

# After the Sri Lankan election: what next for the working class?

Wije Dias

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*The following statement was written by Wije Dias, who was the candidate for the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka.*

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate Mahinda Rajapakse is now installed as the new executive president of Sri Lanka. However, Rajapakse has no mandate at all to occupy the post, with its far-reaching constitutional powers, because he was elected on the basis of deceit and fraud.

His manifesto contained an unprecedented series of lies to rally gullible voters by generating false hopes that their lives would improve under his rule. Moreover, large segments of the population—close to a million voters in the island’s warzones and those working overseas—were deprived of their right to vote. His actual majority was the narrowest in the history of presidential elections in Sri Lanka.

Now that Rajapakse is in power, it will quickly become apparent that he cannot meet the aspirations of the overwhelming majority of the population for an end to the country’s 20-year civil war or the improvement of living standards.

Rajapakse carried out his campaign in alliance with Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) which are opposed to the present ceasefire and to talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He is now promising an “honorable peace”, that is, one that places unrealisable conditions for any negotiations with the LTTE. As everyone who is politically literate knows, this is not a plan for peace, but for war.

In his swearing in speech on November 19, Rajapakse attempted to perform a precarious balancing act—putting the best possible light on his “peace plan”. In doing so, however, he made absolutely clear that he rejected in toto the previous peace process. He made two unmistakable concessions to the Sinhala chauvinist JVP and JHU by calling for major revisions of the ceasefire and by omitting any mention of Norway—the facilitator of the “peace process”. Both Norway and the ceasefire have been repeatedly denounced as being “biased towards the LTTE”. He appealed to India in particular—something the JVP would encourage—to become involved.

Rajapakse was able to defeat his rival Ranil Wickremesinghe

from the United National Party (UNP), in large part because he exploited popular hostility to the economic policies of the UNP-led government between 2001 and 2004. With the assistance of the JVP demagogues, Rajapakse presented himself as “a man of the people” who did not need advisers as he knew what it was like to live in a village. He was not born with a golden spoon in his mouth, he said. All of his lies will be exposed, along with the false promises, as soon as the new government accommodates itself to the demands of the IMF, foreign investors and the corporate elite in Colombo to press ahead with the program of market reform—just as the previous SLFP-led governments have done.

The UNP has once again proven its incapacity to offer any opposition to the communalism advanced by Rajapakse and his JVP supporters. The UNP signed a ceasefire with the LTTE in 2002 and began a series of negotiations, not out of a concern to end the suffering caused by the war, but because big business and international investors insisted that peace was the precondition for economic recovery. As the ceasefire came under attack from Sinhala extremists, however, the UNP, which is also mired in communal politics, repeatedly caved in.

Throughout the election campaign the same process took place: the JVP denounced the ceasefire and the UNP defended its actions as a means of defeating the LTTE. Wickremesinghe boasted that he had been able to build an “international safety net” that would guarantee the success of a peace deal with the LTTE on terms advantageous to Colombo. In fact, what he has done is to pave the way for the greater intervention of the US and other major powers into the island for their own purposes. Washington has not backed the peace process because it is opposed to war as such, but because it views the talks as the best means of achieving its ambitions on the island and more broadly throughout the region.

In a highly significant move just two days before the election, the US Senate passed an unprecedented bipartisan motion urging all parties in Sri Lanka “to remain committed to the negotiation process and make every possible move towards national reconciliation.” It called upon “foreign governments, private individuals and groups to blunt the force of extremist groups representing all points on the political, ethnic and ideological spectrum”.

In what amounted to a threat, the resolution noted: “The US is aware of the presence of non-democratic foreign powers and private sources that have reportedly been funding and patronising various political groups in Sri Lanka including the extremist Sinhalese and extremist Tamil parties or groups.” The fact that the US Congress has even acknowledged that an election on this small island is taking place is a warning that the White House is not intending to sit by. The US has growing economic and strategic interests, particularly in its ties with India, that are threatened by a resumption of war in Sri Lanka.

At the same time, Washington’s ally—India—has also issued a veiled threat. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared on the eve of the recent South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) conference in Dhaka that India was surrounded by neighbouring “failed states”. In the language of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism”, the term “failed state” has been used to justify political and military interventions with or without formal permission. The very real implication is that any return to war in Sri Lanka could involve New Delhi and Washington, and thus become a broader and more destructive conflict.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insists that working people, not just in Sri Lanka but throughout the South Asian region, cannot afford to ignore these dangers. Workers, poor peasants, young people and professionals, whether they like it or not, can only defend their interests by building a political movement, independent of all the ruling class parties and based on socialist policies. Protests and strikes, no matter how militant, are not going to stop the slide towards war or prevent the implementation of socially destructive policies.

As the SEP’s election candidate, I stressed throughout the election campaign that a program to end the war in Sri Lanka and assure equal democratic rights to all had to be based on the principle of proletarian internationalism. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers face common oppression and a common social crisis. The only solution is to unite against the ruling elites of all communities in a struggle for political power with the support of the urban and rural poor—that is, to fight for a workers and farmers government.

The SEP’s struggle for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam is part of the broader strategy to unite the working class of South Asia in opposition to the artificial and unviable state system established to replace the British colonial empire in the region after World War II. None of the social and democratic problems of workers, peasants and the oppressed communities have been resolved during the past 50 years of so-called independence. Rather the barbaric communal carnage that followed the partition of India in 1947 has continued unabated in the form of wars and pogroms.

Asia as a whole, particularly India and China, has been converted into a massive Free Trade Zone where international capital, in league with local capitalists, is engaged in the ruthless exploitation of apparently endless supplies of cheap

labour. Far from ending poverty, these economic processes have only widened the gulf between rich and poor. Throughout the region, local elites employ the old technique of the British colonialists—divide and rule—whipping up communal tensions to maintain their power and privileges.

A recent article in *Newsweek* highlighted the immensity of the social crisis. “By the numbers, Asia is home to 7 in 10 of humanity’s poor—about 700 million people—who subsist on \$US1 a day or less. Even more people dangle one rung up the socioeconomic ladder, earning just \$2 a day per capita. In all, about 1.9 billion Asians live at or below that global poverty line. Put another way, Asia’s impoverished masses now exceed the region’s total population at the end of World War II.”

Throughout the Sri Lankan election campaign, I pointed out that the SEP was not engaged in an exercise of piling up votes, but in initiating a discussion among workers in Sri Lanka and throughout the region on the necessity for a socialist program. Nothing can be resolved within the borders of one country, whether it be a small island like Sri Lanka or a larger country like India or China. To combat global capital, the working class must have its own global strategy—to unify workers in Asia and internationally to refashion society along socialist lines to meet the social needs of the majority of humanity, rather than the profits of the privileged few.

To those who supported and consciously voted for the SEP in Sri Lanka, and to others who followed our campaign elsewhere, I would appeal to you to become regular readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and to seriously study the program and perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Above all, whether you are in Sri Lanka, India or other parts of the globe, you should join the ranks of our international party and begin to fight for a socialist alternative to war and social inequality.



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