

Maithripala Sirisena sworn in as Sri Lankan president

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New Democratic Front presidential candidate Maithripala Sirisena was sworn in as Sri Lankan president last night, after defeating the incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse in Thursday's election. Sirisena polled 51.28 percent of the vote, four percent more than Rajapakse. Sirisena quickly appointed pro-US United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as the new prime minister.

Sirisena's ascension to power was part of a US-orchestrated regime-change operation to ensure Colombo fully supports the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at diplomatically isolating and militarily encircling China. Washington wanted Rajapakse ousted because his administration developed close economic and military ties with Beijing. Sirisena's elevation is in line with US operations throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including in Japan and Australia, to fashion governments that fully embrace the "pivot."

US President Barrack Obama swiftly congratulated Sirisena, saying the US "looks forward to deepening its partnership with the people and government of Sri Lanka." US Secretary of State John Kerry issued a similar statement. On the eve of the election, Kerry had telephoned Rajapakse to implicitly threaten him, insisting that he conduct a "free and fair election" and ensure a "peaceful" handover of power if Sirisena won the ballot.

While these messages sound routine and perfunctory, they are another indication of the Obama administration's concerted efforts to manipulate the Sri Lankan election for its own ends. A senior minister in Rajapakse's government, Sirisena quit the day after the election was announced last November and declared he would run for president as the "common opposition candidate." He was immediately backed by the UNP, in a political line-up organised by former Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga, who has close ties to Washington.

Following Rajapakse's removal, a report in

yesterday's *New York Times* indicated how closely Washington will seek to determine Sri Lankan foreign policy and further isolate China.

The newspaper declared: "A central question is whether Sri Lanka will begin to distance itself from China, which had become a major ally under Mr. Rajapakse, extending billions of dollars in loans for the construction of new ports and highways. That trend was worrying to India, which formally complained in recent months after Chinese military submarines made unannounced visits to the Colombo port."

UNP economic affairs spokesman Harsha de Silva told the newspaper that the new government would "review all major infrastructure projects ... We will have a balanced approach between India and China, unlike the current regime, which was antagonising India almost by its closeness to China."

Sirisena hinted that his administration would be pliant to US demands. In a brief speech after his swearing-in, he said his government would "change foreign policy to build friendly relations with all countries of the world." Sirisena's election manifesto pledged to establish "equal relations" with India, China, Pakistan and Japan.

In a clear reference to Rajapakse's relations with China, the manifesto declared: "The land that the White Man took over by means of military strength [a reference to British colonial rule over Sri Lanka] is now being obtained by foreigners by paying ransom to a handful of persons" and "if this trend continues for another six years, our country would become a colony, and we would become slaves."

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi telephoned Sirisena to congratulate him. While the Modi government voiced no political preference during the election, Indian media outlets, reporting from Colombo, stressed that Sirisena would address New Delhi's concerns about Chinese influence in Sri Lanka and build friendly

relations with India.

The New Democratic Front (NDF) includes the UNP, the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya and the Democratic Party of 2010 presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka. It was supported by the Tamil National Alliance, the main coalition of parties of the Tamil elite, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the All Ceylon Muslim Congress and a range of trade unions. The Sinhala communalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) backed Sirisena to the hilt while remaining outside the NDF.

Among voters, the election result reflected hatred of Rajapakse's regime far more than any popular support for Sirisena and the UNP. Until he defected, Sirisena was a central member of Rajapakse's government and fully complicit in all the social and political attacks it imposed. The UNP is widely discredited among workers and the poor for its ruthless anti-working class assaults when in government.

Pseudo-left formations, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the United Socialist Party (USP) and the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), bear particular responsibility for channeling the popular opposition of workers and the rural poor toward the Rajapakse government behind the right-wing, pro-US front supporting Sirisena. They all endorsed the fraudulent assertions that Sirisena's election would lead to a "democratic" change from Rajapakse's "dictatorship."

In working-class areas in and around Colombo, Sirisena polled higher percentages than Rajapakse. Sirisena decisively defeated Rajapakse in the Nuwara Eliya district, where Tamil-speaking plantation workers mainly live, polling 63.88 percent of popular vote compared to Rajapakse's 34.06 percent.

In the majority Tamil North province, the opposition candidate polled over 70 percent. In the Eastern province, which has a large Muslim population, his vote exceeded 80 percent in some areas. Residents in both provinces not only witnessed the brutal killing of thousands of civilians when the Rajapakse government and the military crushed the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009, but have suffered ongoing military repression.

Irrespective of Sirisena's empty promises in his election manifesto about relief for working people and poor, his government will intensify the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), imposing further attacks on living conditions and democratic rights. Sri Lankan exports are being hit by falling demand in world markets under conditions of a growing global crisis. According to the country's Central

Bank, Sri Lanka's total debt has risen to 7.4 trillion rupees (\$US56 billion), up from 2.2 trillion rupees in 2005, with 43 percent of this being foreign debt.

While Rajapakse boasted about Sri Lankan economic growth, which is currently around 7 percent, that is mainly the result of infrastructure investments funded by foreign loans. The IMF has demanded that the budget deficit be reduced to 5.2 percent of gross domestic product this year, from 5.8 percent last year. The target for 2016 is 3.2 percent, which will require a massive assault by Sirisena's government on the social rights of ordinary Sri Lankans.

At the same time, Sirisena's incorporation of Sri Lanka into the US "pivot's" web of military alliances against China, in line with Washington's dictates, will heighten geo-political tensions throughout Asia and increase the dangers of war. Sirisena will soon drop his rhetoric about "democracy and good governance" and unleash the police-state apparatus developed by Rajapakse to suppress the inevitable resistance from workers and rural poor to the agenda of austerity and militarism.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened in the presidential election, running its own candidate, Pani Wijesiriwardena, against both Rajapakse and Sirisena and his fake-left backers.

The SEP was the only party opposing Rajapakse's reactionary agenda and warning that the Sirisena camp was part of a US regime-change operation in line with Washington's strategic moves against China. Along with our co-thinkers in the International Committee of Fourth International, the central thrust of our campaign was to build an internationally unified movement of the working class against war and social counterrevolution.

SEP candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena polled 4,277 votes. These were conscious votes for the principled struggle waged by the SEP and for the independent mobilisation of workers and youth on a socialist and internationalist program to abolish capitalism, the root cause of war.



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