

The international significance of the Sri Lankan election

K. Ratnayake
6 April 2010

Whatever its immediate outcome, the April 8 general election in Sri Lanka marks a turning point. President Mahinda Rajapakse is campaigning for a “strong government”, which will seek to impose the burdens of the country’s economic crisis on working people, using the police state apparatus built up over a quarter century of civil war.

What is taking place in Sri Lanka is an advanced expression of the agenda of the ruling elites around the world. In response to the eruption of the global financial turmoil in 2008, governments took trillions of dollars in debt onto the public books that now has to be clawed back from the working class. Greece is being used as a test case for the dismantling of public services, the slashing of jobs and wages, and the raising of taxes. Sri Lanka is a warning that such measures cannot be carried out democratically.

The Sri Lankan economy has been devastated by the government’s war that ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May. The eruption of global recession hit the country’s exports hard, and to pay for his war, Rajapakse borrowed heavily. Confronted with a balance of payment crisis last July, he was compelled to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a \$US2.6 billion loan.

Having delayed its presentation for four months, the government will be compelled to bring down a budget in line with the IMF’s demands to halve the budget deficit by 2011. A third of government expenditures is already consumed by debt servicing. Another 21

percent funds the military, which Rajapakse has no intention of demobilising. To meet the IMF’s benchmark means making major inroads into the living standards of the working class, when a sixth of the population already lives below the official poverty line of \$US27 a month.

The government effectively regards any opposition as illegitimate. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, declared on Saturday that “the next parliament must enact legislation to ban political parties promoting separatism and terrorism”. While such a ban would be directed initially at parties advocating Tamil separatism or autonomy, the government has accused opposition parties more broadly of being part of an “international conspiracy” against the country.

After the presidential election in January, the government arrested the opposition candidate, retired general Sarath Fonseka, and dozens of his supporters on trumped up charges that he was plotting a coup. In the past two months, opposition journalists have been detained or “disappeared”, websites have been blocked and opposition campaigners physically attacked. These anti-democratic methods are not primarily directed at the bourgeois opposition parties, which supported the war and back Rajapakse’s pro-market agenda, but are in preparation for a confrontation with the working class.

Rajapakse already has a vast array of powers at his disposal. Under the present constitution, the executive president can hold cabinet posts, sack the government, prorogue parliament and call elections. Even if the opposition parties won a parliamentary majority, there

is no guarantee that Rajapakse would relinquish his control. For the past four years, he has effectively ruled through a presidential cabal of relatives, generals and close advisers that has increasingly ignored the constitution, the courts and the legal system. Now the ruling coalition is campaigning for a two-thirds majority to enable it to change the constitution at will.

Rajapakse has also retained the state of emergency that allows for detention without trial, media censorship and the banning of industrial action. Thousands of people are currently being held as “LTTE suspects” under emergency regulations and the related Prevention of Terrorism Act, without being charged and convicted. Rajapakse, with the complicity of the trade unions, used his emergency powers last October to ban industrial action by port, power, water and petroleum workers seeking a pay raise. The most ominous indication of what is in store for working people is the fact that hundreds of people have been murdered or “disappeared” by pro-government death squads over the past four years and no one has been held accountable.

Last week Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the unelected defence official who is in charge of the country’s huge military machine, stressed at a campaign rally, “It is vital to have a strong government backed by a solid majority in parliament to carry forward Sri Lanka’s development process without any hindrance from within or outside.” The government’s plans are obvious: as soon as the election is over, it intends to press ahead with its regressive economic measures and ride roughshod over any opposition.

The Socialist Equality Party has used its election campaign to warn the working class what is being prepared and to begin to mobilise it independently on the basis of a socialist program. The opposition parties—the right-wing United National Party and the Sinhala-extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—have no fundamental differences with the government. The trade unions of all political persuasions have blocked any fight by workers against the Rajapakse regime. The pseudo-left organisations—Nava Sama Samaja Party and United Socialist Party—promote the dangerous illusion that working people can defend their rights through

these unions and opposition parties.

It would be shortsighted of workers in other countries to dismiss the warning signs in Sri Lanka. The autocratic methods being used by the Rajapakse regime will not be limited to so-called Third World countries. Under the guise of the “war on terrorism”, governments around the world have already made significant attacks on basic democratic rights.

In its March 17 statement on the Greek debt crisis, the International Committee of the Fourth International explained: “As the banks demand measures overwhelmingly opposed by the population, sections of the European bourgeoisie are considering abandoning democratic rule. It must be recalled that only 35 years ago all three countries now targeted by the banks had authoritarian regimes. Between 1967 and 1974, a brutal military junta ruled Greece, backed by NATO. In Portugal, the fascistic dictatorship established in 1926 was not overthrown until 1974, and in Spain it took Franco’s death in 1975, 36 years after the end of the Civil War, to begin a transition from fascist dictatorship to a Western European-style bourgeois democracy”.

The events currently unfolding in Sri Lanka underline the importance of that warning and the necessity of workers around the world unifying in a common struggle for socialism and the abolition of the bankrupt profit system.

K. Ratnayake



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact