

New parliament opens in Sri Lanka

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The first session of the new Sri Lankan parliament took place yesterday after the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won the April 8 general election. While parliamentary forms were observed to the last detail, the proceedings contained unmistakable signs of the country's political crisis and the growing irrelevance of the institution itself.

D.M. Jayaratna had already been selected as prime minister by President Mahinda Rajapakse who, as during the previous parliament, will continue to dominate the government through the use of his broad executive powers. Jayaratna, a veteran member of Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the dominant UPFA faction—will be little more than a figurehead.

The president's older brother Chamal Rajapakse was elected speaker—also unanimously—underscoring the fact that the president continues to rely on a cabal of relatives, top bureaucrats and generals, rather than cabinet. The president's younger brother, Basil, who served as a presidential adviser, was re-elected to parliament while his son, Namal, was voted in for the first time. Another Rajapakse brother, Gotabhaya, serves as the unelected defence secretary, presiding over the country's huge military apparatus.

The UPFA fell just six seats short of the two-thirds majority parliamentary majority required to change the constitution. The government is already engaged in intense efforts to entice the handful of opposition MPs needed to cross the floor. The constitutional changes being mooted include allowing Rajapakse to run for a third presidential term, ending the preferential voting system in order to further consolidate UPFA control, and to abolish or modify the constitutional council that oversees key appointments.

Whether or not it obtains a two-thirds majority, the Rajapakse government will further entrench the police state measures with which it ruthlessly prosecuted its communal war that ended in the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse has already called for repressive new security laws, which in the name of combating “terrorism” and “separatism” would prohibit “divisive politics”—that is any criticisms of government policy.

For all UPFA's boasting about a landside win, the real significance of the election result lies in the record low voter turnout. On the final figures, just 61 percent of registered voters cast a ballot—the lowest figure since independence in 1948 and well below the 76 percent average recorded over the past 15 years. In other words, just 34 percent of voters supported the UPFA and many of those only reluctantly. The United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) fared even worse.

The turnout reflects the deep alienation felt by voters towards the entire Colombo political establishment. Having been promised “peace and prosperity” by President Rajapakse after the LTTE's defeat, living standards have deteriorated amid continuing government attacks on basic democratic rights. After three decades of war and pro-market restructuring by successive governments, most voters have no faith in any of the major political parties.

The swearing in of the new parliament comes on the eve of sharp class battles. Having mortgaged the country to the hilt to pay for his war, Rajapakse now has to slash public spending and impose new taxes in order to meet the requirements of a \$US2.6 billion loan

from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). To avert a voter backlash, he postponed the budget that was due last November until after the elections.

Last year's budget deficit was 9.7 percent of gross domestic product, well short of the 7 percent target required by the IMF, and nearly twice the 5 percent set for 2011. The IMF delayed the disbursement of the third tranche of its loan in February after the government failed to meet the required benchmarks. IMF senior economist Abdul Abiad reiterated this week that "the key challenge for Sri Lanka remains the credible reduction and consolidation of the budget deficit."

Treasury Secretary P. B. Jayasundara recently told Reuters: "It will be a policy budget, with a new tax regime and growth momentum for the private sector while rationalising public spending. Defence and interest expenditure has stabilised." The "stabilised" items—defence and loan repayments—consume 21 and 35 percent respectively of government expenditure, meaning that any "rationalisation" will have to be made by cutting essential services and price subsidies that will hit working people.

Such measures will inevitably provoke anger and opposition from the working class, which has already been forced to sacrifice to pay for the war. Over the past four years, the government repeatedly suppressed strikes and industrial action with the aid of the trade unions and its repressive emergency powers. During the war, Rajapakse accused workers of undermining "national security". He is now waging what he calls an "economic war" to "build the nation" and will use similar methods to deal with any opposition.

Rajapakse's determination to stamp out any criticism was on graphic display in parliament yesterday. Retired general Sarath Fonseka, the opposition's candidate in the January presidential election, was brought to parliament under military guard. He was arrested in February by military police amid unsubstantiated allegations that he was organising a coup. He is now being tried in closed-door military courts on lesser, unrelated charges of corruption and engaging in political activity while in active service.

Fonseka won a parliamentary seat as part of the JVP-led Democratic National Alliance (DNA) and used the opportunity yesterday to criticise the government. "The protection of democracy must begin here in parliament.... The citizens must have freedom of movement, freedom of expression and freedom from illegal detention. I'm also a victim of these injustices," he said. After the session closed, he was taken back to navy headquarters where he is being detained.

Fonseka's attempt to posture as a democrat is absurd. He was part of Rajapakse's cabal, and as army commander was responsible for the crimes and abuse of democratic rights carried out by the military during the war. He fell out with Rajapakse after the LTTE's defeat. Like the opposition UNP and JVP, Fonseka has no fundamental disagreement with Rajapakse's agenda of imposing the burden of the economic crisis on working people. While the unanimous vote for the speaker is parliamentary etiquette, it also underscores this political consensus in the political establishment.

The only departure from procedure was the failure of Rajapakse to deliver a traditional presidential address to the inaugural session of a new parliament. His office informed diplomats that he would speak, but at the last minute the address was called off without explanation. The decision underscores the sharp tensions within the government as it prepares to impose its austerity measures. Rajapakse's address would also have given an opportunity for opposition MPs to express their own opinions.

What the government is concerned about is not the opposition parties, but the resistance of the working class. Despite his apparently strong political position, Rajapakse is no doubt aware that his rule and thus his ability to impose the IMF's austerity measures rests on very shaky foundations.



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