Rajapakse narrowly wins Sri Lankan presidential election

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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 demanded 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 thugsry 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 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 plights 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 Sirityang 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.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact