

Sri Lanka: President Mahinda Rajapakse concedes defeat in election

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse this morning conceded defeat to the pro-US opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena in yesterday's presidential election. Rajapakse reportedly left his official residence, Temple Trees, and stated through a spokesman that he will facilitate a smooth transfer of power.

Overall results are to be announced this afternoon, but initial figures indicate Sirisena received around 51.25 percent of the votes counted. Some 75 percent of the 15 million eligible voters cast ballots.

Rajapakse called the election on November 20, confidently expecting to be re-elected. Instead, he was confronted by the desertion of Sirisena, a senior minister in his cabinet and general secretary of his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Sirisena declared he would stand for president and was immediately backed by the main opposition pro-US United National Party (UNP).

Sirisena's abandonment of Rajapakse was prepared in advance by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who maintains close ties with Washington, and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. Several key members of Rajapakse's ruling coalition, including the chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the All Ceylon Muslim Congress, also broke ranks with the government and joined the opposition. Sirisena was endorsed by the main Tamil bourgeois party, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), trade unions, academics, artists and various pseudo-left middle class organisations.

The line-up of forces with Sirisena and the election result itself are the outcome of a behind-the-scenes intervention by the Obama administration. Decisions were made in Washington that Rajapakse had to be

ousted in order to shift Sri Lankan foreign policy away from the close relations that his government developed with China, which included expanding military ties. The intervention flowed directly from the aggressive US "pivot to Asia," which amounts to a concerted diplomatic, economic and military offensive to undermine Beijing's influence throughout the Asia-Pacific region and to prepare for war against China.

Sirisena and his coalition downplayed their pro-US agenda by emphasising the autocratic and nepotistic character of Rajapakse's presidency. Their key slogan was "Fight for democracy against dictatorship." Sirisena nevertheless made clear his alignment with Washington by condemning the levels of Chinese investment, while the UNP denounced Rajapakse for turning Sri Lanka into a "satellite of China."

Rajapakse's apparently meek acceptance of his ousting likewise reflects the degree to which the election has unfolded under the close watch of Washington. A few hours before voting began US Secretary of State John Kerry publicly contacted Rajapakse to "underscore the government's responsibility to ensure the January 8 elections will be free from violence and intimidation and that the vote counting is carried out credibly and transparently."

State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told journalists that the Obama administration would "continue to monitor the situation." She called on the Sri Lankan government "to ensure a transparent and credible investigation into any allegation of fraud or violence."

The message could not have been clearer for Rajapakse and his supporters in the Sri Lankan ruling elite, military and state apparatus: accept defeat or be prepared for a concerted US-led campaign asserting a stolen election. Paikiasothy Saravanamutta of the pro-

US Centre for Policy Alternatives in Sri Lanka told the *New York Times*: “I think he [Rajapakse] saw the writing on the wall... His representatives within the arms of the state would have told him, ‘Look, we are not going to buck the popular will.’”

The London-based *Financial Times* commented yesterday that whoever won the election “the margin of victory will be narrow, potentially prompting aggrieved claims of vote-rigging and other election-related irregularities—and threatening further violence between opposition and government supporters.” The comment was aimed at preparing the ground for an opposition campaign on election violence and ballot-rigging if Sirisena did not win the vote.

Bloomberg, a mouthpiece of the US financial elite, openly pointed yesterday to Sri Lanka’s position in relation to the US-China tensions. In a comment titled, “Indian Ocean influence at risk in Sri Lankan election,” it noted: “Of all the world leaders watching the outcome of Sri Lanka’s presidential elections tomorrow, Chinese President Xi Jinping has the most at stake.”

Bloomberg reported that Chinese government lending to Sri Lanka increased 50-fold over the past decade, to \$US490 million, compared with combined lending from the US and its European allies of just \$211 million. Other Chinese investment in Sri Lanka rose to more than \$4 billion in the same period.

While India did not openly comment during the presidential election, it considers Sri Lanka within its sphere of influence and has repeatedly voiced concerns over China’s growing influence. The Indian foreign ministry protested over the berthing of Chinese submarines in Colombo port last September, including during President Xi’s visit to Sri Lanka. Colombo and Beijing declared it was a routine presence and was no security threat to India.

Sri Lanka is strategically located adjacent to key Indian Ocean sea lanes that are used by some 4,000 oil tankers a year. Washington is determined that the US and allies such as India will control such sea routes, giving them the ability to block China’s ability to import oil and other energy supplies from the Middle East and Africa.

The US regime-change intervention in the Sri Lankan presidential election is bound up with these considerations and poses serious dangers for the

working class, not just on the island but throughout South Asia and internationally. The alignment of a Sirisena presidency with the US “pivot” will increase geopolitical tensions across Asia and intensify the drive toward war.

All the forces that lined up with and promoted Sirisena’s campaign, including the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the United Socialist Party and the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), bear political responsibility for this outcome. They all helped the pro-US opposition channel the genuine anger among workers, youth and rural poor against the Rajapakse government’s attacks on living conditions and police-state methods into an agenda that serves imperialism’s reactionary aims.



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