

Tensions high as incumbent wins Sri Lankan presidential poll

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A tense political situation continued in Sri Lanka yesterday as incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse was declared the winner in Tuesday's presidential election. Despite the large margin of victory, opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka refused to concede defeat and announced he would challenge the result.

Speaking to reporters, Fonseka denounced the result as distorted and said he would launch a legal challenge. "Victory has been grabbed away from us by the government," he declared. "There is no democracy here." The general has written to the election commissioner calling on him to annul the vote on the grounds that Rajapakse had misused state property, used the state media to attack him and prevented displaced Tamils from voting.

There is no doubt that the government exploited its control of the state apparatus to the hilt and used the state media as its propaganda instrument. As in previous elections, polling day was marred by violence, including bomb blasts in the northern town of Jaffna. During the campaign, some 900 incidents of violence were reported. Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians who were interned following the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May were denied the right to vote.

To date, however, there have been no reports of vote rigging on a scale that could alter the result—58 percent for Rajapakse, against 40 percent for Fonseka, or a margin of nearly two million votes. The opposition parties—the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and Sinhala extremists Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—promoted Fonseka as a democratic alternative, but as the country's top general he was just as responsible as Rajapakse for the war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights carried out by the military. Fonseka only broke with Rajapakse after he was sidelined in the wake of the LTTE's defeat.

While Fonseka won a majority in predominantly Tamil areas, the disgust and hostility toward both candidates was evident in the very low turnout, even though the general had the support of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which previously functioned as the LTTE's political mouthpiece. In the northern Jaffna district, just 26 percent of the electorate voted. In Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, which were devastated in the final months of the civil war, the turnout was just 14 percent and 8 percent respectively, in part because much of the population had been displaced.

In predominately Sinhala areas, however, Rajapakse won substantial majorities. The margin was larger in mainly rural areas. Given the choice between two candidates who had no fundamental differences and who both offered promises that few believed, most voters opted for the incumbent. Overall, Rajapakse won 16 of the country's 22 electoral districts. The results paralleled the outcome of a series of provincial council elections held last year after the defeat of the LTTE.

The bitterness of the campaign reflects deep differences within the Colombo political establishment. The LTTE's defeat resolved none of the communal divisions that had been inflamed by decades of official anti-Tamil discrimination and finally erupted in a devastating 26-year civil war. Moreover, the conflict devastated much of the country and compounded the island's worsening economic crisis.

Powerful sections of the ruling elite backed Fonseka as the best means for imposing the IMF's austerity demands and suppressing any political opposition. Politics in Colombo is also being caught up in growing rivalry between the major powers. There is considerable concern in ruling circles that the Rajapakse regime has tied Sri Lanka too closely to China at the expense of the country's traditional orientation to the US and Europe.

Far from dissipating after the election, tensions have sharpened. In a move designed to intimidate the opposition, the government deployed hundreds of heavily-armed troops and police yesterday around the Cinnamon Lakeside Hotel in central Colombo where Fonseka, his family and supporters were located. Other opposition leaders, including the UNP's Ranil Wickremesinghe, the JVP's Anura Kumara Disanayake and Rauf Hakeem from the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, were also present.

Military spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara implausibly told the media that the army had taken the "protective measure" after learning that 400 army deserters had gathered at the hotel. "They have booked 100 rooms. They are highly trained military people. We are suspicious about their gathering," he said. Soldiers checked everyone entering or leaving and blocked nearby roads. An unnamed official told Reuters that the measure was to prevent "him [Fonseka] taking the first step towards a coup".

Fonseka denied the presence of deserters and accused the government of trying to arrest him. He accused Rajapakse of putting his life in danger by calling for him to give up his security guard and bulletproof cars. "I can't stay in this hotel because it's very expensive," he said. "This is an exercise which is aimed at assassinating me." Government officials denied that Fonseka would be arrested and he moved out of the hotel last night.

The incident foreshadows a no-holds-barred battle between the rival political camps. Having waged a war that included the use of pro-government death squads to murder hundreds of politicians, journalists and Tamils, both Rajapakse and Fonseka are quite capable of resorting to any means to obtain and hold onto power. The decision to surround the hotel reflects deep concern in the government that Fonseka and the opposition parties could use the army and other elements of the state apparatus to oust Rajapakse.

Asked by the *Telegraph* whether he expected to call street protests to contest the result, Fonseka replied: "We have not yet asked people to come out on the streets immediately. Things have to be organised. I will take you by surprise, wait and see." He did not elaborate. There are some indications that the general may leave Sri Lanka, at least temporarily.

A distinct bias is discernable in the international coverage of the election and the results, emphasising electoral fraud and the anti-democratic character of the Rajapakse regime. For instance, a comment in yesterday's British-based *Times* headlined "Abuse of power makes travesty of democracy" highlighted the state-owned media's brazen campaigning for Rajapakse and declared that the president had "long argued that his country no longer needs the Western democratic values". It pointed to the strategic interests at stake for the US and its European allies, noting that Rajapakse "has forged ties with China, Iran, Libya and Burma".

The *Financial Times* also drew attention to the growing influence of China in Sri Lanka at the expense of the US. "Beijing was an important supporter of Sri Lanka during the war, supplying arms and fending off calls at the UN for war crimes investigations into the island's government," it stated. "Analysts suspect China is courting Sri Lanka because of its strategic location on Indian Ocean shipping routes; Beijing is helping to build a port in the president's hometown of Hambantota."

In the course of its campaign, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its candidate Wije Dias warned that the next government would rapidly launch a savage onslaught on the living standards of working people in an attempt to extricate the island from its economic problems. The bitter rivalry between Fonseka and Rajapakse does not lessen the dangers, but is a sharp indication of what is at stake for the ruling class. Both political camps are determined to impose the burden of the economic crisis on workers.

In opposition to the ex-lefts of the United Socialist Party (USP)

and the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the SEP has insisted that workers can only defend their basic rights by mobilising independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie in the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government to implement a socialist program. As the political crisis in Colombo deepens, the necessity for such a struggle becomes more pressing.

The SEP received a small but significant vote for Wije Dias of 4,195, up from 3,500 votes in the 2005 presidential polls. The party received votes in all the country's 22 electoral districts and most of the electorates within the districts. Significantly, the SEP received 621 votes in the northern Jaffna district from an important layer of mainly Tamil workers and youth. In the largely plantation district of Nuwara Eliya, where the SEP has a following among plantation workers due to its intransigent opposition to union betrayals, it received 310 votes.

By contrast, support for the ex-radicals fell sharply. The USP, which maintained its opportunist alliance with the UNP's "Platform for Freedom", received 8,352 votes—down from 35,425 in 2005. The NSSP, which formed a bloc with the right-wing TNA dissident M.K. Sivajilingam, received 7,055 votes—down from 9,296 in 2005. Sivajilingam, who attempted to appeal to disgust among Tamils for Fonseka and Rajapakse, received 9,662.

Unlike these opportunist tendencies, the SEP does not measure its success or the validity of its perspective by the number of votes received in official elections, which are a distorted expression of underlying political processes. Nevertheless, the votes for the SEP do point to a certain, at this stage limited, radicalisation among layers of workers and youth. The most important issue for those who voted for the SEP is to make a careful study of our program and perspective and to apply to join and build the party as the necessary leadership for the class battles ahead.



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