hostility from ordinary Tamils for its failure to improve living standards in the north and east and its anti-democratic methods, the LTTE has stepped up its communalist rhetoric against all “Sinhala politicians”. Its stance in the election is yet another sign of the slide towards military conflict.

Wickremesinghe is threatening to call for a fresh election in the north and east, but his failure to defeat Rajapakse is a direct product of the UNP’s big business agenda. His promotion of the “peace process” is in line with the demands of corporate leaders and the major powers to end the war and open the country for foreign investment. During his term of office as prime minister from 2001-2004, Wickremesinghe began to implement a far-reaching program of economic restructuring and privatisation that produced widespread resentment and opposition among workers throughout the country.

Even though the SLFP has also implemented the demands of the IMF and World Bank, Rajapakse sought to capitalise on the UNP’s record by promoting himself as a “common man” from the village, who sympathised with the plight of the people. Wickremesinghe was still seen as the enforcer of business reforms that cut jobs, fertiliser subsidies and social services and accelerated privatisation. Both candidates issued long lists of election promises, which they knew could not be implemented and which few people believed.

Financial circles reacted sharply against the decline in Wickremesinghe’s fortunes. A fall of 39.95 points on the All Share Prices Index (ASPI) on Monday was attributed by the *Daily Mirror* to “the close fight” between Rajapakse and the “market friendly” Wickremesinghe. The ASPI hit a record high on Wednesday amid rumours that the LTTE had reversed its boycott, lifting Wickremesinghe’s prospects. On election day, the index fell 51.4 points to 2,500 as it became clear that a low turnout in the north and east had “dashed the hopes of the

pro-business Wickremesinghe”.

Many voters were disgusted with both major parties and all their allies—including the JVP and JHU and the smaller bourgeois parties. Despite the fact that the election campaign was highly polarised along communal lines, a significant number of people chose to register a protest vote by casting a ballot for one of two “left” parties—the United Socialist Party (USP) and the New Left Front (NLF). Both parties claim to be socialist and to oppose the SLFP and UNP, but they are based entirely upon nationalist politics and accommodate themselves to the Sri Lankan state and the official political establishment. The USP candidate Siritunga Jayasuriya gained 35,319 votes and the NLF, a proxy for the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), received 9,286 votes.

Wije Dias, the candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), received 3,500 votes, all of which represented a conscious choice for a genuine socialist and internationalist alternative, not only to the two major parties but also to the “left” candidates and the various others standing as proxies for the UNP or SLFP. The SEP vote was spread out across the country, including many areas where the SEP was not able to directly campaign.

Throughout its campaign, the SEP explained that the political crisis in Sri Lanka and the problems facing the working class were not isolated phenomena but were rooted in the crisis of global capitalism, most sharply expressed in the eruption of US imperialism. In contrast to the USP and NLF, the SEP insisted that there was no national solution to war and deepening social inequality. Dias used his campaign to initiate a discussion among working people in Sri Lanka and the region on the need for a counteroffensive by the international working class against US militarism and the predatory activities of global capital.

In the wake of the election, the imminent danger of war and the assault on living standards will only intensify. The SEP encourages all those who voted for Wije Dias to regularly read the *World Socialist Web Site*, to seriously study the program and perspective of the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International, and apply to join its ranks.



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