Sri Lankan election result sets stage for class conflict

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The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won the overwhelming majority of seats in parliamentary elections held on Thursday. But the result that shocked the media and political establishment was the historic low turnout and large falls in support for all the main bourgeois parties, pointing to widespread discontent and alienation among working people.

Voter turnout fell to 52 percent, the worst since independence in 1948—the previous low was 64 percent. In the northern district of Jaffna where people have suffered a quarter century of civil war, the turnout out was far smaller—just 23 percent—indicating a general disgust with all parties, including those that claim to represent the interests of the Tamil minority.

Results have been finalised in 20 of the 22 electoral districts. Counting has been suspended in Kandy and Trincomalee after allegations that UPFA thugs prevented opposition supporters from voting in dozens of polling centres. The UPFA has won 117 seats in the 225-seat parliament so far. Its overall tally is expected to rise once the two districts are finalised and 29 national list seats are allocated.

The UPFA's votes were concentrated in rural districts, following the voting pattern in January's presidential election. The government exploited the army's victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to stir up communal tensions. But the main factor in its electoral defeat of the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was their lack over any fundamental differences with the government—both parties backed the war and pro-market economic agenda.

President Mahinda Rajapakse immediately boasted that "this outstanding victory is an endorsement of the Mahinda Chintana [Mahinda Vision]". Actually, it was a hollow victory. The UPFA's vote fell by about 1 million compared to the presidential election just two months ago. Its overall support (apart from Kandy and Trincomalee) represents only about 30 percent of total registered votes.

The government campaigned strongly for the two-thirds majority needed to make constitutional changes and to consolidate Rajapakse's autocratic regime. Transport Minister Dulles Alahapperuma told the media yesterday that the UPFA expected to fall short of a two-thirds majority by 10 to 12 seats. Once the results are finalised, however, the government will try to induce opposition parliamentarians to cross the floor.

The first item on the government's agenda will be the budget, which has been delayed since November. Despite Rajapakse's claims to have brought peace and prosperity, the economy has been hit hard by the global economic crisis and is heavily burdened with debt. The government was forced to take out a $US2.6 billion loan last year from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is demanding austerity measures, including the halving of the budget deficit by next year.

The election results are a major blow to the opposition parties. During January's presidential election, the UNP and JVP united around a common candidate—former army commander Sarath Fonseka. By supporting Fonseka, they hoped to outdo Rajapakse in their support for the military's victory. Fonseka was the general responsible for carrying out Rajapakse's criminal war, which in the final months resulted in the deaths of thousands of Tamil civilians.

The electoral alliance split after the presidential poll, with the UNP and JVP campaigning separately in the parliamentary election. The JVP formed its own Democratic National Alliance (DNA) with Fonseka, who was arrested on trumped-up charges of planning a coup along with dozens of his supporters. He is in military detention and facing courts martial, not over the coup allegations, but claims that he engaged in political activity while in uniform and was involved in corrupt activities.

Excluding the districts of Kandy and Trincomalee, the combined result for the UNP and JVP in Thursday's election was 1.2 million votes lower than the 3.7 million they obtained in the presidential election. Acknowledging defeat, UNP general secretary Tissa Attanayake said the party would not challenge the legitimacy of results and would reorganise to

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"attract voters in future".

The UNP has received only 41 seats so far. After the 2004 election, it had 81 parliamentarians and was the largest parliamentary bloc. However, the UPFA, which held the presidency, patched together an unstable coalition and over the subsequent period enticed dozens of UNP members, as well as small coalition partners, to join the government.

Working people failed to vote for the UNP simply because they do not regard it as an alternative to the Rajapakse government. The UNP is the oldest party of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and was responsible for launching the war against the LTTE in 1983. It is notorious for its pro-business policies and its record of ruthless attacks on democratic rights. The UNP backed Rajapakse's renewed war and supported his incarceration of a quarter of a million Tamil civilians after the LTTE's defeat.

For the JVP, its election result of just over 5 percent is devastating. The number of JVP seats will drop from 27 to 5 or 6 for the DNA. The southern districts of Hambantota and Matara used to be considered JVP strongholds, but the party was routed in most rural areas, including in the south. The DNA was only able to win a handful of seats in Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara. It may get an additional seat from the national list.

The JVP is thoroughly discredited among broader layers that used to regard it as an alternative to the two major parties—the UNP and Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which leads the UPFA. Voters began to turn away from the JVP when it entered the SLFP-led government in 2004 and backed its regressive policies. The JVP sought to claw back support by backing Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential elections, but split in 2008 over whether or not to join his government, losing 12 parliamentarians. It is now widely regarded as just another opportunist party of the Colombo political establishment.

In the North and East, the very low turnout is a measure of the popular disgust and anger felt toward all of the Tamil parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) that previously acted as the LTTE's mouthpiece. In the presidential election, it backed Fonseka as a supposed lesser evil against Rajapakse. In Thursday's election, the TNA won 12 seats and may pick up several more once the Trincomalee result is finalised, but it no longer has the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of Tamil voters.

The media and political establishment as a whole is trying to obscure the significance of the low voter turnout across the island. In a bizarre twist, Transport Minister Alahapperuma blamed the opposition parties, saying that if they had "aggressively campaigned in the provinces, the overall voter turnout would have been much higher".

UNP general secretary Attanayake attributed the result to voter apathy, saying "the frequency with which the government has been conducting polls and at huge cost to the country" has caused "people to lose interest and take an indifferent attitude". An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* took a similar line, saying the decision to hold the presidential poll just before the parliamentary election "resulted in a major drop in people's participation at yesterday's polls".

In reality, the result points to the huge gulf between masses of working people and the political establishment. Workers, young people and the rural poor no longer believe the false promises of any of the major parties and many have expressed their alienation and anger by not voting at all. The outcome sets the stage for an eruption of class struggles as the Rajapakse government begins to implement the IMF's demands for further major inroads into living standards.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigned in the election to warn the working class of the savage assaults being prepared and to begin to mobilise it independently of the capitalist parties and their various props including the trade unions and ex-radicals. We warn workers that disgust and anger toward the ruling elite and their political representatives is not enough. What is needed is a socialist program and party to unify the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally into an independent political movement against the bankrupt capitalist system.

The SEP and its candidates were the only ones to fight for a socialist alternative in these elections. The party won a small but significant response—371 votes—in the four districts in which it stood. Those votes represent the most class conscious sections of workers and youth, who should now seriously consider applying to join the SEP. At the same time, we make a broad appeal to the working class to seriously consider the political dangers that it now confronts, to begin to study our program and perspective as published daily on the *World Socialist Web Site* and to join and build this party for the class battles ahead.

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